



# In defence of a presuppositional account of slurs



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## ABSTRACT

In the last 15 years philosophers and linguists have turned their attention to slurs: derogatory expressions that target certain groups on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and so on. This interest is due to the fact that, on the one hand, slurs possess puzzling linguistic properties; on the other hand, the questions they pose are related to other crucial issues, such as the descriptivism/expressivism divide, the semantics/pragmatics divide and, generally speaking, the theory of meaning. Despite these recent investigations about pejoratives, there is no widely accepted explanation of slurs: in my paper I consider the intuitions we have about slurs and I assess the difficulties that the main theories encounter in explaining how these terms work in order to identify the phenomena that a satisfactory account of slurs needs to explain. Then, I focus on the pragmatic theories that deal with the notions of conventional implicature and pragmatic presupposition: I assess the objections that have been raised and I propose two ways of defending the presuppositional account, taking into consideration the notion of cancellability. I will claim that the reason why most pragmatic strategies seem to fail to account for slurs is that they assume a rigid divide between conventional implicatures and presuppositions that should not be taken for granted. Reconsidering the relationship between these two notions gives a hint about how a pragmatic account of slurs should look like. Finally, I assess the problem of which presupposition slurs in fact trigger.

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## 1. Slurs and intuitions

In this section, I will present some examples<sup>1</sup> to see what slurs are and how they work and I'll look at the intuitions we have about these terms.

Slurs are derogatory expressions that target certain groups on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and so on. Some examples of English slurs are “bitch”, “chink”, “faggot”, “kike”, “nigger”, “wop” etc. What characterizes slurs is that they derogate people on the account of their belonging to a certain target group. Consider (1) and (2):

1. Bianca is a wop.
2. Bianca is a jerk.

Here we see that both (1) and (2) convey an offense toward Bianca, but only (1) derogates a whole class of people, namely Italians. This is a feature that distinguishes slurs from other insults.

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<sup>1</sup> To do that, I am going to mention some slurs, together with other bad words. I hope it's clear enough that I don't mean to use them, but I need to mention them to make my explanation clearer.

A peculiarity of these words is that their offensive content tends to scope out of semantic embeddings like negations, conditionals, modals or questions. Compare (3)–(4) and (5)–(6):

3. Bianca is not a wop.
4. Is Bianca a wop?
5. Bianca is not a jerk.
6. Is Bianca a jerk?

Here we see that the offense towards the target group conveyed by (1) is still conveyed by (3) and (4); on the contrary, the offense conveyed by (2) disappears in (5) and (6): again we note how slurs behave differently from other insults. In (3) and (4) we observed that the offense conveyed by “wop” scopes out of its embedded position; the same happens for every slur and for other kinds of embedding, such as denials, conditionals, modals and so on. We call this phenomenon “scoping-out”, a characteristic and problematic feature of slurs that must be explained.

These few examples are just a sketch to see how slurs tend to work. Now I would like to consider what our intuitions on slurs are. I would say that the very first and strong intuition is this: a slur is derogatory. This doesn’t really depend on the speaker’s intention: using those words, you are usually offensive, regardless of what you meant. This leads us to a second (less obvious) intuition about slurs: slurs are conventionally derogatory. There are several ways to be offensive; for example, through language, prosody or non-verbal communication: many things both verbal and non-verbal could be offensive, depending on the context.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, slurs’ offensiveness hardly depends on context. Almost<sup>3</sup> every occurrence of a slur conveys an offense. The link between the slurring word and the derogatory content seems to be conventional in this sense. Compare for example the following utterances:

7. Shut up, you’re a woman.
8. Shut up, you’re a nigger.

It seems to me that both (7) and (8) are highly derogatory, even if (8) includes a slur, whereas (7) doesn’t. My point here is to show that there is a deep difference between (7) and (8) and this difference is linguistically interesting: the thing is that “woman” can easily have non-offensive occurrences, whereas “nigger” tends not to. In this sense we would like to say that slurs’ derogatory content is conventional.

So far, so good: we are dealing with bad words that tend to be derogatory every time they occur in a sentence, even if embedded. In the next section, I turn to the question of what kind of analysis we can offer for these terms.

## 2. Theories

In this section I would like to briefly outline the main theories<sup>4</sup> about slurs formulated so far and consider the objections that have been formulated against those theories. I have no aim of completeness here: for brevity’s sake, I will just sketch out in short the semantic and the pragmatic approach.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1. Semantic strategies

The main defender of a semantic approach to slurs is Christopher Hom. Semantic theories hold that the derogatory content of slurs is part of their truth-conditional meaning. From a naïve semantic perspective, “faggot” means something like “homosexual and despicable because of it”. This account may seem a plausible one. The intuition here is that a word like “faggot” picks out a certain set of individuals (in this case, homosexuals) and it also says something bad about the target group (that they are despicable for being homosexual). Since “faggot” and “homosexual and despicable because of it” are considered as synonyms, (1) is equivalent to (2):

9. John is a faggot.
10. John is homosexual and despicable because of it.

<sup>2</sup> About the difference between slurs and non-descriptive expletives, see [Blakemore \(2014\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> See [3.1.2](#) for appropriated uses and non-derogatory uses in general.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed exposition of the different positions, see, among the others, [Hom \(2008\)](#), [Anderson and Lepore \(2013a, 2013b\)](#), [Whiting \(2013\)](#).

There actually is a third approach, which can be called “content-less”, due to the work of Ernie Lepore and Luvel Anderson. I didn’t include it in this work just because my focus here is on pragmatic strategies; the content-less approach could be sketched as follows: [Anderson and Lepore \(2013a\)](#) tried to deflate content strategies (semantic and pragmatic), holding that slurs do not possess derogatory force because of what they mean, but because uttering a slur constitutes an infraction of an edict that prohibits to use them at all. This content-less strategy probably needs to be articulated and developed further: we are still in need of an explanation of why uttering a slur was prohibited in the first place. Obviously, this explanation cannot refer to the meaning of a slur, otherwise it would be viciously circular.

<sup>5</sup> A few words about the terminology: the semantic–pragmatic distinction has been used in the literature about slurs as an easy way to distinguish two kinds of theories, but it would have been more precise to say “truth-conditional” vs “non-truth-conditional”. Nevertheless, the label “non-truth-conditional” would still be very general. In order not to mix up the standard terminology, I will just stick to it and I will explain what I mean every time I need to.

This seems to be a reasonable explanation of what a slur means. Nevertheless, we have already observed the peculiar linguistic behavior of slurs under negation; let's compare the behavior of a slur with the one of its corresponding paraphrase:

11. John is not a faggot.
12. John is not homosexual and despicable because of it.

As we can see, there is no offense in uttering (12); on the contrary, (11) still displays a derogatory force; (9) and (10) display different linguistic behavior when they are under embedding, so they cannot be considered as equivalent; thus, "faggot" and "homosexual and despicable because of it" cannot be synonyms as the naïve version of the semantic theory claims. What we observe in (11) is just the same scoping-out phenomenon observed in the previous section and semantic theories do not account for it, at least in the naïve version I've just presented. Hom offers a refined semantic strategy, that consists in two moves: an externalist turn and a distinction between derogation and offense. Let's see it in more detail. Hom (2008) describes the meaning of slurs 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 nonpejorative correlate of the epithet. For example, the epithet 'chink' expresses a complex, socially constructed property like: ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and ..., because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundering, and ..., all because of being Chinese."<sup>6</sup>

This is a refined and more complex version of the naïve definition "'neutral counterpart' and despicable because of it"; the externalist turn consists in the fact that the properties ascribed to the target group (both  $p_1 + \dots + p_n$  and  $d_1 + \dots + d_n$ ) are established by experts in the community (in the case of "chink", the racists count as experts; in the case of "faggot", the homophobes do and so on). This refined externalist version doesn't really solve the problem noted in (9)–(12), i.e. the scoping-out phenomenon. So here comes Hom's second move: Hom (2012)<sup>7</sup> claims that (1), (8) and (9) are indeed derogatory, but (3), (4) and (11) are not, despite what it might seem. To explain that, Hom introduces a distinction between two notions: derogation, on one hand, and offense, on the other. When we attribute a slur to someone, there is an objective predication of a property like the one described above in the quotation: that is "derogation". On the contrary, when the slur is under embedding, it is not attributed to the subject; the nasty feeling that people might get when they hear utterances like (3), (4) and (11) is due to a psychological effect that depends on the beliefs and values of the participants: that is "offense".

Hom's proposal is a very interesting one from several points of view. Nevertheless, Hom's strategy to explain the scoping-out phenomenon is in fact to claim that there is no scoping-out at all. This sounds quite counter-intuitive. I believe that the derogation–offense distinction doesn't reflect our intuitions about slurs for two reasons: the first one is that it's not clear why (9) and (11) should display different phenomena, as Hom claims, and we don't have arguments to think that<sup>8</sup>; the second one is that the notion of "offense" is characterized as a subjective reaction and a psychological effect; on the contrary, slurs' derogatory power seems to be a conventional and "objective" fact.

To conclude, if one accepts the derogation–offense distinction, then Hom's strategy surely works well. Yet, this kind of distinction doesn't offer us a good description of how slurs work.

In the following section, I will present pragmatic theories that adopt another strategy to account for the scoping-out.

## 2.2. Pragmatic strategies

Many authors find that the best way to solve the scoping-out problem is to claim that the derogatory content of a slur, i.e. the content that scopes out, is not part of its truth-conditional meaning: the pragmatic accounts of slurs hold that "faggot" is equivalent to "homosexual" with respect to the truth-conditional meaning. The difference between a pejorative term and its neutral counterpart is a matter of pragmatic meaning. Let us consider the following utterances:

11. John is a kike.
12. John is Jewish.

According to pragmatic strategies, (11) and (12) share the same truth-conditional content. The reason why (11) is derogatory and (12) is not needs to be explained addressing some components of meaning apart from truth-conditions. On this regard, different pragmatic accounts offer various solutions: some authors, like Christopher Potts,<sup>9</sup> analyze the derogatory content of slurs in terms of conventional implicatures (CI), some others, like Philippe Schlenker,<sup>10</sup> in terms of presuppositions.

<sup>6</sup> Hom (2008), p. 431.

<sup>7</sup> Hom (2012), p. 397.

<sup>8</sup> The fact that people might have different intuitions about the derogation in (9) and (11) suggest that the best way to investigate the derogation–offense distinction is to conduct a study with ordinary informants.

<sup>9</sup> See Potts (2003, 2005, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> See Schlenker (2007).

Consider the sentences (11)–(13): pragmatic strategies hold that (11) and (12) have the same truth-conditions, but (11) also activates something along the lines of (13).

13. Jewish people are despicable for being Jewish.

What kind of thing is (13)? This is where the CI and the presuppositional accounts diverge. But apart from the labeling of (13), the two accounts seem to work more or less the same way. At the beginning of this section, I mentioned a good reason to endorse pragmatic approaches, namely that they can explain the scoping-out of the derogatory content; let's now consider the difficulties that pragmatic accounts meet. I'm going to briefly sketch the CI strategy's problems and then I'll focus on the objections against the presuppositional account in more detail.

The problem that the CI account meets is not properly explanatory; rather, it depends on the very notion of conventional implicature. On the one hand, the notion itself seems to be an obscure one,<sup>11</sup> and on the other hand, it seems to be not that enlightening after all. After we called "CI" a non-truth-conditional component of slurs' meaning, we are still in need of an explanation of what kind of phenomenon it is. It seems to me that classifying a component of meaning as "conventional implicature" does not provide us with a more enlightened insight: it's rather just a labeling. One very basic and yet essential question that remains unanswered is: what are exactly CI and how/why are they activated by slurs<sup>12</sup>?

Let's now turn our attention to the presuppositional approach. Presuppositions tell us something more about how a slur works. A pragmatic presupposition – understood *à la Stalnaker, 1999* – is, roughly speaking, something taken for granted: it's a requirement on the common ground. First, this is a possible description of how slurs work: when a speaker S utters (11), the truth-conditional meaning of (11) is that John is Jewish; but besides that, the utterance of (11) also activates a requirement on the common ground, namely that the common ground needs to include or to be compatible with something like (13), "Jewish people are despicable for being Jewish". Besides, just like presuppositional words, slurs trigger a certain proposition even when they are embedded. This is (more or less) how a presuppositional account would describe slurs' behavior. In addition to this description, the presuppositional strategy also accounts for another peculiarity, discussed for example in *Camp (2013)*, *Croom (2011, 2013)* and *Richard (2008)*: when someone uses a slur in a conversation, usually all the participants seem to accept and share the speaker's derogatory attitude toward the target group, unless they oppose to that explicitly. Using a slurring word creates a sort of complicity between the speaker and the participants in the conversation: if no one of the participants says anything, they get to be party to the offense towards the target group. A plausible explanation for this phenomenon is the one provided by the presuppositional account on slurs: the utterance of a slur activates a requirement on the common ground, so that all the participants are taken to share the speaker's derogatory attitude. In order to avoid that, they need to say something, stop the conversation and prevent the derogatory presupposition from getting into the conversational background. As a matter of fact, according to some authors like *Josep Macià (Macià (2002))* and *Philippe Schlenker (Schlenker (2007))*, the most intuitive explanation for slurs is that they work as triggers for presuppositions. Nevertheless, this approach gave rise to several objections.

In the following section I will consider the main objections formulated against the presuppositional account and I will try to counter them.

### 3. Objections to the presuppositional account

Some objections have been raised against the presuppositional account. I will divide them into two groups, labeling them as "strong" and "weaker" objections. First, I will consider the "strong objection", that deals with cancellability. This has often been viewed as the strongest objection to the presuppositional account,<sup>13</sup> but I will argue that it doesn't necessarily constitute a knocking down problem for the theory. Then, I will consider the "weaker objections", perplexities concerning the fact that the presuppositional account doesn't really reflect our intuitions. My aim is to show how the objections against the presuppositional account are not so evident after all.

#### 3.1. Strong objections

The strongest objection raised against the presuppositional account deals with cancellability.<sup>14</sup> Presuppositions are usually characterized in handbooks as having certain features, such as projection, accommodation and cancellability.<sup>15</sup> According to the cancellability requirement, presuppositions should be cancellable, for example by conditionalization; we see that (14) presupposes (15); but (16), obtained by modifying (14), doesn't presuppose (15) anymore.

<sup>11</sup> See *Bach (1999)*.

<sup>12</sup> As I said, my perplexities about the CI account depend on its explanatory power; on the other hand, *Hedger (2013)* offers arguments against this kind of account (pp. 208–211). Hedger finds that slurs' derogatory content behaves differently from conventional implicatures when they are under embedding (denials and questions, for instance). Hedger proposes a purely expressive analysis of slurs, which I don't endorse. According to Hedger slurs cannot be analyzed in terms of conventional implicatures because the content of an implicature must be truth-evaluable, whereas the content of an expressive is not.

<sup>13</sup> See for example *Kaplan, Potts (2007)*, *Anderson and Lepore (2013a)*.

<sup>14</sup> The cancellability argument was proposed by Saul Kripke in a conversation with David Kaplan, who mentioned it in *Kaplan*. It might be for its illustrious proponents or for its technical flavor that this objection seemed so convincing.

<sup>15</sup> See, among the others, *Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (1990)*.

14. John stopped beating his wife.
15. John used to beat his wife.
16. John stopped beating his wife, if he ever did beat her.
17. # John is a faggot, if homosexuals are despicable for being homosexual.

Nevertheless, cancellation by conditionalization doesn't work with slurs: if we take (9) and we generate (17), we get a quite inconsistent and anomalous sentence.

Consider now the "strong objection"; the cancellability-argument against the presuppositional account can be sketched as follows:

- P1** Presuppositions need to be cancellable;
- P2** The derogatory content of slurs is not cancellable;
- C** The derogatory content of slurs is not a presupposition.

A defender of the presuppositional account might try two strategies to reject this argument: objecting to the first or the second premise. We are going to try them both.

### 3.1.1. Objecting P1

As we said, cancellability is often mentioned among the salient characterizing features of presuppositions. But it's not obvious at all that presuppositions need to be always cancellable, nor that they should be equally cancellable. It can be argued that cancellability is a matter of grade: some can be harder to cancel than others. Consider (18)–(19): supposing that the cancellation by conditionalization works in (18) – and this is not that clear – surely it doesn't work in (19), that turns out to be quite an odd sentence.<sup>16</sup>

18. The king of France is bald, if there is a king of France.
19. # I pick my sister up at the airport, if I have a sister.

As a matter of fact, many authors questioned this point. It's not accidental though that the ones who focus on the non-cancellability of some presuppositions are the ones who analyze the so-called conventional implicatures in terms of presuppositions.<sup>17</sup> If a theory takes for granted that a presupposition has to be cancellable as it was a kind of dogma, that's because it assumes cancellability to be the dividing feature between presuppositions and conventional implicatures. But is it so obvious that they are different phenomena? They are non-truth-conditional components of meaning, they tend to scope out of semantic embedding, they are triggered by certain lexical items, or certain expressions. What I would like to suggest here is that cancellability is not a crucial test; rather we should say that presuppositions can be cancelled, but not all in the same way, nor with the same easiness.

What still needs to be explained is why some presuppositions are harder to cancel than others. A preliminary hint might be that the variance in cancellability probably depends on conventionality: the more a presupposition is linked to a certain lexical item, the more difficult it will be to cancel it. If we want to call "CI" those presuppositions that are really hard to cancel, that's fine; but I don't find it very explanatory. The relation between CI and presuppositions surely asks for further investigation, which might reconsider the role of cancellability.

If we take slurs' derogatory content to be presuppositional, slurs can be considered triggers of lexical presuppositions that are very hard to cancel. In the next section, I will focus on slurs' cancellability.

### 3.1.2. Objecting P2

Another way to bring into question the cancellability argument against the presuppositional account is to show that the derogatory content of slurs can sometimes be cancelled. I'm going to consider two cases.

The first non-derogatory use of slurs is the appropriation case. An appropriated use of a slur is a case in which a target group member addresses another in-group with a slur, without being derogatory but conveying on the contrary a feeling of solidarity with the target group and dissociation from certain discriminatory habits and beliefs: for example, it is very common among African-Americans to use "nigger" in a non-derogatory way.<sup>18</sup> Brontsema (2004) calls this phenomenon "linguistic reclamation" or "counter-appropriation" and analyzes the on-going process of appropriation that involves the slur "queer". A peculiarity of appropriated uses is that they are initially available only for the members of the target group; gradually, the appropriated non-derogatory use can be extended to out-groups: for instance, everybody can talk about "queer studies" even if in other contexts the term is still used as a pejorative. Finally, a slur can definitely change its meaning becoming a neutral term; the process of appropriation is then over and the term can always be used in a non-derogatory way by anyone: that's the case of "gay", which is no longer a slur.

<sup>16</sup> This doesn't mean that it's completely impossible to imagine a situation were (19) can be uttered felicitously: just that it's very difficult. The cancellation in (19) might be hard for pragmatic reasons: usually, when people use the expression "my sister", they know they have a sister; on the other hand, we could propose a similar explanation for slurs: when people use derogatory epithets, they are usually conveying a derogation toward the target group and it's really hard to imagine a case in which they use a slur, but they don't convey any derogation.

<sup>17</sup> See for example Karttunen and Peters, 1979 and Soames (1989).

<sup>18</sup> See for example Kennedy (2003).

The appropriated use represents a problem to most of the theories, since the slur's meaning seems to change in those contexts. For this reason, appropriation has been the object of theoretical research (for instance Brontsema (2004), Croom (2011, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c)), but also of empirical research (Galinsky et al. (2003, 2013)).

Bianchi (2014) offers an account of appropriated uses that does not need to postulate any meaning change and that takes inspiration from Relevance Theory. Bianchi (2014) holds that an appropriated use of a slur is an echoic use of language: while echoing some derogatory practice or widely shared thought, the target group member also expresses her dissociative and mocking attitude to it. Thus, according to this theory, appropriated uses are ironical uses.

Nevertheless, even if appropriated uses are a clearly non-derogatory case, they are not such a good example for our purpose here: if Bianchi is correct, then an ironical use of a slur wouldn't count as a case in which the derogatory content is cancelled; on the one hand, what we call "cancellability" for presuppositions doesn't involve non-literal uses of language such as irony, and on the other, irony allows us to do almost all sort of things, such as to subvert the truth-conditional meaning of an utterance. In short, irony is not a good way to account for presuppositions' cancellation.

If we set apart Bianchi's proposal, we would probably have to accept that in the appropriated uses slurs change their meaning. Still, presuppositions' cancellation doesn't involve a change of meaning.

If these observations about appropriated uses are correct, another example is needed. A better option is the case of pedagogical uses, as Hom called them. Let's see some examples from Hom (2008)<sup>19</sup>:

20. Chinese people are not chinks.

21. Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are morally depraved.

If one agrees with Hom and finds that in (20)–(21) slurs are not offensive, it's easier to bring into question the argument against the presuppositional account, since one would reject the second premise. On this, I'm afraid we can only refer to our own intuitions.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, the argument can still be challenged objecting the first premise, as we saw in the previous section. What I would like to conclude here is that the non-cancellability of slurs' derogatory content is at least not as obvious as it is often taken to be.

### 3.2. Weaker objections

In this section I will assess some objections against the presuppositional account that question the intuitive character and the explanatory power of the strategy.

Richard (2008) argued against the presuppositional account trying to show how it turns out to be a misdiagnosis of how slurs work<sup>21</sup>: according to Richard, the explanation that the account offers doesn't capture what really matters: if we call someone with a slur, we are not pushing something in the conversational background, but rather, we are insulting the addressee. The first thing to account for is this negative attitude: slurs are offensive words used to insult someone, not devices to slip assumptions into the conversational background.

Several answers to this point could be offered. The first one is that presupposing something doesn't need to be considered as a secondary aim of an utterance; indeed, it can be the main point. Something like that happens in the case of the so-called informative presupposition.<sup>22</sup> Suppose for example that I am very proud of my new moped and I want everybody to notice I have a new moped, to make them feel envy; so, I utter (22):

22. I'll be on time, thanks to my moped.

The utterance of (22) has as its main objective to tell everyone I have a moped. It's not so counter-intuitive that what a slur does is to trigger a presupposition: this derogatory presupposition can be the whole point of uttering a slur. On the one hand it is a means to communicate how the speaker feels about a certain target group and on the other it is a way to strengthen the common beliefs among the participants to a conversation.

This is my first point: the whole purpose of an utterance can sometimes rely on what it presupposes.

Let's move to Richard's second objection: if a person gets insulted with a slurring word, it doesn't mean that a derogatory presupposition slips into the conversational record. According to Richard, when you call someone with a slur, the main thing to account for is a malevolent attitude, not a derogatory presupposition. In order to address Richard's perplexity, it's useful to distinguish an aggressive attitude from meaning. Imagine that someone utters the following sentence: "Shut up, woman". In this case, the use of "woman" is clearly an insult, even if "woman" usually has a neutral meaning and there's surely nothing

<sup>19</sup> Hom (2008), p. 429.

<sup>20</sup> I didn't mention metalinguistic uses of slurs, treated for example by Hornsby (2001). I don't think that such uses should be considered derogatory, but on the other hand I don't think that they should count as relevant non-derogatory uses for the simple fact that the slur is not used, but mentioned. If I believed that mentioning a slur was derogatory, I could not have even written this paper.

<sup>21</sup> Richard (2008), pp. 21–22.

<sup>22</sup> Stalnaker (2002), Simons (2004) and Schlenker (2007) underline how the main point of an utterance triggering an informative presupposition is the presupposition itself.

despicable about being a woman. The insulting effect is in part due to the aggressive attitude of the speaker and it doesn't depend on linguistic features of the predicate "woman", but rather on prosody, on mind reading, intention-ascription, widespread beliefs etc.<sup>23</sup>

Let us get back to Richard: according to him, when you call someone with a slur it's not enough to say that you are triggering a presupposition; according to Richard, you need to account for the malevolent attitude. But just like the previous woman-example, the malevolent and aggressive attitude conveyed in the insult doesn't need to rely entirely on linguistic features. In addition to that, we can also express violence violating a linguistic taboo in uttering bad words. Of course some predicates are more likely to be used as insults than others; but this is due to historical reasons, it depends on who has been persecuted or discriminated. If we imagine a parallel universe in which English people were subjected to discrimination and violence for centuries, "limey" would probably sound like a very offensive word.<sup>24</sup> The same holds for non-slurring words: it's more difficult to use "man" as an insult than it is to use "woman", but this doesn't depend on what these two predicates mean.<sup>25</sup>

So this is my second point: the aggressive attitude conveyed by insults could depend on factors other than the predicate's meaning.

In sum, in this section I tried to address some of the perplexities about the pre-suppositional account; I distinguished between two different uses of slurs: when someone is directly insulted with a slur and when a slur is predicated of someone. I sketched an account like the following: a slur is a lexical item that conventionally triggers a presupposition; with respect to the conversational background, the presupposition triggered by the slur can be already part of the conversational background; when it is not, it can be intentionally used as informative presupposition or not; in both cases, it can be non-problematic and easily accepted into the conversational record; in case it is problematic, it can be ignored or rejected explicitly. When we use a slur towards a person, what we are doing is triggering a presupposition and – at the same time – showing our aggressive and derogatory attitude through factors other than meaning.

#### 4. What kind of presupposition?

So far, I considered the objections against the presuppositional account and I tried to formulate some replies; yet, a presuppositional account must also specify what kind of presupposition slurs trigger.

In this section I would like to consider the two main options and discuss them.

Let's take "wop" as an example: a first intuitive hypothesis, very common in the literature<sup>26</sup> and mentioned in Section 2, is that (23) triggers the presupposition (24):

- 23. I don't do business with wops.
- 24. Italians are despicable because of being Italian.

If this is the case, Richard might be quite correct in noticing that, according to this account, when one calls someone a slur, a derogatory presupposition gets into the conversational background if it is not explicitly rejected: this has the paradoxical consequence that if someone uses the word "wop" and I decide to ignore it because this person doesn't even deserve my explicit dissent, it means that I accept that Italians are despicable because of being Italian. Of course we mean "acceptance" as [Stalnaker \(2002\)](#) does, i.e. distinguishing "acceptance" from "belief". Nevertheless, there are still cases – like the imagined one – in which it's not that clear that the participants in a conversation always need to accept that the target class is despicable, even if we mean "to accept" in the Stalnakerian sense.

Perhaps on the basis of similar considerations, [Schlenker \(2007\)](#) avoids this unwelcome consequence, analyzing the presupposition triggered by "honky" – a slur that targets white people – as having the following features. The presupposition is:

*indexical* (it is evaluated with respect to a context), *attitudinal* (it predicates something of the mental state of the agent of that context), and sometimes *shiftable* (the context of evaluation need not be the context of the actual utterance). [...] we evaluate each lexical entry with respect to a context (c) and a world (w). [...]

<sup>23</sup> It is worth noticing that the aggressive attitude can be completely independent of the meaning (in a very broad sense) of a word. Take this story as a funny case. When my little brother was three he learnt bad words from older boys at school. Telling him not to utter those words was the best way to encourage him to go on. So this is what my parents did: they told him that "turacciolo" was a very bad word. It actually means "cork" and there is no way in which it could sound offensive. We all started to use "turacciolo" at home as an insult, making angry faces and using an aggressive tone of voice. Obviously, my brother started using "turacciolo" and he forgot the actual bad words he learnt (for some time, at least). I agree that my brother didn't know the real meaning of "turacciolo", he used it in a non-orthodox way, so he wouldn't count as a competent user of the word; nevertheless, I find this little anecdote instructive, since the speaker used a word as a generic bad word, without associating any precise descriptive content to it. "Turacciolo" became an insult in virtue of features that are not related to its meaning, but to the intentions of the people who used it.

<sup>24</sup> [Hom \(2008\)](#), p. 426 and 433 proposes a similar point and talks about "derogatory variation". About how slurs' derogatory power changes diachronically, see [Cupkovic \(2014\)](#).

<sup>25</sup> About the factors that affect how we perceive derogation, see [O'Dea et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Saucier et al. \(2014\)](#).

<sup>26</sup> See for example [Hom \(2008, 2010\)](#) about Cl.

[[ honky]] (c)(w) ≠ # iff the agent of c believes in the world of c that white people are despicable. If ≠ #, [[ honky]] (c)(w) = [[ white]] (c)(w).<sup>27</sup>

Another option along the line of Schlenker's proposal<sup>28</sup> is to describe the presupposition triggered by (23) as:

25. The 'wop'-user despises Italians for being Italian.

I chose the predicate “to despise” instead of “to believe”, because I find that it expresses better what a slur does: a slur conveys via presupposition how the speaker feels about the target class. As a matter of fact, the presuppositional strategy has seemed a little too “descriptive” to some authors, such as, as we said in Section 3, Richard (2008); but if we understand the presupposition triggered as I suggested, or as Schlenker proposed, it doesn't just describe “objectively” a state of affairs, but rather it expresses how the speaker feels.

An account like that needs to provide an explanation for the complicity-phenomenon, i.e. the fact that in many cases, when someone utters a slur, the participants to the conversation need to say something if they don't want to be party to the derogatory attitude: if the presupposition regards the speaker's feelings and attitudes, there shouldn't be such a phenomenon. This could be a possible solution: the complicity-phenomenon doesn't have to be an exclusively linguistic feature of how slurs work but it might depend on social factors. The reason why people need to step up when a slur is uttered is not that if they don't a presupposition like (24) will slip into the conversational background; the reason is that for people belonging to an egalitarian community it's not acceptable to disapprove or condemn individuals on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and so on. The more a derogatory attitude has been put into practice (discrimination, violence, persecution), the more unacceptable this attitude is: the display of such derogatory attitude is a violation of a social norm. What I would like to suggest is that our need for dissent when we hear something like (23) doesn't prove that the presupposition activated must be something like (24); in fact, it could be something like (25) instead: the reason why we need to intervene in this latter case is that we cannot accept someone's despise toward the target group. We can imagine non-presuppositional cases in which some beliefs are just not acceptable to such an extent that the hearer needs to step up. Compare (26) and (27):

26. I don't want to talk with a faggot.  
27. I'm not a bad person, I just despise homosexuals because they're homosexual.

The utterance of (27) would probably prompt a non-homophobic person to intervene, even if (27) doesn't let a presupposition slip into the conversational background. This example shows how a hearer often needs to step up even if the derogatory belief is not ascribable to the hearer, since here it is not entered into the common background.

Nevertheless, the differences between (26) and (27) are at least two: the first one is that the speaker of (27) asserts what the speaker of (26) presupposes; the second one is that in (26) the speaker breaks two different norms at the same time: a political one, just like in (27), and a social-linguistic one, since, unlike in (27), it contains a taboo word.

In sum, there are at least two main options about what kind of presupposition slurs trigger.<sup>29</sup> The first option is that the presupposition describes a state of affairs about the target group (“the target group is despicable for being so”): let's call it the objective option (OO); the second option is that the presupposition expresses how the speaker feels about the target group (“the slur-user despises the target group”): let's call it the subjective option (SO). On the one hand, the OO has an easier explanation for the complicity-phenomenon; on the other hand, the SO accounts better for the expressive content of a slur. I cannot formulate a crucial test that allows us to see which one is the correct one, since the explanations that the two options can offer are not so different. In fact, the OO-SO opposition closely resembles the debate about attitude sentences' presuppositions; consider the following examples:

28. Mary wants to call her brother.  
29. Mary has a brother.  
30. Mary believes she has a brother.

Some scholars hold that (28) presupposes (29), some that it presupposes (30), some others that it presupposes both.<sup>30</sup> The dilemma here is quite similar: either the presupposition is a state of affairs (“Mary has a brother”), either it regards the speaker's beliefs (“Mary believes she has a brother”) and I think that for slurs both OO and SO are available; we probably could infer one from the other and this might be the reason why it's not easy to see which is the presupposition triggered and which is the inference.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Schlenker (2007), pp. 237–238.

<sup>28</sup> See also Predelli (2010).

<sup>29</sup> Predelli (2010) offers a distinction on the same lines and he tends to prefer the “subjective account” (pp. 178–180).

<sup>30</sup> About this debate, see for example Karttunen (1974), Heim (1992), Beaver and Geurts (2010).

<sup>31</sup> Compare to Beaver and Geurts (2010)'s table.



	“The speaker despises the target class”	“The target class is despicable”
Option OO	inference	presupposition
Option SO	presupposition	inference

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper I defended a presuppositional account of slurs. I suggested that cancellability should be thought of as a matter of grade, rather than the dividing feature between two different categories. Once we re-think the notion of cancellability, the main objections against the presuppositional account do not hold anymore. Apart from the labeling, the question that needs to be posed is what kind of phenomenon we are dealing with.

I find that the best explanation for how slurs work is to say that a slur is a lexical item that conventionally triggers a presupposition; the presupposition triggered by a slur is often an informative presupposition, that expresses the speaker's derogatory attitude toward the target group. In addition to triggering a presupposition, uttering a slur is also a violation of a sociolinguistic taboo in societies that reject discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and so on.

I think that such an account reflects our intuitions about slurs and explains phenomena like scoping-out and complicity.

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