

Pejoratives: a classification of the connoted terms¹

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Abstract Interest in slurs has partly obscured the issue of pejoratives and connoted expressions in general. However, we believe that a deeper understanding of the class the slurs belong to will have a positive impact on the study of slurs as well. In this paper, we sketch out a classification of the connoted terms, in particular, the pejorative ones. First, we analyze the balance between the descriptive and the connotative dimensions of these terms in order to find their collocation along a plausible meaning continuum. Then, we focus on the connotative component and consider the following criteria by which connoted and pejorative terms can be classified: polarity, kind of attitude, conveyed level of emotion, and vulgarity.

Keywords: Pejoratives, Connotation, Insults, Vulgarity, (im)politeness.

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In the last decades, linguists and analytic philosophers of language have dealt with the semantic status of slurs, i.e., with those pejorative terms that convey a negative attitude toward a set of referents. The intriguing feature of these expressions is that they involve an entire target class even though they are directed against only one individual². The interest in this issue has been partly determined by the social and political significance of slurs because the use of such expressions seems to involve the speaker's adhesion to discriminatory practices toward minority groups. For example, the intentional use of pejorative terms based on race (i.e., *nigger*, *chink*, *WOP*), sexual orientation (*faggot*), religion (*yid*, *kike*), and health status (*monger*), etc. is included in the category of hate speech, which, in turn, is included in the category of hate crimes. Emblematic in this context are the legal responses to verbal discriminatory practices: we simply mention

¹ Although this paper results from the collective work of the authors, Maria Paola Tenchini has written in particular the Introduction and section 1, Aldo Frigerio sections 2 and 3.

² Literature on slurs is vast and often located at the intersection of different disciplines. In Frigerio & Tenchini (2014), we have tried to sketch out a map of the main different theoretical positions on the semantic status of the derogatory content of slurs. Here, we simply recall some of the studies that have contributed most to characterize the research on this issue: Anderson & Lepore (2013a), (2013b) for the deflationary/silentist approach; Hom (2008), (2012); Hom & May (2013) for the literalist/truth-conditional approach; Schlenker (2007), Cepollaro (2015) for the presuppositional approach; Potts (2005), (2007); McCready (2010), Whiting (2013), Gutzmann (2015) for the conventional implicature approach.

here the famous *fighting words doctrine* drawn up by the US Supreme Court in 1942 in the *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* case³, which recognizes, in the use of *insulting and “fighting” terms*, a limitation to freedom of speech as protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

The primary interest in slurs has contributed to ‘obscure’ other expressions whose semantics is similar to slurs, but, nonetheless, are not slurs⁴. In various ways and to various degrees, these expressions denigrate the target. They include not only insults like *idiot*, *asshole*, and *bastard* but also less marked terms, such as *cur*, *jalopy*, *dump*, or expressions in their extended meaning, like *fascist*.

Further, expressions classifiable as *profanity* of various kinds (swear words, curse words, and the like), such as *shit*, *damn*, or *fuck* (in all its forms and meanings), are to be considered⁵. Such expressions have the primary function of displaying the speaker’s emotional attitude (*Oh shit, I’ve lost my keys*), and they do not necessarily target an addressee or an outgroup. In this sense, these expressions are similar to interjections, and, like the latter, can be associated with positive facts (*I fucking love cakes*). It is evident that these expressions are very different from each other.

The above-mentioned terms are sometimes classified as pejorative, sometimes as expressive, or offensive, and, in some cases, as vulgar. These labels are occasionally congruent but not always: for instance, there are pejoratives that are not vulgar (cf. *jalopy*) and pejoratives that do not denigrate anyone (cf. *oh shit!*). What these nonhomogeneous terms have in common is that they all convey an expressive code component. This paper aims to propose a classification for them. It is structured as follows. In section 1.1, the balance between the truth-conditional denotative and the descriptive component of these expressions on the one side and the expressive, attitudinal, or emotional connotative component on the other side shall be used as a classification criterion. On this basis, in section 1.2, we will see that these expressions are distributed over a *continuum*, from purely descriptive terms (like *philosopher*) to purely expressive ones (*damn!*), passing through the middle stages (*fascist*, *cur*, *idler*, *bastard*). In section 1.3, we touch upon the neglected distinction between the attribution of negative properties and the expression of a negative attitude. We will see that the attribution of negative properties is part of the descriptive component of the meaning, which does not imply the expression of a negative attitude or an emotional state of the speaker toward the target. Furthermore, we will see that, admittedly, the two components are often difficult to distinguish in some contexts because negative attitudes naturally arise from negative judgments. In section 2.1, the expression of the attitude conveyed by the connoted terms will be classified on the grounds of i) polarity, which can be negative,

³ Cf. *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568 (1942) «There are certain well-defined and narrowly limited classes of speech, the prevention and punishment of which have never been thought to raise any constitutional problem. These include the lewd and obscene, the profane, the libelous, and the insulting or “fighting” words – those which by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace. It has been well observed that such utterances are no essential part of any exposition of ideas, and are of such slight social value as a step to truth that any benefit that may be derived from them is clearly outweighed by the social interest in order and morality» (<http://bit.ly/2fSZeX6>, last access 22/11/2018). According to the definition of fighting words by Nowak, Rotunda, and Young (1986) quoted by Leets e Giles (1997), such expressions constitute «speech that holds no intellectual content to be conveyed to the listener but is merely a provocative emotional message intended and likely to incite an immediate, violent response» (Leets & Giles 1997, p. 262).

⁴ There are some exceptions such as Potts (2005) and Schlenker (2007), who provide a theory of pejoratives and expressive terms in general. However, they do not offer a taxonomy of these terms, which is the aim of this paper.

⁵ For a survey and a history of these terms, cf. Mohr (2013).

neutral, or positive; ii) kind of attitude (contempt, disregard, hate, disgust, anger, cursing, etc.); iii) levels of emotion or attitude. In sections 2.2 and 2.3, the dimension of vulgarity will be considered and put in relation with the expressive component and politeness rules. The offense arising from the use of pejorative terms can be of two kinds: i) the offense arising from the use of a pejorative directed toward a person, where offense arises from denigration; ii) the offense arising from damage to negative politeness, when swear words are used. Section 3 concludes the paper.

Our proposal will consider the terms that are connoted as expressive or pejorative on the basis of their code semantics; therefore, the classification will not take into account the appropriated uses of slurs, ironic or sarcastic uses of neutral terms, and the (important) role of prosody and coverbal communication.

1. Expressive/Descriptive

The first dimension by which we classify these terms lies in the balance between their descriptive, truth-conditional component and their emotional, attitudinal, expressive component. The first component concerns the aspects of the meaning, which are explored using the traditional truth-conditional semantics: sense and reference, intension and extension, *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. What matters here is to specify that, in this first meaning component, two aspects are relevant: the set of objects in the world denoted by the noun or the verb and the concept associated with that noun or verb. We will not take position on how strictly the concept determines the denotation.

The second basic component of our classification is what we call, for brevity, *connotation*. The connotation of a term refers to emotions, moods, tastes, feelings, and assessments displayed by the speaker by means of that very term. In our framework, *connotation* is not a descriptive component but an expressive one, which, accordingly, is independent from the truth-conditions assigned to any sentence. This component does not describe states of affairs but concerns the attitude of the speaker toward individuals and states of affairs and the emotional impact the world has on the speaker⁶.

1.1 A first classification

We can classify the terms depending on the preponderance of one component on the other. Some terms have a descriptive component but not a connotative one. For example, a term like *doctor* has an extension (the set of doctors) and an intension (the complete set of properties included in the concept), but it does not have any connotation. This is not though to deny that, *in particular contexts*, a speaker can use a word like *doctor* with a negative *connotation*. Let us assume, for example, that Mary has had negative experiences with doctors. She generally considers them incompetent and unsympathetic. Mary's attitude toward doctors is well known within the circle of her friends. One day, Mary is talking with a friend about a recent acquaintance and says:

- (1) He would be nice, but...he is a doctor.

⁶ Here, *connotation* is thus intended as the set of semantic values of a word or expression that are additional with respect to its intension and extension. For a survey, cf. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977) and the references within. We presuppose, then, that the semantic value of a word is not exhausted its truth conditional contribution but that there can be components of the meaning that do not contribute to truth conditions and that are, nevertheless, part of the semantic value of a word. For a similar opinion, cf., for instance, Bach (1999).

In saying the word *doctor*, Mary stresses it and slows down the speech rate. She also adopts a facial expression conveying disapproval and/or disgust. It is clear that, for this particular use of the word, *doctor* has a negative connotation. Every term can be used like that, given the appropriate context.

Here, however, we are interested in those connotations that are associated to a term at the code level, i.e., connotations that a term expresses *by default*⁷. Just like a dictionary registers the descriptive component, intended as a semantic potential that can be modified, reshaped, and pragmatically adjusted in context, the same applies to the connotative component. The connotative component that a term has by default can be modified and reshaped, like in (1), where a connotative component is added in a particular context. Here, we are interested only in the connotation's code component and not in its pragmatic reshaping in context⁸. So, for example, *doctor* has no component of this kind by default.

A second class of terms have both components, descriptive and connotative. For example, the word *cur* has a clear descriptive component (extension, i.e., the set of dogs, and intension, i.e., the concept of dog) and a connotative component. The latter consists in the expression of the speaker's mildly pejorative feeling when using the term toward the members of the extension. Slurs belong to this second class as well. A word like *faggot* has an intension and an extension (equivalent to those of *homosexual*) and a connotation consisting in expressing a strong, disparaging feeling toward the target referents.

Lastly, there are terms like *damn!* or *fuck!* which have no descriptive component at all⁹ but only a connotative component by means of which the speaker expresses the

⁷ Here, we sharply differ from Lepore & Stone (2018), who claim that connotation is not part of either the semantic or the pragmatic meaning. According to them, connotation is something indefinite and elusive, something that can vary from speaker to speaker. Thus, connotation cannot be part of the meaning one intends to communicate, both semantically and pragmatically, as meaning must be shared by participants for communication to be successful. Lepore & Stone (2018) compare connotation ("tone") with the "evocative potential" a poem can generate, thus to something vague and subjective, which cannot be considered part of the literal or intended meaning of the poetic text. However, in order to support their argument, Lepore & Stone (2018) quote a single example, i.e., the different tone (in the Fregean sense) of *bloom*, *flower*, and *blossom*. Indeed, it may be that these terms are synonymous, and that the differences among them do not pertain to the meaning because they are something fuzzy and subjective. But it is difficult to apply Lepore & Stone (2018)'s thesis to other highly connoted terms. Let us consider, for example, the difference between *very old* and *decrepit*. According to our classification, *very old* is a neutral term, while *decrepit* is a mixed term, which has, more or less, the same descriptive meaning as *very old*, but which also has a connotation component, by means of which the speaker expresses her pejorative evaluation toward something/somebody that is very old. Lepore & Stone (2018) are committed to the thesis that this difference is purely subjective and rather variable from speaker to speaker. Nonetheless, such a difference is registered in dictionary entries (*decrepit* is marked by the traits "wasted or worn out," "decayed," "enfeebled," and "obsolete," which always convey a negative evaluation in comparison to *old*), so we are induced to believe that a competent speaker *must* be aware of the negative connotation of a word like *decrepit* to avoid linguistic mistakes. To relegate connotation to a purely subjective phenomenon does not consider that a speaker, by using *decrepit*, conveys her feelings and attitudes toward an object that is very old, and that her addressees will grasp such an attitude (unless the context does not reshape the negative connotation in some way). Therefore, we claim that connotation cannot be compared to poetical evocations but is part of the meaning of the term (i.e., part of what is communicated by its use), although it is not part of the descriptive and truth-conditional meaning.

⁸ We believe that as many terms have a code descriptive component that can be reshaped and specified by the context, the same can happen to the code connotative component. The context can also *add* descriptive and connotative components to a term or to a sentence.

⁹ In reality, these terms originate as descriptive ones, but in the course of its linguistic evolution, this descriptive component has faded out. So, *damn* originates as a legal term meaning "to condemn, declare guilty, convict," also in the theological sense of "doom to punishment in a future state" (cf.

strength of her emotional state. Thus, the use of such terms is not designed to describe how the world is, but to display the speaker's emotional state. In this respect, they are very close to some interjections.

This last example allows us to make some clarifications for our analysis. We have said that our classification concerns only the code meaning of these expressions and not their (potential) contextual meaning. We now note that these terms, as many others, may convey more than one code meaning. For example, *damn* can be used, as we have seen, as an interjection to express an aroused emotional state. But this particular meaning is only one of the code meanings of *damn*. The OED registers other meanings: "(in Christian belief) be condemned by God to suffer eternal punishment in hell" or "Be doomed to misfortune or failure." When we classify a term as descriptive, mixed, or purely expressive, our classification refers to one specific meaning of that term. Different meanings of the same term can be included in different classes. This is the very case of *damn* and *fuck*.

This clarification, *per se* quite obvious, allows us to solve complex cases. For example, how should a term like *fascist* be classified? Is it descriptive, mixed, or expressive? We think that *fascist* has at least two meanings. On one hand, it means someone who is registered with the Fascist party or who supports or believes in fascism. In this use, it is a purely descriptive term. Certainly, it can be used with a negative charge, but this is a pragmatic meaning that can be added in contexts where this term is used by antifascist people. On the contrary, people who sympathize with that ideology can use this term with a positive connotation. In itself, however, this term is neither negative nor positive and expresses only that somebody is enrolled in a party (in this, it is similar to *communist* or *Republican*)¹⁰. Nevertheless, *fascist* has another meaning by means of which "extreme authoritarian, oppressive, or intolerant views or people" (OED) are denoted. We believe that, in this last meaning, *fascist* is a mixed term: it denotes authoritarian and oppressive people or views or ideas, but it also expresses the very negative judgment of the speaker toward such people or ideas.

1.2 A continuum

It may be legitimately thought from the above that, along the dimension we are analyzing, the division is tripartite: purely descriptive, mixed, and purely expressive terms. But that is not our opinion. We are of the view, however, that there exists a *continuum* from purely descriptive to purely emotional terms.

Indeed, some terms have a well-defined descriptive component and only a mild and weak connotative component. For example, a term like *idler* means "who avoids work or spends time in an aimless or lazy way." According to our classification, however, this is not the only meaning component, as the term also carries a connotation of a mild criticism toward persons of this kind. This component distinguishes *idler* from *lazy*, since, in *lazy*, the connotation is even weaker. Other terms come close to the opposite extreme of the *continuum* without reaching it, however. Such terms have an indefinite descriptive component and a strong connotation: for example, *jerk* or *bastard*. The descriptive component of terms like these is very vague. *Jerk* denotes foolish persons, *bastard* unpleasant and self-centered persons. On the contrary, the connotative

www.etymonline.com). But in the meaning that we are considering here, such a component has been deactivated.

¹⁰ Let us consider, for example, a history book that details the rise to power of Benito Mussolini's Fascist Party. Evidently, if the authors wish to simply describe the facts objectively without giving any personal judgment, they will use *fascists* as a purely descriptive term.

component is marked and strong. Finally, cases such that of slurring terms are located in the middle, as their descriptive component is clear-cut and so is their connotation. This arrangement explains our intuition on sentences like the following:

- (2) Paul is a faggot.
- (3) Paul is a bastard.

- (4) Paul is not a faggot.
- (5) Paul is not a bastard.

- (6) If there are faggots, I will not come.
- (7) If there are bastards, I will not come.

Both (2) and (3) seem to insult somebody, but while (4) and (6) keep insulting homosexuals, (5) and (7) do not seem to insult anybody¹¹. Yet, according to our classification, both *faggot* and *bastard* are mixed terms provided with a descriptive as well as a connotative component. So, what does their different behavior in (5) and (7) depend upon? The immediate reaction would be to affirm that, while slurs project their connotative component¹², terms like *bastard* do not¹³. But we do not hold this interpretation of the difference between *faggot* and *bastard* to be correct¹⁴. We also believe that sentences (5) and (7) express the speaker's negative attitude toward the extension of *bastard* in the same way as (4) and (6) express a negative attitude toward homosexuals, i.e., the extension of *faggot*. Therefore, the connotation of *bastard* is independent from the descriptive component and is projected out of negation and conditionals in the same way as the connotation of *faggot*. It remains to be seen why (5) and (7) seem to insult nobody. In our opinion, this is due to two factors, which are probably connected to each other:

- i. The extension of *bastard* is very indeterminate because its descriptive component is indeterminate.
- ii. The descriptive component of *bastard* is based on "moral" properties. It is difficult to determine who is part of the extension, and everyone can consider herself part of the complement of the term's extension. On the contrary, the

¹¹ Panzeri and Carrus (2016), in an experimental study, find that pejorative terms like *bastard* do lose their offensiveness when negated, possibly because of a metalinguistic effect that they test in a follow up, but they are still perceived as offensive when used in the antecedent of conditionals. This *prima facie* speaks against our intuitions. However, "offensive" is a generic term, which does not clarify what the participants to the study have in mind. A pejorative expression such as *ob shit!*, *qua* vulgar term, can be said "offensive" even though it has no target and does not insult anyone specifically. Cf. section 2.3 on the different reasons why an expression can generate offence.

¹² On this slur's peculiarity, there is a large amount of literature from Potts (2005).

¹³ Another possible explanation is that the connotative component of *bastard* does not refer to a group of people but only to behaviors and actions (cf. Cepollaro 2018: 72). Nonetheless, the expression of a negative attitude toward an action should also entail a negative attitude toward the group of people who carries it out. Such a group is the term's extension.

¹⁴ As we will see in section 2.2, some of the terms we are analyzing are vulgar. Part of their expressivity is due to their vulgarity. Further, it is evident that the vulgarity of a term is projected in all contexts. For example, if "Paul is an asshole" is vulgar, so, too, are "if Paul is an asshole, I do not want to see him" and "Paul is not an asshole". And if the expressivity of these terms depends on their vulgarity, then it is evident that such sentences are vulgar and, hence, expressive.

extension of *faggot* and the other slurs is determined by more “objective” properties and, thus, is easily determinable.

As for the first point, it suffices to note that the descriptive features of *bastard* are very vague. It is difficult to respond to the question: “Which properties should one have to be a member of the extension of *bastard*?”. We know that, to be classified as a bastard, one must be an unpleasant and self-centered person, but how unpleasant and self-centered must one be, and what, exactly, *unpleasant* and *self-centered* mean is not clear.

The second point is even more central. The features that define the extensions of *bastard*, *jerk*, and *idler* are “moral”, i.e., they concern character, behavior, and intelligence. It is difficult to establish whether a person has these properties or not. A person can always think not to be unpleasant, foolish, or lazy. It is always questionable whether a person has these properties, and it is always possible to deny having them. On the contrary, the skin color, nationality, sexual orientation, etc. of a person are not vague and are not debatable features.

By consequence, even though (5) and (7) express a negative attitude toward the persons who are unpleasant and self-centered, the identification of these persons is very difficult¹⁵. Everyone might consider herself not to be part of the extension of *bastard* and, thus, everyone might feel that she is not insulted. Conversely, in (3), the speaker states that Paul is part of the extension of *bastard* and, therefore, predicates the property of being an unpleasant and self-centered person of Paul. Furthermore, expressing a very negative and aggressive attitude toward these persons, the speaker also expresses this attitude toward Paul, given that he is declared as part of the term’s extension. Paul can, then, feel insulted.

To sum up, words can be arranged on a *continuum* whose ends are the words lacking a connotative component and the words lacking a descriptive component. Slurs are in the middle of this *continuum* because they have both components and they are clearly defined. Instead, words such as *bastard* or *jerk* have a vague descriptive component, but they are strongly connoted because they express a strong attitude of the speaker, so they are located close to an extreme, but not *at* the extreme. Furthermore, many of these terms refer to persons’ moral categories, in contrast to slurs. This accounts for our different intuitions on their projectivity, despite their similar semantics.

1.3 Negative description and negative attitude

To better distinguish the connotation and descriptive components, it is worth differentiating the two aspects that are often conflated: the attribution of negative features and the expression of a negative attitude. A word’s connotation is something that concerns the speaker’s moods, feelings, and attitudes. On the contrary, it does not concern the attribution of negative features, which is part of the descriptive component of the meaning. To clarify this difference, consider the following examples:

- (8) This subject scores I.Q. 76.
- (9) The defendant is experiencing a straitened economic situation.

¹⁵ An anonymous referee objects that, since the negative attitude towards a whole class does leave no trace in sentences such as (5) and (7), the distinction between a descriptive and a connotative component is unjustified in the case of these terms. This seems equivalent to deny that *bastard* has a descriptive component altogether and not simply to acknowledge that it is vague. However, uttering a sentence such as “I do not like bastards”, the speaker is clearly referring to someone – and this demonstrate that *bastard* has an extension after all – and is clearly expressing a negative attitude towards these people – and this demonstrates the presence of a connotation. If *bastard* is a purely expressive term, as the referee seems to believe, it is difficult to account for these sentences, in which the use of *bastard* has no specific target.

- (10) The subject suffers from a chronic mental disorder with abnormal social behavior.

Sentences (8)–(10) attribute negative features, such as a lack of intelligence, poverty, and/or mental illness, but they are not negatively connoted. Indeed, neutral and scientific language is used in these sentences to avoid any negative connotation, i.e., any expression of negative attitudes, such as blame, disgust, scorn, etc., for the persons described.

Compare with:

- (11) Paul is an asshole.
(12) Paul is a bum.
(13) Paul is a weirdo.

Sentences (11)–(13) attribute the same negative features (a lack of intelligence, poverty, and/or mental illness), but express the speaker's negative attitude. The expression of these attitudes does not add *further* negative features or properties. As we have said, connotation does not describe but expresses something¹⁶.

These two aspects are obviously often difficult to distinguish because negative features easily raise contempt or disapproval. It is often hard to separate the attribution of negative features from the attitudes they generate. However, this distinction is mandatory to investigate the semantics of pejoratives and of the connoted words in general. It is not sufficient to attribute a negative property to have a pejorative or a negatively connoted word. It must also express the negative attitude of the speaker.

An anonymous referee has noticed a resemblance between our classification and the terminology used in meta-ethics about the thick terms¹⁷. In this context, it is usual to distinguish among descriptive terms, such as *red*, evaluative terms (called *thin terms*) such as *good*, and mixed terms (called *thick terms*), such as *courageous* and *chaste*. The latter terms are both descriptive and evaluative. We acknowledge that this distinction is analogous to ours but we also believe that there are important differences and the referee's remark gives us the opportunity of better clarifying our position. In particular, we would like to distinguish sharply between *evaluative* and *connotative*. Evaluations are not yet connotations because we can express evaluations in neutral and aseptic terms. Consider a teacher who corrects and evaluates the school works of his students: she assigns a mark to each school work, suppose *excellent*, *good*, *fair*, *poor*, etc. In our opinion, the teacher is making an evaluation, but the terms she uses are not connoted. She is expressing a judgement that is as objective as far as possible, assigning each school work to a class along an evaluation scale. She is *not expressing an attitude* towards the students

¹⁶ An anonymous referee objects that negativity is something socially and culturally laden, so there is no objective description of *negative* features. It is a hard question if values are something objective or subjective. We personally reject the view that all evaluative sentences are expressions of subjective attitudes and we believe in the objectivity of at least some values. For instance, in our opinion neutral terms such as “thief”, “murder”, and “rapist” ascribe objective negative features to the persons they are predicated of. However, to draw the distinction between description and expression of an attitude we need not solve the very complex questions related to the status of values. *Scoring I.Q. 76* is a description of a state of affairs and it remains a description even though the *value* of intelligence is a social construction. Moreover, if we say that Paul is an *asshole*, we are expressing a negative attitude toward Paul independently of the objectivity or subjectivity of the value of intelligence.

¹⁷ This terminology has been introduced by Williams (1985). The debate on these topics is huge. Cf., for instance, Väyrynen (2013).

and their school works¹⁸. Evaluations have to do with the rational sphere and with the analysis, as far as possible, objective of how things are. Rather, connotations have to do with the affective sphere of the speakers, i.e. with their emotions, preferences, and attitudes. Connotations concern the *expression* of this sphere. For this reason, we believe that evaluative but not connoted terms such as those occurring in (8)-(10) should be distinguished by those occurring in (11)-(13). We do not deny that the connotative and the evaluative dimensions are often difficult to disentangle and that sometimes they even overlap. However, a principle distinction between these dimensions is important because they are often collapsed in literature, also in the meta-ethical debate, in which sometimes thick terms are compared with slurs.

2. The classification of connoted terms

After differentiating the connotative and descriptive aspects of meaning, we are now ready to propose a tentative classification of connoted terms. We have already seen one parameter by which connoted terms can be classified: the balance between the connotative and descriptive components. In this section, we will examine some further dimensions by which connoted terms can be classified.

2.1 Dimensions of connotation

We suggest three of these dimensions here:

- 1) *Polarity*. So far, we have considered negatively connoted terms because they are more numerous and frequent¹⁹. However, positively connoted terms also exist. Take, for instance, appellatives such as *darling* and *honey* or politeness pronouns in Italian, German, or French. There are also connoted terms with a neutral polarity, which are neither positively nor negatively connoted but simply express the speaker's aroused emotive state. The context can clarify whether this state is positive or negative. Cf., for example, the word *fucking* and phrases such as *fucking good* and *fucking bad*. In this particular meaning, *fucking* simply expresses the aroused emotive state of the speaker, and the word determined by *fucking* makes it clear whether this state is positive or negative. Polarity – positive, negative, or neutral – is, thus, one of the dimensions by which we can classify connoted terms.
- 2) *Kinds of attitude*. Connoted terms, in the present view, express the emotions, moods, tastes, feelings, and assessments of the speaker. Therefore, the second dimension of our classification is the kind of attitude the term expresses, such as contempt or disgust against a target (*faggot*, *filthy maggot*), curse (*go to hell!*), fondness for someone (*darling*), anger (*Damn!*), surprise or amazement (*holy shit!*), etc.
- 3) *Levels of emotion or attitude*. Attitudes can be more or less strong. For instance, an emotion can be faint or intense. Some terms express very strong attitudes, others much less intense attitudes. For instance, some slurs are very derogatory, while others are weaker, though always negative. Compare, for instance, *nigger* with *Yankee* (slur used by Mexicans to designate American people). In the same vein, some constructions express very contained anger or surprise (*oh my dear!*); others express much stronger emotions (*oh holy shit!*)²⁰.

¹⁸ That the distinction is real is proved by the fact that students often complain that the negative attitude of their teachers towards them negatively influence the evaluation of their works.

¹⁹ For the bias in favor of negative terms, cf. Janschewitz (2008).

²⁰ Dimensions 1 and 3 have been pointed out by Potts (2007).

We do not claim that these are the only dimensions by which connoted terms can be classified. However, we believe that these three dimensions are among the most fundamental.

2.2 Vulgarity

There is at least a fourth dimension by which connoted terms can be classified: vulgarity. As it is clear from the previous examples, many, but not all, connoted terms are vulgar. Further, some slurs are vulgar (e.g., *bitch*, used in this literal meaning to refer to women), but not all slurs are, in our opinion (e.g., *kike*, when used to refer to Jews). We devote a whole section to this dimension because it is more elusive and harder to define than the others. We will not attempt to give a general definition of what vulgarity is here. We simply state that a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of vulgarity is to refer to sex or defecation and physiological functions in general. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition because we can refer to these subjects without being vulgar: e.g., we might use scientific terms to refer to the sexual act or to the physiological functions. It is difficult to say what the difference between the vulgar term and the corresponding scientific term exactly amounts to. They have the same extension and intension and, as a matter of fact, it seems that the sole difference is that one is a vulgar and taboo term, while the other is a neutral term²¹.

Vulgarity, like connotation, tends to project in every context. The negation of a sentence containing a vulgar term is still vulgar. Questions and conditionals containing vulgar terms are vulgar sentences as well. Even reported speech containing vulgar terms tends to be felt as vulgar, so that mass media usually uses abbreviations or the initials of vulgar terms when reporting what some person has said.

The connection between vulgarity and connotation is based on the fact that vulgarity intensifies the expressivity of a term. In other words, vulgar terms are usually very expressive. Reference to taboo subjects, such as sex or physiological functions, using taboo words makes the speaker's elocution very emotively loaded. Insults are usually considered more aggressive if vulgar (cf. *idiot* vs. *asshole*), and expressions of anger or surprise are regarded as less intense if they are not vulgar (cf. *wow* vs. *shit!*).

Whatever moral judgment one might formulate about the use of vulgar expressions, some scholars have noted that they can have positive functions. For example, they can have a cathartic function: by using vulgar terms, speakers can vent intense emotions. Moreover, vulgarity can substitute for physical aggression: instead of resorting to a violent conflict, the use of vulgar insults allows the speaker to pour out her aggressivity toward another person²². Finally, vulgarity can signal informality and proximity. Since the use of vulgar words is usually confined to informal, friendly, and domestic contexts, to begin to use these terms with another interlocutor can indicate that she is now considered a close friend. Paradoxically, the use of vulgar words may be an index of positive politeness.

2.3 Offensiveness and impoliteness

Since pejoratives are sometimes classified as offensive terms, it is important to clarify the relationship between pejoration and offensiveness because there is much confusion

²¹ An anonymous referee of this journal objects that also religion is a typical target of vulgar expressions. Maybe they are. However, here it suffices to say that, if blasphemy is vulgar, it is a kind of vulgarity different from that we are analyzing here concerning physiological functions. We acknowledge not to have a general theory of vulgarity. In fact, as far as we know, there is no such theory in literature, so our treatment of this dimension is tentative here.

²² This is suggested, for instance, by Jay (2009).

in literature on this topic. In fact, a connoted term can cause offense and, then, be impolite for many reasons. The more obvious motive is that some of these terms express the speaker's negative attitude toward the addressee or the whole class of persons to which the addressee belongs. Negative attitudes, like contempt, disgust, and disdain against a person, or a class of persons, warrant offense because they insult somebody and make her feel neglected, ostracized, despised, and scorned. The most studied case is that of slurs, which express disapproval or contempt toward a class of persons. As we have seen, insults, such as *asshole* or *bastard*, display the same attitudes toward a whole class of persons. However, the limits of this class are so vague and indefinite that, when these expressions are predicated of an individual, she can be the sole person who feels offended because she is declared a member of the class. The individuals who are not explicitly said to be members of the target class can believe they are not a part of it. If anything, one might believe that the speaker judges that the class contains only one member: the sole individual the expression is predicated of. For these reasons, expressions such as *asshole* or *bastard* may be considered offensive only for the persons explicitly designated by these terms. The reason why slurs and insults can be considered offensive is that positive politeness prescribes accepting other persons and making them feel appreciated and included in the speaker's social circle. These terms are, therefore, positive face-threatening.

However, connoted terms can be offensive for other reasons. First, expressivity by itself can generate offense. Brown and Levinson (1987) underline that an excessively emotional state can be face-threatening because it gives the addressee reasons to fear the speaker or be embarrassed by her. Thus, excessively expressive terms, especially in formal contexts, jeopardize the negative face of the addressee. A too violent emotional outburst can generate fear because it demonstrates that the speaker is not in full control of her emotions and, thus, of her actions. Moreover, it exposes features of the speaker's psyche that should remain confidential in formal contexts. Therefore, in nonfriendly contexts, even expressions of intense joy, pleasure, or sentiment (which are not negative attitudes) can be offensive.

The third reason why connoted expressions can be offensive is their vulgarity. It has been shown that the offensiveness of vulgar terms depends heavily on the context and the interlocutors. The use of vulgar words among peer college students talking each other in an informal setting, such as a dormitory, is considered as a little or not at all offensive. The use of the same words in more formal contexts, such a classroom or with different interlocutors like professors or the dean, is considered much more offensive²³. In these cases, referring to taboo subjects and the use of taboo terms to refer to these subjects are regarded as inappropriate.

A concluding note about slurs and their offense potential. According to our classification, slurs can offend for the first two reasons: they express a negative attitude toward a class of persons, and they express emotionality. If they are vulgar words, the third reason can be added to the first two. However, there is a further reason why slurs can arouse reactions. The negative attitude toward the target class is not grounded on some negative feature of the people belonging to this class, but on some neutral property²⁴. Insults against a person can always be judged inappropriate but, nevertheless, justified when grounded on a negative feature of the target person (for example, on an

²³ Cf. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) and Beers Fägersten (2012).

²⁴ Of course, racists and homophobic persons believe that a certain color of the skin and a certain sexual orientation are negative properties. However, people reacting to the use of slurs think that racists and homophobic persons are wrong and that these are neutral features. If values are objective, as we believe, these opinions are based on *objective* facts.

improper moral trait or on a blameworthy action). On the contrary, we believe that it is morally wrong to despise people for something that is not negative in itself. This injustice can engender reactions beyond the three reasons we have listed above. This presumably extends to every use of a negatively connoted word when the negative attitude is unjustified.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to sketch out a classification of the connoted terms, in particular, the pejorative ones. First, we have analyzed the balance between the descriptive and the connotative dimensions of these terms in order to find their collocation along a plausible *meaning continuum*. We have then focused on the connotative component and considered the following classification criteria: polarity, kind of attitude, level of emotion conveyed by such terms, and vulgarity. Our proposal is only a first step and, obviously, requires enrichment and development to obtain a more structured and fine-grained classification. The interest in slurs has partly obscured the issue of connoted expressions in general, but we believe, nonetheless, that a deeper understanding of the class the slurs belong to will have a positive impact on the study of slurs as well²⁵.

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²⁵ We wish to thank three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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