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Slurs and speech acts

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, a multi-act view of the meaning of slurs is defended. According to such view, when a speaker utters a sentence containing a slur, she simultaneously performs two different speech acts, one of which, following Searle's taxonomy (Searle, 1975), is an expressive one. Although this view is a particular version of expressivism, it has many advantages over other versions of this theory. First, it allows a clearer definition of the expressive component of slurs by relating slurs with other sentences in which we express various attitudes, not only contempt. Second, it can explain descriptive ineffability drawing on the fact that non-representative speech acts cannot be reduced to representative ones. Third, it can respond to some powerful criticisms recently directed against expressivism.

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Slurs have recently been given growing attention by linguists and philosophers of language. One of the most debated issues regarding them concerns the status of their derogatory content. The positions on this topic are manifold. The derogatory content of a slur has been considered to be a part of its literal meaning, i.e. of the truth-conditions of the sentences containing slurs (Hom, 2008, 2010, 2012; Hom & May, 2013, 2018), or a presupposition (Macià, 2002; Schlenker, 2007; Cepollaro, 2015; Garcia-Carpintero, 2017), or a conventional implicature (Potts, 2005, 2007; McCready, 2010; Whiting, 2013; Gutzmann, 2011, 2013), to mention the most popular positions. It has even been denied that such content exists (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a, 2013b; Nunberg, 2018). Our contribution will propose an account that explains the derogatory contents of slurs in terms of the speech act theory. In particular, this account supports the hypothesis that, when a speaker utters a sentence containing a slur, she is simultaneously performing two different speech acts, one of which, following Searle's taxonomy (Searle, 1975), is an expressive one. Thus, by using a slur, a speaker performs an expressive act through which she expresses contempt for the target group. This interpretation is in line with the expressivist theories of slurs. Thus, in endorsing an expressivist thesis, we reject those theories that consider the derogatory content to be something descriptive (e.g., a stereotype or a set of stereotypical properties; cf. Hom, 2008, Croom, 2011, and to some extent, Camp, 2013) or a truth-conditional proposition. Instead, our account is in line with Jeshion's hypothesis, according to which slurs do not semantically encode or conventionally implicate stereotypes, although they may be associated with stereotypical characteristics in some contexts (Jeshion, 2013). We consider one of the main advantages of our version of expressivism the fact that it can respond to some of the criticisms recently advanced against this view, such as Kirk-Giannini (2019). Once it is established that slurs are linguistic tools suitable for performing an expressive speech act and the performed act has the features of any expressive act, such criticisms can be addressed.

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On our theory, in addition to the expressive act, the speaker who uses a sentence containing a slur simultaneously performs another act depending on the type of utterance and on the context. The view that by uttering a single sentence it is possible to simultaneously express more than one proposition and to thus perform different speech acts has been explored by Bach (1999) and Neale (1999), who take a critical position on the theory of conventional implicatures. Here, we follow the same approach: we move from the theory that the derogatory content is a conventional implicature, we point out its limitations, and then we modify it to arrive at our theory. By stating that a speaker who uses a sentence containing a slur performs two different speech acts, we account for the peculiar properties of the derogatory content, such as the seeming impossibility of embedding such content within modal, temporal, and conditional contexts or within a negation.

Another advantage of our theory is its scalability: it is extensible to other kinds of pejoratives or emphatic expressions. It shares this advantage with other expressivist theories, such as Potts's. Nonetheless, not everybody will believe that this is an advantage. Indeed, some scholars think that slurs have a semantic specificity as compared to other pejoratives (cf. Nunberg, 2018; Diaz-Legaspe, 2020 for instance). Although slurs undoubtedly present some specificity compared to other pejoratives, we hold that such specificity is due to the interaction of their semantic meaning with the social context in which they are used (cf. Frigerio and Tenchini, 2020). This means that their specificity is actually due to certain implicit meanings meant in contexts in which there exists a situation of social oppression of a social group by another social group. Nevertheless, from a semantic point of view, we hold that slurs can be considered a full-fledged underclass of pejoratives.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we will analyze the theory that the derogatory content of slurs is a conventional implicature. We will consider Bach's and Neale's criticisms of the traditional account of conventional implicature, and on that basis, in section 2, we will propose a different theory that regards the derogatory component as something through which an expressive act is performed. In section 3, we will consider some possible objections to our theory, and in section 4, we will compare our theory with Camp's and Jeshion's theories.

1. Criticisms to the notion of conventional implicatures

According to Potts (2005), one can account for the semantics of pejoratives and epithets by singling out two levels of meaning: an at-issue content and a conventional implicature. The at-issue content of a sentence coincides with its truth conditions. Consider the following example.

(1) The damn Republicans are aggressively cutting taxes.

The at-issue content of (1) coincides with the truth conditions of (2):

(2) The Republicans are aggressively cutting taxes.

Thus, whereas (1) and (2) have the same truth conditions and consequently have the same at-issue content, (1) differs from (2) because it conveys a conventional implicature that (2) does not convey. This implicature coincides with the semantic contribution of the epithet *damn*. Potts (2005 p. 167) argues that this epithet takes a kind as an argument: the kind of being a Republican. Thus, the conventional implicature of (1) is the following:

(3) $bad(\overset{\cap}{\text{Republican}})$

where $\overset{\cap}$ indicates a function that takes for argument a predicate and maps it onto the correspondent kind (cf. Chierchia, 1998). Hence, (3) applies the predicate *bad* to the kind corresponding to the predicate *Republican*. As conventional implicatures are insensitive to modal, temporal, and other operators, Potts's theory can easily explain the non-detachability of the derogatory content of epithets.

Potts's theory cannot be immediately applied to slurs, however, because it assumes that no lexical item conveys both a descriptive and an expressive meaning (2005, p. 7). Nonetheless, it is possible to modify and use Potts's account to build a theory that explains the derogatory content of slurs as a conversational implicature. McCready (2010) and Gutzmann (2011, 2013) have proposed such modifications and extensions to Potts's (2005) logic of expressives. For instance, according to McCready, a slur, such as *kraut*, has a descriptive and an expressive components, which can be formalized as follows:

(4) $\llbracket kraut \rrbracket = \lambda x. German(x) \bullet bad(\overset{\cap}{German})$

The symbol \bullet divides the descriptive component from the expressive one. The first part of the formula, $\lambda x. German(x)$, denotes a function over objects that gives *true* as value if the object is German. The second part of the formula, the expressive one, predicates the property of being bad of the kind *German*.

In this way, the difference between (5) and (6) below is parallel to the one between (1) and (2):

(5) Wolfgang is German.

(6) Wolfgang is a kraut.

The at-issue contents of (5) and (6) are identical and coincide with their truth conditions. In particular, (5) and (6) are true if the individual denoted by the proper name *Wolfgang* belongs to the extension of the predicate *German*. In addition, however, (6) expresses a conventional implicature that (5) does not express, namely (7):

(7) *bad*(\cap *German*)

This proposition applies the predicate *bad* to the kind corresponding to the predicate *German*. Again, as conventional implicatures are insensitive to modal, temporal ... operators, this theory can easily explain the non-detachability of the derogatory content of slurs.

Although this theory is well thought out, it can be criticized on two counts. The first concerns the fact that the conventional implicature is a truth-conditional proposition. This is confirmed by Potts (2005), who claims that conventional implicatures have the semantic type *t* (i.e., they denote truth values; see, for instance, p. 166). Hence, if his theory, with the appropriate modifications, is applied to slurs, we can state that in uttering (6), a speaker expresses two truth-conditional propositions: an at-issue content and a conventional implicature. The first proposition predicates Wolfgang to be a member of the extension of *German*. The second proposition predicates the kind \cap *German* to belong to the extension of *bad*. The latter proposition is equivalent to that expressed by (8):

(8) Germans are bad.

Now, usually, our reaction to the use of a slur is not that of correcting a false opinion. That is, we do not believe that a speaker who uses a slur is simply stating a false proposition. This is especially true with the slurs that are particularly insulting and offensive. For instance, whoever uses the N-word does something more than and something different from simply implicating the proposition expressed by (9):

(9) Afro-Americans are bad.

We would surely react to a proposition like the one expressed by (9), but not with the same intensity as we would react to the use of the N-word. Specifically, our reaction is based on the fact that a speaker who uses a slur is not simply saying something false (i.e., does not simply have a wrong opinion, which can be corrected); she is *doing* something wrong, which is *morally* blameworthy for non-bigot persons.¹ The moral disapproval of a person who uses a slur arises from the fact that she has behaved wrongly and not only from the fact that she has expressed a false opinion.

These considerations suggest that the derogatory content of slurs cannot be reduced to a truth-conditional proposition. The fact that a speaker who utters a slur is *doing* something morally deplorable leads to think that the derogatory content should not be reduced to a mere statement of an informative content, like (8) or (9), but rather should be interpreted in terms of expressive illocutionary force. Similar considerations count against those theories that tend to reduce the derogatory content of slurs to the attribution of negative stereotypical characteristics to the target group (Hom, 2008; Camp, 2013). We believe that Jeshion's arguments against such theories are valid (see Jeshion, 2013): on the one hand, a speaker can competently use a slur without knowing such stereotypical characteristics; on the other hand, once again, attributing such characteristics to the target group is something that can be judged as false. We believe, however, that someone who uses a slur does something more condemnable than simply expressing false opinions.

The second reason why applying Potts's theory of conventional implicatures to slurs seems questionable concerns the very notion of conventional implicature. This notion originates from the fact that Grice, following a long tradition starting from Frege (1892); Wittgenstein (1953), identifies what is said with the truth conditions of the sentence. The basic idea is that understanding a sentence involves understanding how the world must be for the sentence to be true.

However, if this equivalence is accepted, cases as the followings seem to be problematic:

(10) She is poor and honest.

(11) She is poor but honest.

According to Grice, (10) and (11) have the same truth conditions. If the referent of *she* in the utterance context is both poor and honest, (11) is as true as (10). However, the conventional meanings of (10) and (11) are different because (11) conveys the idea that poverty and honesty are in some sense incompatible with each other while (10) does not. However, if what is said is identified with the truth condition of a sentence, the opposition between honesty and poverty conveyed by (11) cannot be part of what is said. Therefore, Grice postulates the existence of conventional implicatures, i.e. propositions whose truth a speaker is conventionally committed to but which are not part of what is said.

¹ In general, when we refer to moral judgments in the following pages, we are specifically considering the moral intuitions of non-bigot persons for whom any human being is deemed worthy of respect regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, origin, profession, medical, physical, psychological, and economic conditions, etc.

The notion of conventional implicature has been criticized by Bach (1999) and Neale (1999). Relying on our intuitions about the right way to report what a speaker has said by uttering (10) and (11), Bach concludes that the opposition itself between poverty and honesty is part of what is said when uttering (11). To explain why we are inclined to regard (11) as true event though it is false that poverty and honesty are incompatible with each other, Bach makes a distinction between the primary and secondary statement of a sentence. To appreciate this difference, let us consider (12):

(12) Beth's husband, a plumber, never washes the dishes. (cf. Bach, 1999, p. 345)

Suppose that Beth's husband never washes dishes and that he is not a plumber. In this situation, if we are forced to judge (12) as true or as false, we would say that (12) is true, although we may feel that there is something wrong with the sentence.

This can be explained by the fact that, in uttering (12), the speaker says two things: (i) Beth's husband never washes dishes; (ii) Beth's husband is a plumber. However, (i) is primary, while (ii) is secondary, since it is a parenthetical statement. If the primary statement is true and the secondary statement is false, when forced to judge the truth or falsity of the utterance, we base our judgement on the primary statement because we consider the secondary less important than the primary. However, this does not imply that the secondary statement (the parenthetical statement) is not part of what is being said; it is simply less prominent than the primary statement.

The same is true of (11), which expresses two propositions: (i) the referent of *she* is both poor and honest and (ii) poverty and honesty are somehow incompatible with each other. However, the first proposition is the primary proposition expressed by the sentence, while the second is secondary and this explains why one tends to give more importance to the first proposition in judging the truth or falsity of the utterance. Nevertheless, the secondary proposition is part of what is said as the primary proposition. According to Bach, the theory of conventional implicatures depends on the false presupposition that "every indicative sentence expresses exactly one proposition" (Bach, 1999, p. 350). In fact, this presupposition should be rejected because a sentence can express more than one proposition, as (11) and (12) demonstrate. Such propositions are independent of each other and not conjoined. Therefore, some sentences express two different propositions and not the conjunction of two propositions.

Neale (1999) has the same opinion. For him, a sentence such as (11) expresses a sequence of propositions (where *sequence* must be carefully distinguished from *conjunction*). The second proposition is expressed by a speech act of commenting in a certain way on a lower-order speech act (p. 55). Specifically, in (11), the proposition that poverty and honesty are incompatible constitutes a comment on the proposition that the referent is poor and honest. Nonetheless, Neale, referring to Searle, maintains that "the two propositions will typically end up ranked as a direct result of contextual factors" (p. 67). In other words, although the comment is usually the secondary proposition expressed by (11), in some contexts it can become the primary proposition.

If we apply Bach and Neale's theories to slurs, the difference between (5) and (6) can be considered parallel to that between (10) and (11): (5) and (6) express the same primary proposition. This proposition is true if the referent of the proper name *Wolfgang* belongs to the extension of the predicate *German*. Nevertheless, in contrast to (5), (6) also expresses something more: a secondary proposition through which the speaker expresses her contempt towards Germans. As we have seen, however, this proposition is not a truth-conditional content. Thus, we must go beyond Bach's statements: not only can a speaker express two different propositions by means of a single utterance; she can also perform two different speech acts. This modification will be implemented in the next section.

2. A multi-act view

If Bach's and Neale's view is correct, then some sentences can express more than one proposition. We call this view "multi-propositional theory". Whereas Bach and Neale consider only indicative propositions i.e. propositions with a representative illocutionary force, according to Searle's (1975) taxonomy, we can think of certain sentences expressing more than one proposition as having illocutionary forces different from the representative one. Moreover, the illocutionary force need not be the same for each proposition expressed by the sentence.² So, if the utterer of (11), reported here for convenience,

(11) She is poor but honest

commits herself to the truth of two propositions and states something true or false depending on their truth value, we argue that a speaker who uses a sentence containing a slur performs *two different illocutionary acts*.

² This theory does not align with the idea that an utterance containing a slur conveys both a direct and indirect speech act. The indirect speech act is typically inferred by the addressees through the maxims of conversation and is cancellable by the speaker. By contrast, according to our view, both speech acts are literally expressed, meaning that both are direct speech acts and none of them is cancellable. Furthermore, our theory differs from Cappelen and Lepore's speech act pluralism (see, for instance, Cappelen and Lepore 2005). Their pluralism derives from their semantic minimalism and from the idea that the hearer must reconstruct the speaker's utterances up to a point where they express thoughts, and that no one way of doing so is uniquely correct. Our theory is independent of semantic minimalism and not tied to the idea that we have to reconstruct the speaker's utterance. The two speech acts performed by a speaker who uses a sentence containing a slur are not different reconstruction of what the speaker utters and are expressed independently of any reconstruction.

Therefore, a speaker who utters (6)

(6) Wolfgang is a kraut

performs:

- 1) A representative act, by which the speaker commits herself to the truth of the neutral content of (6) (i.e., the content of (5) above). By such an act, the speaker commits herself to the truth of the proposition that Wolfgang belongs to the class of Germans.
- 2) An expressive act, by which the speaker expresses her contempt for the individuals who belong the extension of the predicate *German*.

Recall that according to Searle (1975), by performing an expressive act a speaker expresses an attitude toward an individual or a state of affairs. Just as “I’m sorry” expresses regret for something the speaker has done, the use of a slur expresses contempt for a class of persons. Just as the word “sorry” is a linguistic means that can be used for expressing regret, a slur is a linguistic means that can be used for expressing contempt against the target class. Just as the word “sorry” is an illocutionary force indicator, by which a speaker who uses it is normally expected to express regret, similarly a slur is an illocutionary force indicator, by which a speaker who uses it is normally expected to express contempt.³

In addition, just as someone who says “I’m sorry” expresses regret regardless of whether she actually feels regret or not, so does someone who uses a slur express contempt regardless of whether she actually feels contempt for the target class or does not. Certainly, the kind of infelicity that Searle (1969) calls “violation of the insincerity rule” – and Austin (1962) calls “abuse” – takes place here. Saying “I’m sorry” without feeling regret is somehow defective. In the same way, it is defective to use a slur when the negative attitude toward the target class is missing.

We believe that this version of expressivism, which exploits the theory of speech acts, has many advantages. First, the two acts expressed by a sentence like (6) are, at least to a certain extent, independent of each other. This explains, in the same way as Potts’s theory does, why a slur derogates the target class even when embedded in negative, modal, conditional ... contexts. For instance, let us consider (13):

(13) Wolfgang is not a kraut.

According to the view defended here, in uttering (13) the speaker performs two acts: a representative act, by which she commits herself to the truth of the proposition that Wolfgang belongs to the anti-extension of the predicate *German*, and an expressive act, by which she expresses contempt for Germans. The second act is identical to the act that the speaker performs through (6). Therefore, the fact that a speaker denies that Wolfgang is a kraut has no influence on the derogatory charge of the slur.⁴ The same goes for (14):

(14) Is Wolfgang a kraut?

The difference between (14) on the one hand and (6) and (13) on the other hand consists in the fact that in (14) the first act is a directive and not a representative: the addressee is asked to tell the speaker whether Wolfgang belongs to the class of Germans. The second act is unchanged, and (14) once again expresses contempt for Germans, just as (6) and (13) do.

A second advantage of our theory is that it can easily explain the infelicity of (15):

(15) *Wolfgang is a kraut, but I have nothing against the Germans.

Any sentence in which an expressive is used and in which, at the same time, the speaker denies having the attitude or feeling conveyed by that expression is infelicitous:

(16) *Thanks, but I do not feel any gratitude toward you.⁵

³ This theory is similar to that proposed by Liu (2021). He also argues that slurs give the same contribution to the truth conditions of the corresponding neutral term and that, additionally, slurs are illocutionary force indicators. According to Liu, by using a slur, a speaker contributes the same content of the neutral term to the truth conditions and performs an illocutionary act. Therefore, Liu believes that a single utterance can express more than one illocutionary act. However, Liu states that the expressed illocutionary act is a declarative act through which the speaker enforces a norm against the target. Moreover, Liu criticizes expressivism because “it explains the derogatory power in terms of expressing emotions, rather than performing illocutionary acts” (p. 1062). We do not agree on this point. First, expressivism can be framed within speech act theory. Second, in section 3, we will present some arguments supporting the idea that the use of a slur does not always intend to enforce a discriminatory norm against a social group. While this may result from the use of slurs and may even be the primary aim in some cases, it is not an essential feature of slurs.

⁴ If the negation in (13) is metalinguistic, then the speaker is doing something very different: she is raising objections against the use of the term *kraut* (cf. Horn 1989). One of the main reasons why one may object to this use is that one does not believe that Germans deserve contempt, and as such, one does not think that the term *kraut*, which expresses contempt for Germans, should be used.

⁵ In both cases, a violation of Austin’s felicity condition $\Gamma.2$ occurs (cf. Austin 1962). This condition requires that a speaker, after performing a certain speech act, must subsequently conduct herself accordingly.

Third, by identifying the derogatory content of slurs as a means through which speakers can perform an expressive act, we reject that such content is identifiable with or reducible to a truth-conditional content, which allows us to explain the property of the descriptive ineffability enunciated by Potts (2007) as follows:

Descriptive ineffability: Speakers are never fully satisfied when they paraphrase expressive content using descriptive (i.e., non-expressive) terms (p. 166).

This feature of slurs (and of pejoratives in general) can be explained by the fact that expressives cannot be reduced to representatives. Expressing an attitude is not the same as describing it. This explains why we feel unsatisfied when the derogatory content of *kraut* is paraphrased as (8). Further, we believe that someone who uses a slur does something different from and something more than just expressing a false opinion. Expressing contempt for a group that does not deserve any contempt is a morally reprehensible action and hence worthy of censure.

This point is particularly important because it allows us to respond to a recent criticism against expressivism. Kirk-Giannini (2019) believes that expressivism is affected by the “speaker-orientation problem” as it is any approach that tries to account for the “pejorative character [of slurs] exclusively or primarily by appealing to what the use of a slur reveals about a speaker’s doxastic or evaluative attitudes (occurrent or dispositional) or commitments” (p. 2). In fact, Kirk-Giannini states, the function of slurs cannot be to inform that the speaker has a certain negative attitude toward the target class:

Proponents of speaker-oriented accounts of slurs hold that the distinctive pejorative potential of slurs is explained by the information they reveal about the speakers who use them. They thus hold that the revelation of this information is inherently pejorative; the distinctive role of slurs in discourse is explained by the fact that they are devices for conveying this information. For this reason, speaker-oriented accounts have difficulty accounting for the *inoffensiveness* of certain utterances not containing slurs. If slurs are offensive because they raise to salience information about the perspectives or attitudes of individuals, then other utterances which do the same should be equally offensive (p. 5).

In fact, there are many examples of utterances in which the information that a certain individual has a negative attitude toward a certain class is not offensive or at least is not as offensive as the use of a slur. However, in our view, there is an essential difference between *giving the information* that one has a negative attitude toward a class and *expressing* a negative attitude toward such class. The former is a representative act, and the information given can be true or false; the latter is an expressive act, with no truth conditions. This is the general difference between representative and expressive acts. For instance, there is an essential difference between *informing* someone that you feel sorry for something you have done and *apologizing* for something you have done.

Our theory accounts for a further feature of expressives identified by da Potts (2007):

Repeatability: If a speaker repeatedly uses an expressive item, the effect is generally one of strengthening the emotive content, rather than one of redundancy (p. 167).

If the derogatory content were reducible to a truth-conditional content, the effect of the repeated use of a slur should be redundancy. Indeed, this is the typical effect of the repetition of a representative speech act.

(17) Ann is at home. Ann is at home.

Usually, a sentence like (17) is repeated only if the addressee did not understand it the first time. However, if this is not the case, (17) has a redundancy effect.

This is not the case for expressive speech acts. The repetition of an expressive speech act is usually not considered redundant but strengthens its emotive content:

(18) Thank you! Thank you! Thank you so much!

(19) I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm very sorry!

(18)–(19) have the effect of enhancing the expression of the feeling of gratitude and regret, respectively. The speaker appears to be *very grateful* and *very contrite*. Similarly, the repeated use of a slur increases its expressive effect instead of producing redundancy. This confirms the fact that the derogatory content is not truth conditional, but it is interpretable as the performance of an expressive speech act.

This answers a further objection by Kirk-Giannini:

In holding that the pejorative potential of slurs is explained by the information they reveal about the speakers who use them, proponents of speaker-oriented accounts commit themselves to a further prediction: that the pejorative potential of slurs will be realized only when the information they reveal about the speakers who use them is not old news. For if the inherently pejorative information revealed by the use of a slur is old news, it is difficult to see how the use of that slur could warrant any further offense on the part of audience members (p. 6).

Again, this criticism hits the mark only if the expressive component is thought of as a representative content. Admittedly, certain versions of expressivism, such as those of [McCready \(2010\)](#) and [Gutzmann \(2011, 2013\)](#), can be interpreted along these lines. However, if we consider slurs as linguistic means suitable for performing an expressive act, the problem dissolves: the repetition of a slur does not consist in providing an already-provided information but in a new expression of the same attitude. As we have seen, this has the effect of increasing the emotional charge of the sentence.

The duplicity of acts performed by someone who utters a sentence containing a slur explains the ambivalent reactions of non-bigots when hearing a slur. If the utterance containing the slur is a statement, then one of the two performed illocutionary acts is a representative. For example, through (6), the speaker states that Wolfgang is German. Assuming that Wolfgang is really German, by uttering (6), the speaker says something true. This explains why many scholars have claimed that sentences such as (6) are true (e.g., [Whiting, 2013](#), p. 372–374). On the other hand, other scholars have argued that accepting as true sentences like (6) means to accept that Wolfgang is a kraut, thus endorsing the racists' perspective ([Richard, 2008](#), chapter 1). Indeed, non-bigots often refuse to accept sentences like “Germans are krauts” as true (cf. [Hom and May, 2013, 2018](#)). As an expressive act is also performed by means of these sentences, by which Germans are derogated, these reactions are natural. On the one hand, non-bigots accept one of the performed illocutionary acts; on the other hand, they reject the other act. They then have an ambivalent attitude toward these sentences.

We have seen that in the case of sentences such as (12), which express two propositions, one of which is true and the other false, the reactions to the sentences can be ambivalent. Thus, (12) can be judged as acceptable in some contexts and can be rejected in others. This is even truer if we endorse [Neale's \(1999\)](#) opinion that the rank of the two propositions can vary depending on the context. We believe that the ambivalent reactions of non-bigots to sentences containing slurs are due to a similar situation.

The question is further complicated by the fact that often, when we say that a sentence is true, we intend to say something more than the simple fact that it corresponds to a state of affairs: we want to say that it is also adequate in the other dimensions (cf. [Horn, 1989](#), pp. 416–418). We believe that many non-bigots assume this broader sense of truth. For these persons, saying that (6) is true is equivalent to saying that (6) is a sentence we can accept. As non-bigots, however, these persons refuse to accept (6) and therefore affirm that it is not true. Hence, we believe that our theory accounts for the ambivalence of non-bigots' reactions to sentences containing slurs, and for the resulting debate about their truth.

A further advantage of the multi-act theory is its flexibility. As there are two distinct acts, which is prominent between them may depend on the context. Usually, the non-expressive act has communicative prominence, but as [Neale \(1999\)](#) highlights, the other act may become prominent in specific contexts. Thus, in most contexts, a sentence such as (20) is intended primarily to inform that there were three Germans in the room and secondarily to express contempt for Germans:

(20) When I arrived, there were three krauts in the room.

Accordingly, the function of (20) is primarily informative and only secondarily expressive. Among the sentences containing slurs, the ones like (20) are the most easily judgeable as true or false given their prevalent function. By contrast, a sentence such as (21), in which the slur is used to define the speaker's addressee, has a preeminent expressive function:

(21) You {are a} kraut!

We are reluctant to judge these sentences as true or false just because of the communicative prominence of the expressive act.⁶

A final advantage of our theory is its scalability. It can be easily extended to other pejoratives. For example, (1) repeated here:

(1) The damn Republicans are aggressively cutting taxes.

(1) can be interpreted as a sentence by which the speaker performs two acts: one representative, by which the speaker commits herself to the truth of the act's neutral content (cf. sentence (2)), and one expressive, by which the speaker expresses her attitude of contempt for and/or rage at the Republicans. Furthermore, the multi-act theory may be extended not only to pejoratives but also to many connoted expressions in general, and also to those expressing a positive attitude toward a person or a fact (e.g., *honey*, *angel*). We consider this scalability to be an advantage. On the contrary, those who claim that slurs are

⁶ According to another approach that uses the speech act framework to explain hate speech and derogatory epithets, a speaker who uses (20) and (21) performs two different classes of illocutions: through (20), an act of propaganda (focused on the addressees and bystanders); through (21), an act of assault (directed toward the hearers who are members of the target group) (cf. [Langton 2012; Langton et al., 2012](#) for instance). Drawing on Langton, [Bianchi \(2014\)](#) proposes to classify the assault act as verdictive and the propaganda act as exercitive (using Austin's classification). Thus, according to this position, the speaker, in uttering (20) or (21), performs two different speech acts. In our theory, on the other hand, (20) and (21) differ from each other because of which speech act is prominent: in (20), it is the representative act; in (21), it is the expressive act. Langton, Haslanger, Anderson and Bianchi's accounts are more focused on the hearer and emphasize the social effects of slur usage, whereas our view is more speaker-oriented and focuses on what the utterer does by using a slur. We suspect that at least some of the features identified by these scholars are perlocutory effects rather than illocutionary acts.

special expressions, different from the other pejoratives and from connoted terms in general, would not judge scalability as an advantage. In the next section, we will discuss this and other questions.

3. Answers to some objections

The multi-act theory raises a number of issues. In this section, we will deal with some of them. One might say that the idea that one can perform two speech acts by uttering a single sentence is odd and ad hoc. This is not the case, though, because a multi-act view has been proposed to account for some examples completely different from slurs. For example, Hancher (1979) states that in using a sentence to express an invite or an offer, two different speech acts, a directive and a commissive, are performed. If A invites B to a party, A wishes that B would come to the party (directive act) and is committed to greet B if B accepts the invite (commissive act). If A offers some wine to B, A wishes that B would drink it (directive act) and is committed to give it to B if B accepts (commissive act). Hancher says that

Offering, tendering, bidding, inviting, volunteering, and formal challenging are all hybrid speech acts that combine directive with commissive illocutionary force. As such, they need to be specially provided for in Searle's taxonomy. Let us call them commissive directives (p. 6).

If it is possible to perform a directive and a commissive act using a single sentence, it should also be possible to perform a representative and an expressive act using a single sentence. Thus, the multi-act view is neither odd nor ad hoc.⁷

Another possible objection is based on the fact that if expressivism were correct, in using a slur the speaker would not ascribe any negative property to the target class. Many scholars, however, think otherwise. For instance, Croom (2011) refers to the family resemblance analysis of Wittgenstein's (1953) and Rosch and Mervis's (1975) category membership to claim that slurs are connected to a constellation of properties, none of which is a necessary condition to be a member of the extension of the word (even though some of them are more salient than others). To give an example, the N-word would express properties such as "African American, Prone to laziness, Subservient, Commonly the recipient of poor treatment, Athletic, Emotionally shallow, Simple-minded, Sexually licentious" (p. 356). Croom believes that slurs have an emotional and expressive component, but he also thinks that this component is directed to the negative properties connected to the slur. By using a slur, the speaker does not only express a derogatory attitude toward the members of the target class but also ascribes some stereotypical negative properties to them. The speaker expresses such negative attitude because she believes that the members of the target class possess at least some of those negative properties.

According to Camp (2013), by employing a slur, a speaker signals a commitment to an overarching perspective with regard to the target group. A perspective is a cognitive structure through which some features of an object become more salient in the way the object is conceived. For example, by employing a slur such as *kraut* in (6), the speaker signals that the property of being German is central in her classification of Wolfgang and of any other German. Calling *g* the property expressed by the neutral term corresponding to a slur, Camp explains that

The speaker [who uses the slur] thinks it is relevant to draw attention to *g* because he takes *g* to be highly diagnostic, or classificatorily useful. And typically, he thinks this because he takes being *g* to explain a range of further properties (e.g., laziness, stupidity, greed, cunning, athletic and sexual prowess or debility), which are themselves prominent in his thinking and which he takes to warrant certain affective and evaluative responses (pp. 337-8).

Property *g* is central to explaining what kind of persons the members of the target class are according to the speaker, and what further features they possess. These features are obviously negative. Therefore, even though negative properties are not part of the semantics of slurs, as Croom holds, such properties are strictly connected to the perspective signaled by the use of a slur.

As stated above, we regard the fact that in expressivism no negative feature is ascribed to the target class as an advantage of this view rather than a drawback. We maintain that the persons who employ slurs are more seriously at fault than those who just have a wrong opinion about the members of the target class. This *fault* is that of expressing contempt for the members of the target class *precisely because they belong to that class*. As the features by which individuals are classified as members of the target class are not negative or worthy of contempt or hatred, whoever expresses these attitudes is doing something that is seriously wrong and morally unjust. This also accounts for Camp's remarks about the centrality of property *g*: if a person expresses contempt for the members of a class precisely because they belong to that class and thus have property *g*, that person clearly considers *g* central to her attitude toward the members of the class and to the way she treats them.

We believe that Jeshion (2013 and 2018) provides excellent answers to the "descriptive objection" to expressivism. First, one can have an attitude of contempt for the members of the target class for many reasons. The negative features that can be ascribed to the target class by those who use a slur vary considerably from speaker to speaker. This has no impact on the competent use of the slur. Furthermore, some speakers have a very vague idea of what these features are, and other speakers

⁷ For further support to the multi-act view, see Sbisà (2013). She argues that Austin's idea that in uttering a single sentence a speaker performs a locutionary, an illocutionary and a perlocutionary act, already embodies a form of speech act pluralism. Furthermore, she provides some argument in favor of the *illocutionary* multi-act perspective.

do not know them at all, but again, this does not impinge on a competent use of the slur. Second, and more important, sometimes no negative stereotype is associated with a slur. One may have contempt for gays and lesbians *precisely because they are gays and lesbians*, without associating any further negative feature to these properties. The persons who use slurs often express contempt for the target class just because the members of this class have features different from theirs, such as a different skin color, a different eye shape, a different language, or a different religion, even though no other ascribed property arouses such attitude. Racial discrimination and bigotry are often caused simply by the fact that the members of the target class (out-group) are different in some respects from the members of the in-group, and not by the fact that some negative properties are ascribed to them. In fact, a negative stereotype of the target class is often created precisely because its members have some neutral property that distinguishes them from the members of the in-group. In other words, it is diversity that produces prejudice.

There are other arguments that lead to the belief that the derogatory component of slurs has no descriptive content. As [Jeshion \(2013\)](#) remarks:

There are bona fide slurs for groups for which there are not any corresponding societal stereotypes. Take the Yiddish *Goyim*, used to refer pejoratively to all non-Jews, and *Shiksa* to refer to non-Jewish women and girls. Japanese has a similar term, *Gai-jin*, which literally means “outside person,” to refer wholesale to non-Japanese (pp. 322-3).

The target group of these slurs is too heterogeneous to be associated with a negative stereotype and with shared negative properties. The target group is identified just for being the anti-extension of the in-group. Another possible example is *midget*, which targets persons with a short stature, but which is not associated with any negative stereotype concerning such persons. These examples support the claim that what fuels bigotry is often the mere fact that the members of the target group do not belong to the in-group; that is, they have a morally neutral property that the members of the in-group do not have.

This does not mean that a speaker *never* communicates a stereotype using a slur. The point, however, is that the stereotype cannot be a semantic component of the slur, which is *always* and *invariably* communicated by competent speakers, but rather it is part of the pragmatic meaning, which may or may not be present depending on the context. Some expressivists have indeed interpreted it in this way. [Jeshion \(2013\)](#), for example, states that the activation of the stereotype is a perlocutionary effect, while [Cella \(2016\)](#) argues that it is communicated by a conversational implicature. We believe that a view along these lines is on the right track.

Another objection to expressivism hinges on the fact that it seems an overly subjectivist view of the derogatory component of slurs. [Camp \(2013\)](#) advances a similar criticism underlining that:

if the speaker were merely expressing her own feelings, it would make no sense to challenge her use of the slur: that use would be appropriate just in case it reflected her feelings [...]. According to expressivism, the hearer should be able to dismiss the speaker’s feelings as just her problem (p. 333).

There is another objection connected to this. By employing a slur, a speaker does not only express her own perspective on the target group, but she also seems to invite her interlocutors to embrace the same perspective. In other words, the use of a slur seems to have a *prescriptive force*⁸ that is not accounted for within expressivism, for which the derogatory component is merely the expression of a subjective feeling. In fact, how slurs express the prescription that the members of the target class should be subjected to discriminatory practices and that other persons should assume attitudes similar to those of the speaker has been underscored. For instance, [Hom \(2008\)](#) claims that the derogatory component of slurs can be illustrated as follows:

ought be subject to $p^*_1 + \dots + p^*_n$ because of being $d^*_1 + \dots + d^*_n$ all because of being npc^* , where p^*_1, \dots, p^*_n are deontic prescriptions derived from the set of racist practices, d^*_1, \dots, d^*_n are the negative properties derived from the racist ideology, and npc^* is the semantic value of the appropriate non-pejorative correlate of the epithet (p. 431).

The multi-act view does not explain why the use of a slur is an instrument of oppression of the target class, which activates and strengthens discriminatory practices.

These objections touch an important point, but we believe that our version of expressivism, appealing to the theory of speech acts, has all the resources to reply to them. First, the attitudes expressed by slurs are at least partly conventionalized, just as those displayed by other expressive speech acts. We use *thank you* to express gratitude, *sorry* to express regret for something we have done, and *hello* to express our recognition of the addressee. The feelings and attitudes expressed by these words are conventionalized and are thus at least partly independent of the individual variations in the feelings of the speakers who use them.⁹ The range of emotions and feelings that can be experienced by a person who says *thank you* is very large: one can feel cool detachment or deep gratitude, one can be flattered or embarrassed by what the other person has done, and one can really experience a feeling of heartfelt gratitude or no feeling at all and say *thank you* only because the circumstances

⁸ This is Kirk-Giannini’s position, for which slurs are directives (cf. [Kirk-Giannini, 2019](#)).

⁹ This answers another objection by [Camp \(2013\)](#): “[D]ifferent slurs, and different uses of the same slur, are associated with different feelings (e.g., contempt, disgust, fear, dismissiveness) and with different degrees of feeling” (pp. 338-9). However, this would be tantamount to saying that *thank you* does not express gratitude because the users of this sentence experience different feelings and feelings of different strengths in different contexts.

require it. The fact remains that *thank you* is a sentence by which we conventionally express gratitude, and if we employ it, we express such a feeling because its expression is conventionally connected to the use of this sentence. Likewise, by employing a slur, one expresses contempt and expresses it whatever feelings toward the target group one may have or may not have. The speaker can loathe and hate the members of the target class or just feel a sense of superiority over them or estrangement from them. She can even have positive feelings toward the target group, but she can be led to use a slur to gain acceptance within her group, where bigotry is widespread. The fact remains, however, that by using a slur the speaker expresses contempt for the target group because such an expressive act is conventionally connected to the use of the slur. The use of a slur is thus independent of the speaker's real emotions and feelings. The conventionalization of the feeling expressed by the slur makes the act that one performs when using a slur less subjective.¹⁰

Second, let us analyze more deeply what a slur conventionally expresses. Contempt is an attitude by which one regards its object as being low in worth. As Jeshion (2018) posits, contempt targets persons as such and not their actions; for this reason, it is different from hate or disgust. Further, this attitude is clearly distinct from a judgment or from a propositional attitude:

[T]he contemnor perceives or ranks another as *low in worth*, as undeserving of full respect, and, crucially, this evaluative stance is relative to norms governing the moral domain that the contemnor endorses [...] Contempt shares its status as a moral emotion with reactive attitudes like resentment and indignation. Unlike them, contempt takes whole persons, not actions, as its primary objects. One may resent someone's manipulation, be indignant to acts of dishonesty and injustice. Such emotions are directed at persons' actions or persons for performing particular actions—at their *wrongdoing* [...] [By contrast, contempt] is directed to the whole person—at their *badbeing*—and thus is governed by moral norms setting standards of worth and respect for persons as such (Jeshion, 2018, pp. 92–3).

Contempt, like reverence, which is its opposite, can be morally judged. These attitudes can be suitable to the persons to whom they are directed. We believe that it is morally appropriate to feel contempt for a child torturer and to feel reverence for a benefactor of humanity. However, sometimes these attitudes are morally improper. To rank another person as low in worth due to the color of her skin, her sexual habits, her religion, her ethnicity, etc. is morally wrong. Likewise, it is morally wrong to feel reverence for a person who is not worthy of reverence.

Contempt cannot be reducible to a subjective feeling concerning only the person who expresses that feeling. On the contrary, contempt and reverence are morally relevant attitudes, which can be approved or condemned. It is *right* or *wrong* to feel contempt or reverence for somebody, and thus, it is *right* or *wrong* to use words that express these attitudes toward somebody. Far from being a private matter of the speaker, these attitudes are judgeable as the deeds of the speaker on the basis of a moral criterion.

This has relevant consequences. When we express an opinion on something, we usually also advance the idea that our opinion is correct and appropriate, and as such, we implicitly invite our addressees to embrace our view. In the same way, when we express contempt for somebody, we implicitly invite our addressees to embrace and manifest the same attitude toward that person because we assume that our attitude is appropriate. For example, suppose a speaker says that the economy is in dire straits. If she is sincere, then this sentence reflects her belief, and accordingly, it is something that she considers true and correct. But if she believes that it is true that the economy is in dire straits, then she also believes that others must embrace such truth and think the same thing.¹¹ Even though contempt and reverence are not propositional attitudes that can be judged as true or false, something similar happens with regard to them. If one expresses contempt or reverence and is sincere in what she expresses, such expression reflects her attitudes. In addition, if these attitudes are expressed, they are usually believed to be fitting and morally right. Therefore, it is implicitly believed that others must find these attitudes fitting and must adopt a similar stance. This explains why the speaker who employs a slur not only expresses an attitude of contempt for the target class but also implicitly invites others to adopt the same attitude. In this way, expressivism can easily account for the prescriptive dimension of slurs.

The context in which the slur is uttered is particularly important. If the slur is used in a context in which some discriminatory institutions and/or practices are in force, to express an attitude that ranks the target group as low in worth means to adhere to these institutions and practices and to reinforce them. In this case, the use of a slur is particularly grave because the association with discriminatory institutions/practices contributes to the oppression of the target group.

¹⁰ Incidentally, this addresses a criticism put forward by Kirk-Giannini against expressivism: “[E]xpressivism is subject to the objection that a competent, literal, non-reclaimed use of a slur need not be accompanied by any occurrent negative attitude on the part of the speaker” (p. 3). If in using a slur a speaker performs an expressive act, this is not a problem. Many expressive speech acts are performed without the corresponding attitude on the part of the speaker. Obviously, we predict that these uses of slurs are infelicitous. Following Searle (1975) terminology, they are violation of the *sincerity* rule and following Austin (1962) terminology, they are *abuses*.

¹¹ Although these side effects are naturally connected with representative acts, we deny that they are part of the representative act itself. Rather, they fall under the perlocutory domain. By contrast, Kirk-Giannini seems to maintain that the proposal to adopt the speaker's belief is something intrinsic to the representative act: “[T]he act of asserting a proposition [...] depend[s] for its intelligibility on one's *proposing* to one's audience that they come to believe it” (p. 14ff). Given this conception of assertion, it is quite obvious that Kirk-Giannini thinks that slurs do not express an attitude but the proposal to adopt a certain attitude. We prefer a more traditional view of assertions: that they express the speaker's beliefs. The proposal to embrace the same belief is a perlocutory consequence, which can be absent in certain contexts and which thus does not enter into the conditions of intelligibility of assertions. Similarly, the proposal to embrace the speaker's attitude is not part of the conditions of intelligibility of the use of a slur even though it is naturally connected with such use. Rather, it is part of the perlocutory effects of slurs, which can be absent in certain contexts. For this reason, we reject Kirk-Giannini's theory, according to which slurs are directives.

Conversely, when the target group is not discriminated against (e.g., when a slur for a dominant group is employed), its use seems less grave because although the slur expresses contempt for the target group and is implicitly prescriptive, the existing power relationships ensure that such a use does not strengthen any discriminatory institution or practice.¹² This does not change the fact that to express contempt for the members of a group because they possess a certain neutral property is *always* morally wrong for non-bigot persons even if no discriminatory institutions or practices exist and regardless of the nature of the power relationships existing among the groups involved. The existence or non-existence of discriminatory institutions and the nature of the existing power relationships and practices only increase or decrease the seriousness of the moral transgression of using a slur.

Diaz-Legaspe (2020) advances the opinion that the existence of power relationships and discriminatory practices is a necessary condition for the existence of slurs. For her, slurs have a register trait, [+derogatory], which, as every register trait, makes the use of a word appropriate only in certain contexts. Diaz-Legaspe believes that the circumstances that make the slur appropriate are those in which there is a dominance of some groups on the others:

Slurs are not just pejorative terms targeting identifiable neutral groups. They occur in the context of a particular type of social tie between the community of speakers using the slur (call them Ss) and the targeted group (call them Gs). In all cases, the relation between Ss and Gs involves marginalization, subordination, oppression and/or discrimination (p. 1413).

The fact that slurs are marked as [+derogatory] allows Diaz-Legaspe to exclude from the category of slurs the pejorative terms used by the supporters of a football team to designate the supporters of another team, and the pejoratives that designate certain professions (e.g., *shrink* for psychologists) and certain political groups (e.g., *commie*). Slurs are reserved to the contexts in which the members of the dominant group designate the members of the dominated group, or vice versa.

It is not clear whether the category of slurs should be so restricted. For example, when two groups are in conflict with each other, without either group dominating the other, some pejoratives are often created to designate the other group. Intuitively, these pejoratives are slurs even though neither of the two groups dominates the other.¹³ Moreover, there are several cases of cultures that have various sorts of contacts with each other (e.g., commercial contacts), without either group dominating the other. In this case, some pejoratives are also coined for the other group, and it seems difficult to exclude them from the category of slurs. Some examples of these are the term *Gai-jin* used in Japan to designate all non-Japanese people, and the American slang nickname *limey* used to refer to British or English people. Finally, Diaz-Legaspe acknowledges that terms such as *shrink* or *commie* are pejorative and “offensive in themselves” (p. 1401). In our opinion, to express contempt for somebody just because she practices a certain profession is morally wrong. For this reason, we believe that terms like these should be considered slurs.

We prefer not to include in the semantics of slurs a trait such as Diaz-Legaspe's [+derogatory] as the relationships among groups can be complex and nuanced, and it can be difficult to precisely take apart dominance situations from non-dominance situations. There are several degrees and forms of dominance, and there are also situations in which two or more groups collaborate with each other but such collaboration does not prevent the attitudes of diffidence and hostility. This leads to the consideration of all pejoratives that target a group identified by neutral features as slurs. If the use of such pejoratives is always morally wrong, the seriousness of the moral mistake varies from one context to another, in particular depending on the existence of oppressive or discriminatory practices.

However, the semantics defended here is compatible with Diaz-Laspage's view. If her view is correct, our theory becomes a semantic theory for pejoratives targeting morally neutral classes. Slurs would be a subclass of these pejoratives differing from the others for the particular register trait identified by Diaz-Laspage. Ours would not be a theory of slurs but a theory of a more general class of terms.¹⁴

4. Comparison with other theories

The idea of using the speech act theory to account for the derogatory charge of slurs is not entirely new. For instance, Hornsby (2001) mentions *en passant* the speech acts performed by “those who use them [slurs] —speech acts of illocutionary kinds, as we have seen, such as vilifying, snubbing, expressing derision, and so on” (p. 140). Discussing Japanese honorifics and comparing a neutral sentence with one containing an honorific, Potts and Kawahara, 2004 point out that “[t]he two sentences

¹² For discussions focusing on the question of the speaker's authority as a felicity condition for the illocutionary success of subordinating acts, see, among others, McGowan (2004); Langton et al. (2012); Maitra (2012); Langton (2018); Bianchi (2019). We shall not deal with this topic here.

¹³ Political pejoratives are more intricate because at least in some cases, pursuing certain political opinions is not neutral from the viewpoint of morality. For example, consider the groups that follow national socialist ideologies and the pejorative *Nazi* to designate them. One may argue that the status of this term is similar to that of *jerk* because both terms designate groups that have a *non-neutral* moral connotation.

¹⁴ Expressivism has raised other issues. One of the most common of these hinges on the fact that in some contexts the speaker performs no expressive act by using a slur. Some of these cases are reported by Hom (2008): “X is Chinese, but she is not a chink,” “the institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are racist,” and “they are Chinese, not chinks.” In addition to these “pedagogic uses,” there are also the so-called appropriated uses, in which the slur is employed by a member of the target class. Although these are serious objections, we shall not address them here because they concern cases that are problematic for almost any theory of slurs and not for expressivism alone. Pedagogic uses are a problem for the silentist theory and for any view that holds that the derogatory content of a slur is not part of its truth conditions. Only Hom and May's theory seems to have a ready explanation for these uses. As for appropriated uses, all theories must provide an explanation of why they lose their derogatory charge.

also have identical primary speech-act force (or potential). But the sentence containing the honorific defines a secondary speech act, one that derives from the presence of the honorific” (p. 257). Croom (2013) writes the following in a footnote: “Perhaps it is helpful to think of the distinction between descriptive and expressive terms discussed here as being in some sense analogous to the distinction between representative and expressive illocutionary acts discussed by Searle” (p. 179). Unfortunately, he does not pursue this idea further. However, the theories that more closely resemble that defended here are Camp’s (2018) and Jeshion’s (2013). We will address them in this order because the second more closely resembles our view.

Camp (2018) maintains that the semantics of slurs has two components. Appealing to Bach (1999) and Neale (1999), she argues against the view that the derogatory content is a conventional implicature, and she embraces the view that the two components of the semantics of slurs are part of what a speaker says using a slur. However, the title of her essay notwithstanding (*A dual act analysis of slurs*), she does not make any particular use of the speech act theory to illustrate the dual nature of the meaning of slurs. Therefore, her view is less close to ours than one might think.

In addition, according to Camp, whereas in the informative, quantificational, and modal contexts the “other” meaning component of slurs¹⁵ scopes out the at-issue content, in other contexts (e.g., in reported speech or in the scope of verbs such as *treat* and *consider*), the other component “can be included as part or all of the at-issue contribution” (p. 50). The same would happen with the so-called “weapon uses” of slurs, in which the addressee of the utterance herself is referred to by the slur (cf. (20)). Regarding these uses, Camp remarks that “the fact that predication of group membership would be conversationally inert forces the perspective to step in as the at-issue contribution” (p. 56). In other words, in such contexts the informative component is very thin because both the speaker and the addressee know that the addressee is a member of the target group. In these cases, the other component, identified by Camp with a perspective, becomes part of the at-issue content.

It is not completely clear what Camp means when she says that the perspective becomes part of the at-issue content. Surely, she means that the other component can take narrow scope with respect to reported speech verbs or verbs such as *treat* and *consider*: this component, Camp states, can be bound by the verb only if it is part of the at-issue content (p. 51). Although she is not completely explicit about this, it seems that Camp also means that this component becomes part of the truth-conditions of the sentence.

However, Camp seems to put together two different phenomena that should be taken apart: the communicative centrality of one of the two components and the fact that the other component becomes part of the truth conditions of the sentence. The first phenomenon can be accounted for in a dualist framework if a certain contextual flexibility is allowed: which of the two components is more significant from a communicative viewpoint depends on the context, even though one of them is more significant by default. This explains the difference between informative uses (cf. (19)) and weapon uses (cf. (20)). However, allowing this flexibility is different from allowing the other component to be part of the truth conditions. In the latter case, the duality would be cancelled, and the two components would become one.

If the distinction between the two components is preserved and if the second component is expressivist and thereby not reducible to a truth-conditional proposition, pedagogic uses, reported speech, and appropriated uses of slurs will obviously pose a problem. However, as noticed in footnote 14, these problems are shared by most approaches to the semantics of slurs, and many solutions have been suggested to address them. We hope that some of these solutions can provide a viable alternative to Camp’s view.

Jeshion (2013) proposes a three-component semantics of slur. The first component is truth-conditional and is identical with the contribution of the corresponding neutral term. By means of this component, slurs refer to groups of people. The second component is expressivist: “[S]lurring terms are used to express contempt for members of a socially relevant group on account of their being in that group or having a group-defining property” (p. 316). Jeshion makes it clear that this second component is not reducible to a descriptive content: by means of this component, one *expresses* contempt and does not *affirm* that the members of the target group are contemptible. Finally, the third component is an identifying component:

As a matter of the semantics of the slurring term, an utterance of [...] He is a faggot does not simply ascribe a property to the target, here, that of *being gay*. It classifies the target in a way that aims to be *identifying*. In calling someone “faggot”, the homophobe takes a property that he believes someone to possess and semantically encodes that it is the, or a, defining feature of the target’s identity (p. 318).

Admittedly, Jeshion’s view is the closest to that defended here. However, our proposal is distinct from that of Jeshion in at least two respects. First, in the view defended herein there are two semantic components, not three. The identifying component is not required. In fact, if the speaker expresses contempt for the members of a class *precisely because they are members of that class*, it is clear that the property for which those persons belong to such class is essential for their identity. Recall that contempt is directed to a person and not to her actions: the speaker who uses a slur regards the members of the target group as low in worth, and she does so just because they belong to that group. Having a certain property is deemed

¹⁵ Although Camp defines her theory as “broadly expressivist” (p. 50), we hesitate to call this component expressive, first because Camp rules out that this component is the expression of contempt, and second because she prefers to see this component as the expression of a perspective (i.e., a way of considering the target group), and at least in some circumstances perspectives are “susceptible to evaluation for truth, and to ascription in cognitive terms” (*ibid.*).

sufficient for considering someone else lower in worth. Therefore, the contempt for the target class implies that the speaker considers the property shared by the members of that class crucial.¹⁶

The redundancy of the third component is admitted by Jeshion herself when she writes: “Notice that the identifying component is dependent upon the expressive component because the identifying component partially captures what it is to regard someone with contempt. That is, it follows from what it is to find someone contemptible on the basis of being gay that one takes that person’s sexual orientation as the most or among the most central aspects of that person’s identity” (p. 318). As the third component depends on the second one and is implied by it, we can remove it from the semantics.

A second way in which our semantics differs from Jeshion’s is the exploitation of the theory of speech acts to account for the duality of meaning. The use of speech act theory allows us to: 1) more clearly define the status of the expressive component of slurs and distinguish it from the descriptive content; 2) better respond to objections raised against expressivist theory such as those of Camp and Kirk-Giannini; 3) better define the relationships with other expressions that serve to convey emotions and attitudes and determine their conditions of felicity.

As for 1), we have shown, for instance, that speech act theory easily accounts for some of the features that Potts believes characterize slurs, such as Ineffability and Repeatability.

Obviously, other expressivist theories have provided explanations for these phenomena, but we believe that the explanations offered by our theory are better because they are more *general*. For example, the fact that the derogatory content of slurs cannot be paraphrased using descriptive content (the Ineffability discussed by Potts) can be traced back to the broader and well-known phenomenon that non-representative speech acts cannot, in general, be paraphrased through representative speech acts. Therefore, a specific explanation for this phenomenon with respect to slurs is not necessary, as it can be traced back to a more general phenomenon. The same can be said for Repeatability. Since generality is one of the criteria for judging the quality of an explanation, an explanation that traces back phenomena characteristic of slurs to more general phenomena is, *ceteris paribus*, better.

As for 2), we have seen that some powerful criticisms directed against expressivism by Camp and Kirk-Giannini lose their strength when speech act theory is applied. For instance, this theory explains the conventionalization of the expression of contempt associated with slurs, relating it to the conventionalization of the expressions of attitudes we can see in expressive speech acts in general. In this way, we can easily distinguish what a slur conventionally expresses from the actual attitudes of the speaker, which can be highly diverse.

Once again, we do not deny that expressivists can provide responses to these criticisms, but we believe that our response is better because it is more general: it connects a phenomenon related to slurs with other phenomena concerning constructions used to perform expressive speech acts.

As for 3), we can precisely define the infelicity that occurs when a slur is used without feeling any contempt for the target group – it is the infelicity arising from the violation of Searle’s sincerity rule (cf. [Searle, 1969](#)) and Austin’s condition $\Gamma.1$, (cf. [Austin, 1962](#)). We can sharply distinguish this infelicity from the moral error made by the person who uses a slur. Another kind of infelicity arises when, after having used a slur, a speaker claims to have no negative attitude against the target group. Again, our version of expressivism permits to precisely define this infelicity as a violation of Austin’s felicity condition $\Gamma.2$ (cf. [Austin, 1962](#)), which requires that a speaker, after performing a certain speech act, must subsequently conduct themselves accordingly. More generally, our version of expressivism allows us to situate the semantic theory of slurs within the broader theory of expressive speech acts, thereby relating slurs to all those linguistic expressions through which speakers convey feelings and emotions, both positive and negative. Finally, the fact that a certain kind of action is performed in employing a slur helps us better understand that the error made by the users of slurs is not cognitive but moral. That is, they do not just have wrong beliefs but do something wrong.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, we have proposed a multi-act theory of the semantics of slur. The person who uses a slur does two different things, the second being expressing contempt for the target class. Even though this second act is secondary by default, it is part of the semantics of slurs like the first one and it is not a conventional implicature. Further, in some contexts, this component can become prominent from the communicative point of view.

We believe that our approach to the semantics of slurs has many advantages. One of them is to account for the fact that the persons who use slurs are liable to moral, if not penal, judgment. Another one is that our view is able to respond to some of the most powerful criticisms against expressivism.

Our view can also be extended to other pejoratives and connoted expressions. This is an advantage if slurs are not specific with respect to other pejoratives and if the differences between slurs and pejoratives in general are only apparent.¹⁷

¹⁶ A similar criticism has been advanced by [Cella \(2016\)](#). Regarding Jeshion’s identifying component, he writes: “If someone employs a slur, the attitudinal component will be directed toward the ascription to the target group, and since the speaker is already categorizing the membership to a group to be the – or one of the – defining characteristics of the identity of their target, this additional component is not necessary to characterize the semantic content of these expressions.” (p. 145).

¹⁷ We have demonstrated this in [Frigerio and Tenchini \(2020\)](#).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Aldo Frigerio: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Maria Paola Tenchini:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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