



Are ableist insults secretly slurs?

Chris Cousens

La Trobe University, Australia



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ABSTRACT

Philosophers often treat racist and sexist slurs as a special sort of puzzle. What is the difference between a slur and its correlates? In attempting to answer this question, a second distinction has been overlooked: that between slurs and insults. What makes a term count as a slur? This is not an unnecessary taxonomical question as long as ableist terms such as ‘moron’ are dismissed as mere insults. Attempts to resolve the insult/slur distinction by considering the communicative content of slurs are not promising. A better solution is offered by speech act theory, and this paper develops a novel way to describe ordinary slurring utterances as oppressive speech acts. This can both explain the difference between slurs and insults, and challenge the dismissal of ableist terms.

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1. Introduction

Recent work in the philosophy of slurs suggests that paradigmatically, slurs are racist epithets, although homophobic and sexist terms are also often considered to be the same kind of pernicious word. However, little is said about *ableist* terms—those that derogate people in virtue of a real, or perceived, (usually cognitive) disability.¹ When mentioned at all, terms such as ‘retard’, ‘idiot’, and ‘moron’ tend to be used as examples of ‘mere’ insults, contrasted with the more objectionable category of ‘slurs’.² However, in a world where people with disabilities face significant stigma and discrimination, the dismissal of terms targeting them sits uneasily alongside analysis of terms such as ‘limey’ as slurs. Furthermore, ableist terms such as ‘imbecile’ were developed to categorise, and so legitimate harmful actions against, people with disabilities. So why do we treat ableist terms as insults and not slurs?

This question arises because philosophers have recently come to use the word ‘slur’ in a new sense. While it was once synonymous with ‘insult’ and is still used in this way in everyday conversation, ‘slur’ tends to denote a particularly pernicious kind of pejorative. These words have a special badness that gives them an elevated moral status. Insulting someone might be rude, nasty, and hurtful, but *slurring* them is supposed to be somehow worse. However, slurs in this sense are rarely defined. Philosophers disagree about which words should count alongside paradigmatic racist examples.³ My hypothesis is that while insults and slurs are both pejorative terms, slurring utterances *oppress* their targets, whereas insults do not.

The new way of using ‘slur’ is both useful and important. Useful, because it allows us to carve up the set of pejorative terms in a language with precision, grouping like with like to facilitate analysis. It is *important* because it recognises that slurs are particularly harmful things to say. Paradigmatic slurs tend to target marginalised and subordinated social groups.

E-mail address: c.cousens@latrobe.edu.au.

¹ While there are various ways to speak about dis/ability (see Goodley, 2014, especially xi–xiii), I use the more familiar ‘ableist’ to capture the social structures that threaten to exclude and oppress people with disabilities. I also use ‘people with disabilities’ to try to avoid essentialising, while recognising that the choice of terminology is important, and not yet settled.

² As in Hom (2008), Predelli (2010), and Nunberg (2018).

³ See Diaz-Legaspe (2019) for an overview of this disagreement.

Understanding the semantic content of the 'N' word matters because doing so helps us, in some way, to combat the racist attitudes and practices that attend utterances of that term. And yet despite the elevated importance given to understanding slurs rather than insults, very little is said to enable distinction between the two. For the same reason, it matters how we categorise ableist terms. If these are (as I argue) slurs in the narrow, morally laden, sense then we must combat their use for the same reasons that we combat the use of racist, sexist, and homophobic slurs.

At several points in this paper I mention certain slurs, including particularly noxious examples. There is a growing recognition that even academic mentioning of slurs can be offensive, off-putting, and potentially harmful just as in paradigmatic derogatory uses of these words (Camp, 2018; Kukla, 2018). There are considerations in favour of doing so anyway, as hiding the affective power of slurs behind euphemisms such as 'slur term S' can make it too easy to treat these terms as interesting linguistic puzzles and gloss over their impact. Additionally, reproducing the use of slurs in canonical examples makes it easier to engage with other accounts directly. However, as using slurs in this way is not harmless, I do so sparingly. As Camp (2018, p31) promises, "I token these expressions in the awareness that even reading them makes many people deeply uncomfortable, and with an acknowledgement that I incur an obligation to compensate with commensurate insight".

This paper has two purposes: firstly, to develop an account of the insult/slur distinction that captures the special badness of slurs; and secondly, to argue that ableist terms share this quality. To do this, I will at times set ableist terms aside to allow a general consideration of 'obvious' slurs (such as racist epithets), before returning to show how conclusions about slurs can inform our treatment of ableist terms. §2 outlines the insult/slur distinction and argues that prevailing content-based theories of slurs struggle to satisfactorily explain this. In §3, I develop an alternative model for understanding slurs, mirroring a recent turn in this field to treat slurs as certain kinds of speech acts.⁴ I argue that slurs, but not insults, are paradigmatically used to perform *oppressive* speech acts, and that ableist terms are used to do the same.

A qualification is required before we begin, necessary for priming intuitions about ableist terms. After all, can it really be *oppressive*, or even a slur in the strong moral sense, to call a colleague a 'moron'? Diaz-Legaspe (2019) offers perhaps the best critical treatment of this question, and argues that as 'moron' has two dictionary entries (as both an informal personal insult and a non-derogatory technical medical label) it cannot be a slur; in neither sense is it used as a derogatory group term, which is supposed to be a requirement of slurs. However, I think that the two definitions are related. To effectively convey its derogatory content, 'moron' does not simply convey that someone has low intelligence; its use as an insult in this way also suggests that being a person with low intelligence is a bad thing to be. It is a kind of metaphorical use of a word, suggesting that one belongs to a group that one does not to suggest shared negative characteristics. If the personal insult use of 'moron' is parasitic upon its medical use in this way, then the fact that it has two dictionary definitions does not mean that it is not a slur. It might mean that it is a slur being used in an unusual mode, at least compared to the way that we tend to imagine obvious slurs, like racist epithets, being used.

Most existing analyses of slurs conceptualise them in a 'paradigmatic derogatory mode' (Croom, 2013). In this kind of utterance, a slur is directed at a member of the group it targets, as in (1), where Jacob is Jewish:

1) Jacob is a kike.

However, most actual utterances of ableist terms are not directed at people with disabilities, but rather to derogate neurotypical people as in (2), where Jacob does not have a cognitive disability:

2) Jacob is a moron.

The speaker derogates Jacob by suggesting that he shares an essential characteristic with the group targeted by the term 'moron': having a cognitive disability. This 'metaphorical' use of the slur might seem more permissible than the paradigmatic derogatory slur in (1). However, this compares apples to oranges. If our intuitions are to guide us, we should consider both slurs and ableist terms in the same mode. If (2) is said about Jacob, and he has a cognitive disability, then this seems to make the utterance somehow worse. In the same way, if Jacob is not Jewish when (1) is said, and the intention is to convey some negative connotation associated with Jewish people, this *might* seem more permissible than in the paradigmatic mode. However, I think it better to reject the use of 'kike' even in the metaphorical mode, as its use in such a way belittles Jewish people even if the direct target is not Jewish (by assuming that being Jewish is a negative property, when of course it is not). For the same reason, I think it best to reject even metaphorical uses of (2), as to use the ableist term in this way belittles people with disabilities regardless of Jacob's actual cognitive abilities. I will default, as philosophy of slurs does generally, to considering paradigmatic derogatory uses of slurs. However, analysis of ableist terms will take them to be likewise used in their paradigmatic derogatory mode; comparing apples to apples.

⁴ See Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2017), Anderson (2018), and Kukla (2018).

2. The insult/slur distinction

The question posed at the beginning of this paper asks how to treat ableist terms: as insults or as slurs? This question is only intelligible because of a relatively recent distinction drawn between paradigmatic slurs, such as racist epithets, and ordinary (and seemingly more permissible) insults such as 'jerk' and 'asshole'. In this section I argue that existing theories of slurring struggle to account for this distinction. This is not entirely surprising, as such accounts were developed to consider another distinction: what makes slurs different from their correlates? What does one say in uttering 'Boche' beyond that which they say in uttering 'German'?

There are enough ways to answer this question that a scholar can find an account to suit any semantic preference. One explanation is the semantic account, which argues that the difference between slur and correlate lies in each term's literal meaning. There are different ways of caching this out; [Dummett \(1973\)](#) and [Brandom \(2000\)](#) consider the inferences licenced by the slur but not its correlate, whereas [Hom \(2008\)](#) argues that the slur's meaning includes a complex set of negative attitudes and practices.⁵ [Bach \(2018\)](#) argues that slurs include additional content loaded into a side-comment that goes along with identifying a target group, similar to [Camp's \(2013\)](#) account which argues that slurs convey both a group identificatory component and the endorsement of a certain perspective towards the target. An upshot of the semantic position is that sentences using pernicious slurs will be false. When someone utters (1), if they do not only say that Jacob is Jewish but also that he is in some way inferior in virtue of his Jewishness, then the speaker has said something false; being Jewish does not make someone inferior.

On the other hand, those who prefer to explain the pernicious content of slurs in terms of pragmatics suggest that semantic theories cannot account for the intuition that slurring speech gets *something* right. If Jacob is Jewish, then it seems that the speaker correctly, albeit bigotedly, applies the slur term to Jacob. The pernicious, derogatory, content might then be conveyed not through semantics but pragmatics—typically characterised as a matter of Gricean conventional implicature ([Williamson, 2009; Whiting, 2013; Sennett and Copp, 2015](#)). In choosing to use 'but' instead of 'and', a speaker implies a contrast between two things, as in (3) and (4):

- 3) Sally is British but brave
- 4) Sally is British and brave

The sentences are supposed to have the same truth conditions (that Sally is British, and that Sally is brave), but in (3) the speaker also implicates, although does not assert, that being British and being brave do not normally go together. Likewise, on this view a slurring speaker might choose to use a slur instead of its correlate to imply that the target group is in some way deserving of inferior treatment:

- 5) Yao is a chink
- 6) Yao is Chinese

On this view, (5) implicates, but does not assert, that there is something wrong with being Chinese. (6) does not. Both are true on this account so long as Yao is Chinese, but the slur also conveys false extra-semantic content.⁶

The most prominent alternative to semantic and pragmatic theories, which frame the additional content of slurs as a set of propositions conveyed about the target group, is expressivism. Expressivist accounts argue that slurs do not convey a set of propositions so much as express the speaker's negative attitude towards the target group. On such a view uttering 'Chink' is akin to uttering 'Boo Chinese!'. Some argue that these terms are purely expressive and so offer no truth-conditional content ([Richard, 2008; Hedger, 2012](#)).⁷ Others prefer a kind of dual-level account like those of [Bach and Camp](#), according to which the slur both identifies a target group and expresses negative attitudes ([Hornsby, 2001; Jeshion, 2013](#)). (5) would then be like saying 'Yao is Chinese, and boo Chinese!'.

This (quite brief) overview of the philosophy of slurs takes the field to be primarily a debate about the communicative content of slurs; an instantiation of a long-running clash between semantics and pragmatics. This is often motivated by the recognition that slurs possess a special badness beyond that of ordinary insults.⁸ So how might the insult/slur distinction be described in terms of the content of slur terms? There are two obvious approaches to explaining this distinction. The first is to take it as a matter of *degree*. Slurs and insults are the same type of thing, characterised by some unifying quality (such as derogatory force). At some point, a term has enough of that quality (by conveying such strong derogatory content) that it is no longer merely an insult but counts as a slur. This is [Hom's](#) explicit position, as he argues that the 'derogatory force' of racial

⁵ [Hom's](#) thinking has developed, and he now argues (with [May](#) in their 2013, 2014, and 2018) that slurs refer to fictional groups. A racist slur refers to a target group that is inferior because of their race. As no one is inferior because of their race, the slur cannot refer to any actual group even if racists think that it does.

⁶ [Hom \(2008\)](#) and [Bach \(2018\)](#) defend the semantic account against the pragmatic account.

⁷ [Potts \(2005\)](#) makes similar arguments about pejoratives generally, rather than slurs specifically.

⁸ Outliers such as [Anderson and Lepore \(2013\)](#) and [Bolinger \(2017\)](#) attempt to explain the special badness as the offensiveness of slurs in a non-content based way, unlike the theories described so far which instead infer that offensiveness follows from derogatory content.

epithets is much stronger than that of 'ordinary' derogatory terms (Hom, 2008, p426).⁹ The terms that deserves special moral consideration are these extra-ordinary epithets.

There are two problems with this strategic approach. Firstly, the notion of 'derogatory force' is not necessarily restricted to the terms under Hom's consideration. Terms like 'rat', 'snitch', and 'cockroach' have, at least in some contexts, significant derogatory force. Racist epithets like 'limey' and 'honky', on the other hand, do not have very much (Hom calls this 'derogatory variation'). For the insult/slur distinction to be a matter of degree, it would need to be the case that slurs all have more derogatory force than insults. But if 'rat' or 'cockroach' can be more derogatory than 'limey' or 'honky', then the derogatory force of an utterance is not enough to distinguish between insults and slurs.¹⁰

Secondly, this approach is vulnerable to intuitively powerful counterexamples. 'Chink' is certainly more explosive than 'jerk', but the same does not necessarily hold for all slur/insult pairs. On the received view, where even mild racial and ethnic epithets are considered slurs, 'limey' should be more offensive and derogatorily forceful than any mere insult. It should then be more explosive to say (7) than (8) to a prominent member of the British royal family:

- 7) You're a limey
- 8) You're a fucking fascist troglodyte

However, as an English person, I would rather be targeted with the former than the latter. I suspect that their royal highness might feel the same. If this is because (8) has stronger derogatory force than (7), then some insults are more forceful than some slurs, and so the difference cannot be a matter of the force with which they convey negative content.

The content-based alternative to a distinction of *degree* between slurs and insults is to take the difference to be a matter of *kind*. Slurs might possess some quality that mere insults do not.¹¹ A content-based account would locate this distinguishing quality in the content of slur terms, but not insults. Predelli (2010) and Cepollaro (2015) suggest that slurs (and not insults) target people based on their group membership. This would mean that 'lefty' and 'mobster' are slurs, but these do not seem to convey the kind of explosive derogatory force, or have the special badness, supposed to typify slurs. Jeshion (2013), Ashwell (2016), and Diaz-Legaspe (2019) consider, and reject, a similar distinction between group membership and personal characteristics or behaviour. Religious and homophobic slurs are group referencing terms applied to individuals based on their behaviour (practicing a certain religion or engaging in same-sex sex) and so behaviour-referencing is not a quality that distinguishes insult from slur.

Hay (2013) attempts to make a technical distinction in kind between slurs and insults. He identifies two distinguishing properties—slurs have neutral correlates and so their descriptive content is detachable from the negative content they express, and they behave differently in belief reports. However, some insults have neutral correlates—'asshole' correlates to 'sphincter'—and it might not be the case that *all* slurs have correlates. Ashwell (2016) and Nunberg (2018) both argue that many gendered terms such as 'slut' do not have neutral correlates. For Nunberg, this means that gendered terms are not really slurs; for Ashwell, this means that we should alter our requirements of correlates for slur terms. As Ashwell's solution preserves the special badness of slurs, as (especially sexual) gendered terms seem of great moral import in patriarchal societies, I prefer by this approach. Hay's first distinguishing property is at least not settled; there is also ongoing disagreement about the behaviour of slurs in belief reports (as seen in the debate between Hom and May 2013, 2014, 2018 and Sennett and Copp, 2015, 2017).

There are other plausible alternatives, but each face problems. Maybe insults are adjectives while slurs are nouns? But we often use slurs as adjectives, verbs, and adverbs (Jeshion, 2013), and we use nouns as insults, as in 'douchebag', 'wet blanket', and 'steaming pile of shit'. I am not satisfied by the existing options that purport to explain the insult/slur distinction as a difference in the *kind* of communicative content conveyed. As explaining this in terms of *degree* also seems unpromising, I prefer a non-content-based explanation of the insult/slur distinction.¹² To offer such an account, I follow a recent turn in the philosophy of slurs towards speech act theory. Put simply, the suggestion is as follows: slurring utterances are speech acts that oppress their targets. Slurs, but not insults, are terms characteristically used to perform these oppressive utterances. As ableist terms oppress people with disabilities in the same fashion, they should be treated as slurs rather than insults. The next section develops and defends this view.

⁹ Jeshion (2013) is sceptical that slurs and insults have different derogatory force. However, she considers only terms targeting socially marked groups such as 'fatso' or 'wino'; it might be that these are slurs, but that other terms such as 'asshole' remain insults with less derogatory force than slurs.

¹⁰ See Tirrell (2012) for a thorough explanation of how 'inyenzi' (cockroach) accrued pernicious meaning before and during the Rwandan genocide.

¹¹ Diaz-Legaspe (2019) identifies similar problems regarding the way that existing literature defines 'slurs'. However, she adopts a linguistic (although not content-based) definition according to which slurs are marked by their register. As noted in §1, I have some concerns with this analysis of 'moron' (she later argues, as I do, that terms targeting people with 'disabilities and psychiatric disorders' count as slurs; just not those like 'moron' that seem intuitively permissible). Furthermore, the inclusion of terms such as 'limey' under her definition of slurs would seem to limit their special badness. I hope that the account developed in this paper avoids both concerns.

¹² Anderson et al. (2012) also argue that more than just content-based explanations are required to describe the phenomena generated by slurs.

3. Oppressive speech acts

To defend the claim that slurs are terms used to perform oppressive speech acts, several questions must be answered. What are speech acts, and what is oppression? This leads to a more specific question: what is an oppressive speech act? Once this has been answered, I will argue that slurs (and ableist terms) constitute oppressive speech acts. Insults do not.

3.1. Speech act theory

So, what is a speech act? The central idea, attributed to Austin (1962), is that our speech does not only communicate information. In addition to conveying ideas and meanings, our utterances sometimes constitute certain kinds of action: speech acts. If I utter (9) I do not just tell you something about my intentions; I perform the action of making a promise.

9) I promise to meet you at noon tomorrow.

Nothing more or less is required for me to make a promise than saying such a phrase. The speech constitutes the performance of the action, and so is a speech act. Austin conceptualises this as the difference between the *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary* dimensions of an utterance. The locutionary component is roughly equivalent to the meaning of an utterance, and the perlocutionary component is roughly equivalent to its effects. The illocutionary force is what makes an utterance performative, and is roughly equivalent to the action performed in speaking. When a celebrant says, during a marriage ceremony, 'I now pronounce you married', the utterance has certain meaning, referring to themselves with 'I', explaining a relationship with 'married', and so on—this is the locutionary content. The utterance may also cause the married couple to feel great joy, or parents-in-law to scowl with disapproval—these are perlocutionary effects. Uttering such a phrase also makes it the case that the couple are now married. The institution of marriage is such that the utterance of these words during a marriage ceremony constitutes the act of marrying the couple—this is the utterance's illocutionary force. It is this illocutionary force, or the action performed by words, that can solve the problem of the insult/slur distinction.¹³

Austin's central examples are ceremonial, such as naming a ship or conducting a marriage. There are conventions governing these activities that outline who may perform a speech act and how they must do it. For example, if I am the designated person to name a ship, and during the naming ceremony I utter the words 'I hereby name this ship the *HMS Pinafore*', I successfully name the ship. However, if these conventions are not followed, such as if a non-designated person leaps in front of me and smashes a champagne bottle across the bow, crying 'I name this ship the *Generalissimo Stalin!*', then the ship would not be named. Or, as Kukla (2014) memorably puts it, one cannot name babies by running through a maternity ward shouting out names.

Not all speech acts are so ceremonial, with such clearly defined conventions dictating the successful performance of the action. As with (9), some of our ordinary conversational contributions can also count as performing actions. Unlike the ceremonial examples, no special authority is required for me to promise. The conventions of promising are such that most people can make promises on their own behalf.¹⁴ Similar ordinary speech acts can be performed with phrases such as 'I bet...' or 'I challenge...', used to constitute the placing of a bet or the issuing of a challenge respectively. Some ordinary speech acts, such as ordering and permitting, do not need to explicitly state the action performed:

- 10) Go to your room
- 11) You can go outside

In (10), the speaker orders the listener (assuming that they have the authority to issue such orders, as when a parent speaks to a child). In (11), the speaker gives permission even though they do not expressly permit through the use of a sentence that makes its illocutionary force clear; the conventions of permitting allow that a variety of sentences constitute the giving of permission (Austin dubs these 'implicit' performatives, contrasted with explicit performatives which do make their illocutionary force clear: 'I hereby permit you to go outside'). Even 'Yes' in answer to the question 'May I go outside?' would constitute the act of permitting. Speech may constitute action in seemingly innocuous ways.

McGowan (2004) argues that this kind of less visible speech act is performed all the time. Speech that introduces a presupposition into conversation performs a kind of action by changing the rules governing what it is permissible to say. When I say 'I took my dog Merlin to the vet', it no longer makes sense for you to ask a question like 'Do you have any pets?' My previous utterance presupposed that I have at least one pet and so changes the rules of our conversation to make your question no longer count as correct. This act of updating conversational rules means that a great many utterances have illocutionary force, even if this force is not immediately obvious as in these 'covert' speech acts (McGowan, 2009).¹⁵ The point

¹³ I will tend to set aside traditional Austinian terminology and refer simply to 'speech acts', but what I mean by this is the action performed in speaking, or the illocutionary force of an utterance. I prefer the more general phrase to include also non-'Austinian' speech acts, to use McGowan's (2009) phrase, as I am very sympathetic to arguments that extend Austin's framework to utterances that might not traditionally be thought of as carrying illocutionary force.

¹⁴ Sbisà (2009) also argues that we should look more closely at conventions, rather than lexical qualities, when examining speech acts.

¹⁵ See also literature on pornographic speech acts, especially Langton and West (1999).

to take from this is that not all speech acts are clear-cut in the way of traditional Austinian speech acts, which might articulate (or at least imply) the kind of action one is intending to perform with their words.

This sketches out how I think that slurs can constitute speech acts. These words are used in unremarkable, ordinary, conversations. As §2 section detailed, there are a great many theories about what the content of slurs might be. And yet, regardless of precisely what their content is, slurring speech may do more than just convey content. It may also perform a speech act, even if listeners might not immediately realise it.

Slurs can obviously be used in utterances that perform speech acts, as in (12):

12) I promise I'll kill that gook

Let us assume that the conventions of promising are such that saying 'I promise X' sincerely constitutes the act of promising to X. Thanks to such conventions, (12) constitutes an act of promising. It also plausibly constitutes a threat, as the conventions of threatening (for example, suggesting that someone will come to harm) could be such that this utterance also counts as the performance of that action.¹⁶ But my claim is not that slurs can be used as part of the performance of other actions; instead I argue that the use of a slur constitutes the performance of a kind of action in its own right. This is, I think, the solution to the insult/slur distinction, as well as potentially distinguishing between slurs and their correlates. The slurring utterance in (13) constitutes the performance of an action that (14) and (15) do not:

13) Yao is a chink

14) Yao is Chinese

15) Yao is a jerk

The speaker in (14) makes an assertion. The speaker in (15) both makes an assertion and derogates Yao (a single utterance being used to perform two communicative speech acts). The speaker in (13), though, makes an assertion and derogates Yao while also doing something else. That additional action is an act of oppression. To properly explain this, I need to outline what I take 'oppression' to be. §3.2 defines both 'oppression' for the purposes of this argument and 'oppressive speech acts'. §3.3 argues that slurs, but not insults, match this definition, and so explains what is done in uttering (13) beyond that of (14) and (15).

3.2. Oppressive speech acts

I take 'oppression' to be the unjust and systematic subordination of a group. This definition is merely asserted here, but it echoes that of Matsuda (1993), Crenshaw (1993), Frye (2000), Haslanger (2004), and McGowan (2009). Oppression is *unjust*; while some groups, such as children, might merit subordinate status, oppression is never merited. It is *systematic*, as nothing is oppressive by itself; it is the relationship between an action and a wider structure, or system, of actions that together constitute an oppressive situation. Frye's (2000) metaphor of the birdcage seems apt. Individual actions do not oppress any more than a single strand of wire might cage a bird. But enough wires together may very much constrain it. And oppression targets *subordinated* groups; this separates it from discrimination simpliciter. Scholarships for indigenous students require a kind of discrimination against white Australians. However, the discrimination does not target a subordinated group, and so does not oppress those it discriminates against.¹⁷ Even a policy, such as the provision of a scholarship for only indigenous students, that systematically discriminates against a racial group (white Australians) is not necessarily oppressive. It must be understood in terms of its relationship to broader social structures.

Actions can be oppressive. Firing an employee because one mistrusts people of colour is unjust, systematic and (in contexts where whites are privileged) targets a subordinated group. This is not to say that white people in white-privileging countries do not face subordination; but they do not face subordination *in virtue of their whiteness*. One may be white and a woman, or poor, or gay, and so face oppression *despite* being white. When oppressive actions can be performed with speech, then one can perform an oppressive speech act, as in (16):

16) Jeeves, fire all our Chinese employees because I don't like Chinese people

The speaker performs an action (firing) with their utterance. The conventions of employment could be such that if the speaker is an employer, they may terminate the employment of an employee by clearly stating that they are doing so.¹⁸ The utterance, performed in accordance with those conventions, constitutes the performance of the action. However, firing

¹⁶ The conventions of threatening presumably include more than just the suggestion of harm. If said as a joke, or in a moment of exaggerated exasperation, and depending on the relationship between speaker and listener, (12) might not properly threaten; nonetheless, such an utterance can, at least sometimes, constitute both a promise and a threat.

¹⁷ In seeking to overturn centuries of oppression, I think that such scholarships are just and so are doubly not oppressive.

¹⁸ I am not an expert in either employment or contract law. For the sake of argument, let us assume that people may be felicitously fired as they are in the movies.

someone because of their race is unjust. It is also systematic, as it is methodical, structured, and consistent. In contexts where Chinese people face discrimination, it also contributes in a small way to their subordination. An utterance such as (16) would contribute to the unjust, systematic subordination of Chinese people. It therefore also constitutes an act of oppression. As it is performed with speech, it has the illocutionary force of an oppressive speech act. As the previous section argued, this illocutionary force can be difficult to see. Even though (16) does not explicitly say that it is performing an oppressive action, the conventions of oppression are such that it constitutes one anyway.

A more formalised utterance could also be oppressive:

17) I hereby vote to prevent women from working once married

The law enacted with such a vote is clearly unjust. It is also clearly systematic. If women are subordinated (notwithstanding that many women are privileged in other ways, and that many achieve great success despite the barriers they face), then an utterance such as (17) meets the conventional requirements to count as an act of oppression. It does not make women oppressed by itself, but would be one of the pieces that, taken together, constitute oppression. The act of verbally voting in favour of such a law (assuming that it passes) would be a speech act that oppresses; an oppressive speech act. An interesting side-note: what if one votes thus, but the vote fails? I think that it would constitute an infelicitous attempted oppressive speech act, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

An alternative example could be even less general than (16), as in (18), said by an NFL team owner to their general manager:

18) Do not hire Colin Kaepernick

This utterance targets only one person: Kaepernick himself. So how might it be oppressive? Kaepernick rose to international prominence thanks to his refusal to stand during the national anthem in protest against police killing of unarmed black citizens. An utterance such as (18) in that context might only directly target one person, but it does so in virtue of their role within the system of black-white race relations in the USA. This utterance constitutes the denial of employment opportunities to Kaepernick in virtue of his role in that system. This connects the individual action to broader social structures. Furthermore, it plausibly affects the actions of future protesters by 'making an example' out of Kaepernick, suggesting that if they protest in this way, they will never play NFL again. In this way, (18) is a systematic contribution to the subordination of black Americans. As it is also unjust,¹⁹ then (18) would constitute an oppressive speech act despite not directly referring to race.

If slurring utterances also make an unjust and systematic contribution to the subordination of their targets, then they likewise constitute oppressive speech acts. If insults do not, then they would not. This would solve the insult/slur distinction and provide a way to determine the categorisation of ableist terms.

3.3. Slurs as oppressive speech acts

How, then, can slurs contribute to the systematic and unjust subordination of their targets? After all, they're only words. The answer lies in the way that slurring utterances interact with the norms governing our behaviour that dictate what it is appropriate to do. One does not lick one's plate in a restaurant, not because there is anything inherently wrong with doing so, but because of norms about eating in public.²⁰ These norms are enforced with informal sanctions, such as the negative attitudes that transgressive behaviour might engender in others, and the embarrassment of people seen (or thought to have been seen) transgressing. However, if many people transgress, the norm is undermined. If one is eating in a restaurant and the other patrons begin to lick their plates, it would seem both that the general norm does not hold in this context, and also that the sanctions (judgement and embarrassment) will not follow. As a result, we might say that the norm that originally influenced behaviour (do not lick one's plate) is undermined by unsanctioned transgressive behaviour.

Something similar happens when slurs are used in everyday conversation. There are lots of ways to cache out the exact phrasing for norms that govern real-world contexts, so these are only suggested ways to describe behavioural norms relevant to the paradigmatic use of slurs:

The Distress Norm: One should not say things likely to distress other people.

The Negative Representation Norm: Where possible, avoid representing individuals or groups in a negative light.

The Negative Treatment Norm: No group should be subjected to unjust differential negative treatment.

¹⁹ Kaepernick may be denied employment if he is not a good enough footballer without it constituting oppression. For the purposes of this example, (and given Kaepernick's success prior to his protest) I stipulate that this is not the owner's concern.

²⁰ Here I merely assert that such norms exist, but this approach mirrors some of the work in politeness studies (see Culpeper and Terkourafi, 2017 for an overview). My description of norms roughly accords with some of the ideas of Lakoff (1973), Kallia (2004), and especially Leech (2014 §4.3, the reformulation of maxims of politeness). Each theorises politeness maxims or principles that dictate appropriate (polite) behaviour. While there is not space here to adjudicate debates in politeness literature, my assertions about norms are at least not without basis.

In a context where such rules are in play, it would not be appropriate to insult someone's parents, as this would violate the Distress Norm. It would likewise not be appropriate to assert that Chinese people are untrustworthy, as utterances of this sort would transgress both the Negative Representation Norm and the Negative Treatment Norm. If the speaker is then rebuked, the norms would be upheld, or reinforced. However, if the speaker is not sanctioned for their speech, then this would undermine the norm, at least a little bit, just as in the example of plate-licking restaurant patrons. There may be exceptional circumstances that render norms inactive—informing someone about the hospitalisation of a family member might violate the Distress Norm, but other considerations (about the importance of informing family members about accidents) could be added to this framework of norms governing behaviour.

Slurring speech violates these putative norms. Consider the following examples:

- 19) Shut up, faggot.
- 20) That house is full of spics.
- 21) My niece is a real bitch.

A paradigmatic slurring utterance such as (19) is, all things being equal, reasonably likely to upset or distress the target. In using a slur rather than, say, the target's name, the slurring speaker represents them in a negative light, focusing on one aspect of the target and taking that to in some way affect their worth.²¹ This also subjects gay people to negative differential treatment, as it is being gay that is the focus of the slurring expression and the target of the utterance is supposed to feel demeaned or belittled by being thought of as part of that group. The utterances in (20) and (21) might not be as likely to cause actual distress (if they are, for example, said in conversation between two white men), but can still violate the Negative Representation and Negative Treatment Norms. Just as with (19), their rhetorical effect relies on associating membership of the slurred group with undesirability.

Slurring speech violates these kinds of behavioural norms; if it is not sanctioned, and if there are no observable consequences for transgressing them, then those norms are, at least to some extent, undermined. If everyone in the restaurant licks their plate, then it would be reasonable to say that the norm does not hold, at least in the current context. But what to say about a situation in which a few people lick their plates? There may still be some of the judgement and muttered comments that could be expected if just one patron licked their plate, but the presence of several people transgressing in unison might, rather than demonstrate that the norm is not in play, weaken its hold. The negative judgements of other patrons might be mitigated by the presence of several people transgressing, sanctions such as asking a plate-licker to stop might be avoided because patrons who might otherwise attempt to enforce the norm are perturbed by the number of people transgressing, and so on. I think that slurring speech likely follows a similar pattern. When just one person uses a slur it is easy to call out their behaviour and ask them to change; to conform to the norms of polite behaviour. But in a context where several, or even many, people are using slurs (or if the slurring speaker is particularly powerful), it becomes harder to apply sanctions, and so less likely that they will be applied.

Furthermore, the way in which norms might be weakened or altered by transgressive behaviour could be quite specific. In a workplace with several Jewish employees but no Chinese employees, a norm against using anti-Semitic slurs might be in place and easily sanctioned. However, if employees use anti-Chinese slurs, it could undermine norms relevant to slurring in specific ways. Something like the Negative Treatment Norm as phrased above might be no longer said to apply to that workplace, as the use of anti-Chinese slurs would suggest an exception. A better way to capture the norm governing that workplace might be as follows:

A Modified Negative Treatment Norm: Most groups should not be subjected to unjust differential negative treatment—except the Chinese.

If slurs interact with behavioural norms in this way, then they contribute to the oppression of their targets. This updating of behavioural norms is unjust, as no group deserves such negative differential treatment in virtue of their race, gender, or sexual preferences. It is systematic, both as it extends exceptions to polite behaviour to all members of the target group and as it extends to other contexts; once one has been to several restaurants where patrons lick their plates, one will, presumably, be less likely to negatively judge such behaviour in the future. When the group targeted is subordinated, the slurring utterance, by undermining behavioural norms, constitutes a contribution to the oppression of that group. An utterance that constitutes such a contribution, such as these uses of slurs, counts as an oppressive speech act.

Parallel paradigmatic insults do not meet these criteria:

- 22) Shut up, asshole.
- 23) That house is full of jerks.
- 24) My niece is a real piece of shit.

²¹ Jeshion (2013) further develops this idea of slurs 'essentialising' their targets.

In some circumstances, these will violate the norms outlined above. (22) would likely distress the target, while (23) and (24) represent groups and individuals in a negative light. (23) might be said to treat membership of a group (people that live in that house) as undesirable. However, these transgressions of behavioural norms are not necessarily unjust. People can be jerks, assholes, and pieces of shit, and so deserve such appellations. These are also not systematic in the same way as slurring transgressions. The kinds of exceptions to general norms that might be instantiated by insulting utterances do not interact with broad systems of subordination:

A Modified Negative Representation Norm: Where possible, avoid representing individuals or groups in a negative light—except for my niece.

The modification required to normalise (24) requires that an exception only be made for one individual, and not in relation to their group membership. Finally, and most importantly for the insult/slur distinction, assholes and nieces and people in houses are not subordinated, and so changes to behavioural norms that negatively affect them might not be desirable, but do not constitute acts of oppression.²² Slurs, but not insults, contribute to the unjust, systematic subordination of targeted groups, and so constitute oppressive speech acts. This explains the insult/slur distinction, while capturing the special badness of slurs; oppression is a harm constituted by slurring speech above and beyond that of other pejorative terms.²³

It might be objected that the kinds of rules described above do not actually govern many contexts, including those where slurs are most often used. A conversation between two racists would presumably be conducted according to modified versions of the norms outlined in this section. This might be captured roughly as follows:

The Bigoted Distress Norm: One may say things that distress groups other than those to which participants belong.

The Bigoted Negative Representation Norm: Minority groups should be represented in a negative light.

The Bigoted Negative Treatment Norm: Minority groups should be subjected to negative differential treatment.

Slurs uttered in a context subject to these norms would not violate or transgress them. However, they still interact with them—by reinforcing the existing set of norms.²⁴ Every person who acts in accordance with norms against plate-licking demonstrates that the norm is at play. By behaving in unison, patrons encourage the behavioural coordination of others.²⁵ Even without applying sanctions for transgressive behaviour, an observer who might desire to lick their plate may still feel pressured into acting in accordance with everyone else.

Slurs uttered in bigoted contexts subject to something like the norms outlined above would then constitute the *reinforcement*, rather than the undermining, of bigoted norms. This would still contribute to the unjust and systematic subordination of their targets, not because it makes things worse, but because it helps to maintain the status quo—much like voting to renew a piece of oppressive legislation. This model for understanding slurs as oppressive speech acts works not only in polite contexts, but also in bigoted contexts. What is important is not the specific norms that are influenced by slurring speech, but the direction in which norms are influenced. If the pattern of reinforcement and undermining makes things worse, in general, for the (subordinated) targets of the term, then the utterance is likely to contribute to their subordination and therefore constitute an oppressive speech act.

²² For the same reason I am sceptical that terms targeting privileged groups, such as 'honky' for white people, should be considered slurs, at least not if one cares to capture the special badness of slurs.

²³ Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2017) and Kukla (2018) make a similar claim: that slurs subordinate their targets, whereas insults do not. However, I think that the model I outline here has some theoretical advantages. Firstly, it requires fewer pre-theoretical commitments, avoiding Lewisian conversational kinematics and Althusserian ideology respectively. Secondly, Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt's model, by relying on conversational rules, does not obviously extend to non-conversational contexts where slurring may occur, such as in written formats (see e.g. Waldron, 2012). Finally, Kukla argues that the distinction stems from the observation that one insults another as an equal, but one cannot slur as an equal. However, insults such as 'asshole' seems to assume a sort of *moral* superiority over one's target; even if speakers are formally equal, the insult seems (to me) to at least attempt to alter that relationship. Additionally, slurs can be used by in-group members to derogate others, such as in Chris Rock's 'Black People vs Niggas', or when a woman calls another woman a 'slut'. While more could be said on these points, I think that there are potential problems for these accounts when it comes to explaining the insult/slur distinction that I hope my own can avoid. That said, these accounts are concerned firstly with the slur/correlate distinction, and so it would not cost them much to adopt something like my analysis of the distinction between slurs and insults.

²⁴ Diaz-Legaspe (2019, p20) makes a similar claim: 'The choice of these words [slurs] reinforces and strengthens the dominance relations and systemic patterns of inequity they involve.'

²⁵ Psychology can help to explain why this occurs. People tend towards conformity, as suggested by experiments conducted by Asch and Guetzkow (1951), where subjects often gave obviously incorrect answers to questions to conform to the behaviour of those around them, and Sherif (1936), where discussion led to subjects with outlying beliefs converging on the majority view. The strength of this call to conform is not uniform. Milroy and Milroy (1985) argue that interpersonal ties between people play an important role in linguistic adoption (see also Wong, 2005 for an overview of related positions). However, communication is often framed as a cooperative activity (e.g. Stalnaker, 2014; Lewis, 1979). This provides practical, as well as psychological, reasons to coordinate linguistic behaviour.

3.4. Ableist terms

Having developed an account of slurs as oppressive speech acts that can explain the insult/slur distinction, we can now categorise ableist terms. As discussed in §3.3, both slurs and insults interact with the suggested norms in similar ways (undermining and reinforcing). So does the interaction of ableist terms with these norms contribute to the unjust, systematic subordination of people with disabilities? We can take another parallel set of examples:

- 25) Shut up, retard.
- 23) That house is full of spastics.
- 24) My niece is a real imbecile.

Used in the paradigmatic derogatory mode, these utterances transgress the Distress, Negative Representation, and Negative Treatment Norms, in much the same way as slurs. (25), (26), and (27) treat belonging to the groups targeted by these terms (people with cognitive disabilities) as a mark of inferior worth. This kind of negative treatment is, I think, unjust, and so ableist terms meet the first criterion for oppressive speech acts. Secondly, these changes are systematic, as the norms are reinforced and undermined to the detriment of a whole social group and as suggested above, plausibly extends the modification in some way to future contexts. Finally, in contexts where people with disabilities face subordination, such utterances play a (minor) role in contributing to the total set of barriers facing them. As ableist terms influence behavioural norms in ways that unjustly and systematically contribute to the subordination of their targets, they constitute oppressive speech acts. This is characteristic of slurs, but not insults. As a result, we should treat ableist terms as slurs and not dismiss them as 'mere' insults, recognising that in an important way, these terms are especially bad just like paradigmatic slurs.

This is, for many, a counterintuitive conclusion. When I began working in this area, I would use terms such as 'idiot' and 'moron' to casually refer to politicians, sports people, and even (at times) friends. But once the difference between insult and slur had been explained, I could no longer see a principled difference in using ableist terms or racist terms in the metaphorical mode. If I would not use 'kike' as a general pejorative term, why would I use 'imbecile'?

It is worth mentioning that in most contexts, the behavioural norms outlined in §3.3 are probably not taken to apply to people with (especially cognitive) disabilities. One can find ableist terms on tabloid front pages, quotes from political leaders, and in the headings of philosophy blogs. Ordinary contexts are then better thought of as being governed by norms similar to those for conversation between two bigots. Given how freely these terms are used, polite behaviour seems to have exceptions for people with disabilities, and so the use of ableist terms would work to reinforce these exceptions just as the use of racist terms between bigots reinforces the contextual norm that such behaviour is permissible. Everyday ableist utterances then play a role in the reinforcement of an ableist status quo. As mentioned above, this kind of reinforcement is a contribution to the oppression of its targets. Even if everyone around you is licking their plates, your decision to join in with the plate-licking reinforces the norms that make such behaviour permissible. Even if everyone around you is using ableist terms, your decision to join in reinforces the norms that make *that* behaviour permissible. It might *seem* harmless to call a colleague an 'idiot', but that plays a role, albeit a very small one, in reinforcing norms that constitute oppression. It might be a tiny piece of the wire that builds the birdcage, but we should refrain from contributing even tiny pieces towards oppression.

Conclusion

Slurring utterances do not merely communicate content about their targets, whatever that content might be. They also constitute oppressive speech acts as they contribute to the unjust and systematic subordination of their targets. This explains the insult/slur distinction, as insults might be mean and nasty things to say, but do not oppress. Ableist terms, on the other hand, do; as a result, we should make room for such terms in our analysis of slurs. The model developed in this paper explains the operation of slurs in paradigmatic derogatory modes, but slurs are used in a great many ways. I think that this model can offer insight into re-appropriated slurring speech, terms that target privileged groups, and the apparent variation between uses of the same slur; all of these deserve further attention. For now, we can at least adopt a preliminary conclusion: ableist terms, like slurs, oppress their targets. If we think that slurs are especially bad words and so should not be used, then we should adopt the same attitude towards ableist terms. It might appear that such words are harmless, but it seems to me that this is more likely due to us being blinded by the ableism entrenched in our society than due to the actual harmlessness of ableist terms.

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