



# What is a slur?

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**Abstract** Although there seems to be an agreement on what slurs are, many authors diverge when it comes to classify some words as such. Hence, many debates would benefit from a technical definition of this term that would allow scholars to clearly distinguish what counts as a slur and what not. Although the paper offers different definitions of the term in order to allow the reader to choose her favorite, I claim that ‘slurs’ is the name given to a grammatical category, and I consequently trace a difference in kind between slurs and other kinds of group pejoratives. I rely on a novel approach to slurs that characterizes them based on their membership to a particular kind of register category, an often neglected sociolinguistic notion determining the social contexts in which registered terms are expected, tolerated or unacceptable. The paper also points out to the close link between words registered as [+derogatory] (slurs) and their usage in the context of dominance relations of different kinds between users and recipients of slurs. By pointing out to this link I hope to underscore the political significance of slur usage, as well as to contribute further to the explanation why slurs are so damaging and unacceptable in most social contexts.

**Keywords** Slurs · Derogatory language · Discrimination · Type-meaning · Register

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## 1 Introduction

If you are about to read this paper, you are most likely interested in philosophical approaches to slurring expressions or *slurs*. If that is the case, luck is on your side; we had plenty of those in the last decade. However, it may also be the case that you are not only interested on what this particular paper might contribute to the topic, but also intrigued by the title. After all, it is pretty clear what a slur is and the vast majority of English speakers can offer a satisfactory answer to the title's question in a heartbeat. Why, then, do we need a paper stating what is already obvious?

However, it is far from obvious what slurs are. Leaving aside the many meanings the word 'slur' may have in English, the philosophers of language and linguists that had pushed forward the debate on slur meaning in the last years don't seem to agree completely on which words count as slurs and which don't. They agree, indeed, on the set of paradigmatic slurs: pejoratives targeting groups singled out by race (the N-word), ethnicity ('spic'), nationality ('chink') and religion ('kike'). However, different authors focus on different sets of words that comprise these when theorizing about 'slurs'. Thus, some of them focus only on racial and nationality-based epithets,<sup>1</sup> seemingly leaving aside gender or sexual-orientation-based pejoratives. Others talk about 'pejoratives' or 'derogatory words',<sup>2</sup> at the risk of including foul words targeting individuals and not just groups. Some work on 'group slurs', classifying as 'slurs' pejoratives for professionals ('shrink') or any other stereotyped group for that matter.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, intuitions or linguistic competence in English are not enough when it comes to determine whether certain words are or not 'slurs'.

The aim of this work is to offer a particular kind of answer to this question. In a sense, I aim to provide a technical definition that hopefully will prove useful to, first, determine which words count as slurs and which don't, and second, explain why some borderline cases are difficult to classify. In another sense, I aim to provide a set of criteria or requirements that a word –or complex expression– should satisfy in order to be classified as a 'slur'. The final result, hopefully, will be the discovery of a genuine kind which fits the paradigmatic cases we have all agreed to consider as such.

The roadmap is as follows: Sect. 2 aims to convince the reader of the lack, and therefore of the need, of a technical, precise notion of 'slur', and offers a preview of what follows in the guise of a taxonomy for 'insulting terms'. Assuming I am successful enough as to keep the reader interested, Sect. 3 works its way through growingly complex approaches to a definition for this set of words. Section 4 introduces my preferred, register-based approach to slurs, together with a summarized account of the notion of the [+derogatory] register on which it relies, and its connection to dominance relations. Section 5 concludes the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Hom (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Williamson (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Bach (2018).

## 2 Do we need a definition of ‘slur’?

My goal in this paper is to clarify what philosophers of language talk about when we talk about ‘slurs’. Ideally, this paper will leave the reader with a more precise notion of what we have been calling ‘slur’ so far, a notion far from the commonsensical understanding of the term. If this notion grasps what is fundamental about these terms, as I expect, we will have a tool to distinguish what is a slur from what is not. Although this may not be an impressive result in philosophy, think of the importance such a notion would have for policy-makers or researchers on discrimination or hate speech.

But you may wonder, don’t we have it already? The word ‘slur’, in all forms and meanings, is familiar to English speakers, academic or not. This familiarity reinforces the feeling of knowing fairly well what slurs are, or which words count as slurs. This feeling is confirmed by the fact that all philosophers of language working on the meaning of slurs agree in considering racial, ethnic, religion and nationality-based insulting words as indisputable instances of ‘slurs’, and seem to assume that this agreement would extend to any other instances.

Turns out, this is not the case. Apart from words that are unequivocally ‘slurs’ (the paradigmatic cases mentioned above), philosophers of language differ in their classifications of some other words; while some authors are willing to classify them as slurs, others don’t, and others hesitate. The enterprise of defining what slurs are, then, requires a bit of weeding. First, when focusing on slurs, i.e., *words*, we have to forcefully look away from *actions*. Hence, we shouldn’t be interested in linguistic actions characteristically involving the use of slurs: slurring, harassing, insulting, etc. Also, I will be putting aside *offensive talk*. Almost anything we say can be offensive for someone in the right circumstances, blurring the notion.

My focus will be exclusively on linguistic expressions which one might think of as offensive. This little taxonomy below may be useful to foresee what I will be discarding or focusing on:

- A. Words that merely do offend but are not offensive (‘you look great for your age’!)
- B. Words that can be thought of as offensive:
  - a. Words that can offend sometimes, in the proper context, but not because of their meaning (‘average’, ‘mystical’, ‘pig’).
  - b. Words that are always offensive because of the *standing meaning of the type*: we will call them ‘*pejorative words*’
    - i. Pejoratives that name a property whose possession is socially condemned or ill-considered (‘pedophile’, ‘traitor’, ‘jerk’)
    - ii. Words that are offensive in themselves:
      1. Racial, ethnical, nationality pejoratives (‘spic’, ‘chink’, the N-word)
      2. Gender-based, sexual orientation pejoratives (‘slut’, ‘faggot’, the C-word)
      3. Physical or mental disability pejoratives (‘retard’, ‘spaz’)

4. Professional pejoratives ('shrink)
5. Political, cultural or sport-related pejoratives ('papist', 'commie', 'Nazi')

I claim that 'slurs' locate within (B.b.ii). However, not all pejoratives within (B.b.ii) come out as slurs in this paper. The cutting point will be based on current disagreements over hard cases. Just to mention a few, should we classify descriptions like 'tree-huggers' or 'anti-vaxer' under (B.b.ii) or they fit best in (B.a)? Is there any difference between 'Jewish American Princess' and its acronym 'JAP' that matters for classifying it as a slur? Also, although words in (B.b.ii.1) are paradigmatic slurs, there are still blurry cases: is 'Diego' a slur for Mexicans? Are the words in (B.b.ii.2) slurs?<sup>4</sup> How are 'slut' or 'faggot' different from 'gay', 'queer' or 'fairy'? Pejoratives for professions also raise doubts: is 'shrink' a slur? 'Pig' is not a slur, but how about its use by the members of the Black Lives Matter movement in reference to police officers?

The fact that waters divide when competent English speakers approach these cases points to the need of coming up with a more precise, well defined notion able to settle the issue. This paper aims to provide such a device, and at the end, as a happy byproduct, I hope to offer with it some insight on the source of the offensive nature of these expressions.

### 3 Some semantic requirements for being a 'slur'

What are 'slurs' then? Here is an assortment of increasingly restrictive approaches for the reader's delight.

#### 3.1 Slurs are used to derogate

The first thing that pops to mind upon reflection on our intuitive grasp of slurs is that they are always used to derogate, demean or belittle people. Hence, a very, *very* broad definition of slurs could be:

*Very Very Broad Definition (VVBD)*: the set of slurs is identical to the set of linguistic expressions used to belittle or disparage people.

Although not very popular, this definition sounds about right. VVBD correctly classifies expressions like 'spic' or 'paki' as slurs. It also classifies descriptions like 'rag head' as slurs, which may seem fine for many people. But according to VVBD even terms like 'Jew' (with no funny intonation or accompanying gesture) can be considered slurs in certain contexts. Consider the example for 'slur' provided in the booklet *Slurs, stereotypes and prejudice*:

<sup>4</sup> See Ashwell (2016) for doubts on the status of these as slurs.

“I had a long wait in line to see a show the other night... we were waiting patiently, but I was disgusted by a crowd of Jews around us. They act as if they own the world, they’re so loud and pushy!” (Stern and Mackenzie 2016, 11).

Since VVBD focuses on the intentions with which words are used, every word said with the intent to offend or harm can be considered a slur.

The reason why this very, *very* broad definition resonates as correct is because words used or interpreted with this intention achieve an effect commonly associated with slurs: to denigrate, demean or belittle targets. However, classifying every word triggering this effect as a slur amounts to confuse the *act* of slurring with *words* that are slurs. The mistake resembles the one issuing from the ambiguity of the word ‘insult’: although many things we say may be *insulting* (like ‘Women are intellectually inferior to men’), only a small set of words are in fact *insults*, or if you prefer, *pejoratives* (‘Asshole!’). When it comes to slurs, we have to discard actions and focus on words, and this implies getting rid of words that partake in hate speech or discriminatory discourse without them being offensive per se, keeping an eye only on words coined to demean or belittle in virtue of their type-meaning. The citation above is, no doubt, slurring. But from my standpoint it does not contain any slur. In contrast, substituting sentence (1) for sentence (2) in the citation would include a slur in the resulting paragraph (‘kike’):

- 1) We were waiting patiently, but I was disgusted by a crowd of Jews around us.
- 2) We were waiting patiently, but I was disgusted by a crowd of kikes around us.

Unlike non-offensive terms occurring in slurring speech, slurs are always offensive. They are so even when used in sentences not intended to belittle or disparage (‘I like my spic friend so much!’). Even if both speaker and hearer understand that there is no intention to offend or belittle the Hispanic community with this utterance, the sentence is *still offensive* for the targeted community. Hence, a proper definition of slurs should not be based on the intention with which they are used.

### 3.2 Slurs are pejoratives

Distinguishing between the act of slurring and slurs leads to classifying slurs as *pejoratives*. By ‘pejoratives’ I mean words that are offensive in virtue of their meaning<sup>5</sup> and not solely in virtue of the speaker’s intention. Quite the contrary, it is because of their meaning that these words are typically used to offend or otherwise harm their targets. However, defining a set of words by the effect caused by their meaning is as obscure as the notion of ‘slur’ itself. Words are, after all, always offensive in virtue of what they mean, as in these cases:

- 3) I think your paper not only lacks argumentation, it is also boring.
- 4) I don’t want to sit next to him during lunch, he is a pig.

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<sup>5</sup> I won’t attempt here to provide a definition of ‘meaning’. I am using the term in opposition of ‘use’ and in this contrast, ‘meaning’ could be as well truth-conditional content, that plus conventional implicature or semantic presuppositions, or that plus an expressive dimension.

Utterances of (3–4) are insulting, harmful and/or upsetting for the target precisely in virtue of what they mean. It is in virtue of its meaning that ‘boring’ (3) can seriously harm the ego of a professional philosopher if it appears in a paper review. Also in virtue of its meaning ‘pig’ (4) can bring to mind features associated to these animals, suggesting by way of a simile that the target is dirty, has sloppy eating habits, or is careless or rude in the way he addresses people (especially women). However, even though we agree on the fact that these words may offend or harm, we would hesitate in considering ‘pig’ or ‘boring’ as pejoratives.

We could claim that pejoratives are offensive not just when used in a particular context, but in most or all uses. But classifying a grammatical category on a contingent individual reaction<sup>6</sup> or a potential perlocutionary effect is controversial to say the least. Hence, we need to refine the notion of *offense* a bit more: instead of appealing to subjective emotions triggered by sayings or doings, we can focus instead on how people act out these emotions and on the social norms shaping the proper ways to do so. Thus, it is socially acceptable to act offended after being called a pejorative, in contrast, say, to act offended after a bad review. For some pejoratives, it is even justified or expected for the recipient to act offended.<sup>7</sup> This is independent of the subjective emotions of individuals: even hard-skinned individuals that do not actually feel offended or hurt are entitled –or even pressured– to *act* offended. Words like ‘boring’ or ‘pig’ may upset or offend people. But they achieve this effect by means of the recognition of the speaker’s intention to denigrate the target and not in virtue of the words per se, which are, by themselves, entirely inoffensive. A different wording of the same idea (“Your paper put me to sleep better than a lullaby” or “He smells really bad and spits his food all over”) would hurt recipients as much, and in both cases it would be hard to blame the words to *justify* their offense. In contrast, recipients of “Your paper is a piece of shit” or “He is an asshole” may point to the words to justify offense.

Thus, pejoratives are terms whose use makes acting offended either socially acceptable or justified. If so, some hard cases mentioned above can be safely discarded as pejoratives (or slurs). Per se, words like ‘tree’, ‘vaccination’, ‘to hug’, ‘to shrink’ do not justify acting offended. The word “shrink”, used to refer to psychiatrists, is demeaning insofar ‘to shrink’ triggers images of the ancient practice of shrinking human skulls in magical rituals. Descriptions like ‘tree-hugger’ or ‘anti-vaxer’ can upset their targets by presenting their beliefs under an unfavorable light. Similarly, ‘Diego’ and ‘Gino’ are Spanish or Italian proper names used to demean but are not pejoratives. Thus, none of these expressions are pejoratives in the sense above and should be ruled out as slurs too.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Hom (2012).

<sup>7</sup> When it comes to slurs, in many countries, this entitlement to offense can even impact on legislation, allowing individuals to initiate legal actions against speakers using these expressions (Kennedy (2002)). See also the distinction between actual, warranted and rational offense in Bolinger (2017): offense can be rational if hearers are epistemically justified in taking offense, and warranted if the offense is morally justified.

<sup>8</sup> This should be clear by now: this does not prevent speakers from making slurring remarks using these expressions. I am just saying that the words in themselves are not slurs. However, some of these descriptions or expressions can crystallize as slurs after reiterated slurring use. ‘Limey’ first described the

Defining slurs as pejoratives leads to a Very Broad Definition of slurs:

*Very Broad Definition (VBD):* the set of slurs is identical to the set of pejoratives.

If you agree with VBD, you would be in good company. Although I don't think this is their position, some authors<sup>9</sup> mention a distinction between group slurs and personal slurs that evidences an implicit acceptance of VBD: slurs are just pejoratives, and you can have them in two flavors.

According to VBD, words like 'asshole' or 'jerk' are slurs. However, for some of us there is still a radical difference between these terms and those we classify as slurs. For us, 'stupid', 'idiot' and 'jerk' are not at all in the same ballpark as the set of expressions we are interested in, and hence, we feel obliged to keep on looking for a more restricted definition. A common mistake pertaining the term 'moron' may be of interest here.<sup>10</sup> Some people may feel inclined to align this term along with paradigmatic slurs, and not together with individual pejoratives like 'idiot'. The reason for this is the fact that 'moron' has two different dictionary entries: "informal: a stupid person" and "psych.: a person with a genetically determined mental age between 8 and 12 on the Binet scale, or a person with an IQ of 51–70".<sup>11</sup> Taken together, they give the impression of 'moron' being a pejorative term for a group of people, namely those with a low IQ. This impression is of course mistaken: when used as part of a technical psychological jargon 'moron' is a not pejorative, and when it is, it is used in a non-technical way, targeting only individuals. This mistake points out in the right direction: slurs are not only pejoratives, but *group* pejoratives.

### 3.3 Slurs are group pejoratives

For those who think that VBD is not quite right, slurs are group pejoratives: pejorative terms for groups that, in contrast to pejoratives aimed exclusively at individuals, offend people other than recipients:

*Broad Definition (BD):* the set of slurs is identical to the set of group pejoratives.

As correct as it may seem at first glance, BD is not without problems. What is the difference between group and individual pejoratives after all? One would say that the former targets individuals in virtue of their membership to a certain group. In contrast, the latter targets people for individual traits, actions or lifestyle choices. But many of these features, actions and lifestyle are shared by other individuals that

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Footnote 8 continued

habit of British sailors arriving to North America of sucking limes to prevent scurvy, and is now a slur for British in general. [Example by Richard (2008)].

<sup>9</sup> Bach, unpublished.

<sup>10</sup> I thank Ram Neta for this example.

<sup>11</sup> Oxford Dictionary of English.

could easily be bundled up in a group. If ‘group’ is a collection of individuals bundled together by a shared property, individual pejoratives are group pejoratives in a trivial way. Any property, even bizarre ones as ‘being considered an asshole by me’, can set up an extension and constitute a set. Thus, the distinction between individual and group pejoratives is blurry from the beginning. Surely advocates of BD would want to avoid this result that makes BD indistinguishable from VBD. They need to trace a clear divide between individual and group pejoratives. This requires coming up with an equally clear distinction between ‘trivial’ groups and ‘non-trivial’ groups.

On top of this, many advocates of BD seem to associate slurs with a sense of injustice that is lacking in non-slur group pejoratives, let alone individual pejoratives. Lurking beneath the surface of some papers on slurs lays the assumption that group pejoratives don’t count as slurs if the property constitutive of the referential set is deemed morally (or otherwise) questionable. Thus, targets of group pejoratives like ‘pedo’ seem to deserve social punishment in virtue of their membership to this set, mostly because the property of ‘being an adult with a sexual interest in children or underage’ is considered immoral. In contrast, targets of ‘spic’ are considered undeserving of social punishment for their ethnicity. If this is so, not all group pejoratives are slurs, and therefore, there is a second, morally-based articulation of BD:

*BD-inclusive:* the set of slurs is identical to the set of (all) group pejoratives.

*BD-restrictive:* the set of slurs is identical to the set of (some) group pejoratives.

On top of a criterion for distinguishing between individual and group pejoratives, partisans of BD-restrictive owe us an explanation of what exactly sets the divide between proper slurs and mere group pejoratives. More precisely, they owe us a criterion dividing between groups deserving and undeserving social punishment to ground the distinction between mere group pejoratives and slurs, respectively.

As far the divide between individual and group pejoratives goes, the problem is solved by distinguishing between subjectively and objectively identified groups. This distinction relies on the difference between speaker-dependent (subjective) and speaker-independent (objective) properties. Any property ascribable to an individual will give rise to a set constituted by all the people holding that property. However, sets based on speaker-dependent properties are unstable. These properties are only held in relation to a speaker, and then, variance in speakers leads to differing ascriptions of the property. Hence, group terms based on speaker-dependent properties have different extensions for different speakers. Most individual pejoratives target people on the basis of a speaker-dependent property, often the result of a subjective evaluation of the recipient and/or her deeds. Thus, ‘being an asshole’ and ‘being a jerk’ are speaker-dependent properties determining different subjectively identified groups. In turn, speaker-independent properties are stable, in the sense that individuals hold these properties independently of a speaker. Speaker-independent properties yield identical extensions for every speaker. These properties give rise to objectively identifiable groups: ‘being Hispanic’ determines



a unique extension, an objectively identifiable set of individuals. With this distinction at sight, we can clarify further what advocates of BD-inclusive mean and part of what advocates of BD-restrictive mean: slurs are pejoratives targeting members of an objectively identifiable group. ‘Asshole’ and ‘jerk’ should not count as slurs, but ‘spic’ should if used literally.<sup>12</sup>

A little caveat though: the divide between pejoratives for objectively and subjectively identifiable groups does not match exactly the intuitive distinction between individual and group pejoratives. There are many greys in between: ‘wino’ or ‘lard-ass’ are considered individual pejoratives, but they target people holding objectively identifiable properties. Partisans of BD should then agree to include these terms in the set of slurs (as they often do). The set of ‘slurs’ should not only include pejoratives targeting people on the basis of their nationality, religion, ethnicity, gender orientation and sexual preferences but also pejoratives targeting people on the basis of professions, lifestyle choices, physical traits and other speaker-independent properties. Pejoratives for Steelers fans, vegans and tax evaders would all come out as slurs.

Advocates of BD face another problem: many speaker-independent properties are actually vague.<sup>13</sup> Take the property of ‘being tall’: although there are certain situations with a height standard in place, in most cases there simply is no clear-cut standard dividing tall from not-so-tall people. When it comes to vague properties, it is up to speakers (and context)<sup>14</sup> to decide whether individuals fall on one or the other side, bringing vague properties closer to subjective, speaker-dependent properties. In consequence, it is not clear whether pejoratives picking up groups constituted by vague properties would count as slurs or not. A quick solution for BD advocates would be to simply export these cases to the non-slur camp: after all, these properties do not determine extensionally identical sets for all speakers. If this is so, many group pejoratives based on vague properties (like ‘fatso’) would not count as slurs.

But alas, the problem does not end here and is worse than it seems. The same problem can arise from borderline cases of the speaker-independent properties that constitute paradigmatic cases of slurs, like ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation. In a growingly diverse world, it is often not clear whether someone is Hispanic or not. Rich ethnic profiles including Hispanic heritage would constitute then a fuzzy penumbral range for the application of the associated slur. Arguably, partisans of BD would not be satisfied with exporting these pejoratives to the non-slur camp. Now, a problem as complex deserves its own paper -at least-, and this is not the place to venture a solution. I will therefore happily ignore it here, but not without pointing that BD supporters owe us an answer. I will only assume that BD advocates are okay with a classification that includes among slurs pejorative terms targeting professions, lifestyle choices, physical features, etc., vague or not.

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<sup>12</sup> By ‘literally’ I mean the sense in which Jeshion (2013) uses this term.

<sup>13</sup> I thank the anonymous referee for warning me about this problem.

<sup>14</sup> Graff Fara (2000).

Supporters of BD-restrictive have to put one more restriction in place, a division between objectively identifiable groups deserving and underserving social punishment. Recall that, for them, only pejoratives for the latter count as slurs. We can trace the divide by appealing to group ‘neutrality’, but this too requires some unveiling.

Following Ashwell’s (2016) requirements for neutral counterparts, we can posit two requirements for an objective property P to be neutral in the expected way:

- (a) *Moral neutrality*: if holding P violates moral standards, P is not a morally neutral property. In order to be a morally neutral property, holding P should not violate moral standards.
- (b) *Normative neutrality*: if holding P goes against norms, rules and laws, P is not a normatively neutral property. In order to be a normatively neutral property, holding P should not go against rules, laws and norms.

Hence, a group constituted by a (morally and normatively) neutral property counts as a neutral group, while a group constituted by a (morally or normatively) non-neutral property counts as a non-neutral group. In this line of thought, slurs are pejoratives for neutral groups, and pejoratives for non-neutral groups are not slurs.

Neutrality thus defined helps identify groups deserving punishment (moral, social, legal) in virtue of holding a membership-determining property deemed immoral, illegal or incorrect. Thus, ‘being a pedophile’ is morally and legally condemned and therefore, not a neutral property nor constitutive of a neutral group. Thus, ‘pedo’, a pejorative for this non-neutral group, does not count as a slur for supporters of BD-restrictive. In contrast, since ‘being Hispanic’ is a morally and normatively neutral property, it is constitutive of a neutral group. A pejorative targeting it (‘spic’) counts as a slur. The distinction between neutral and non-neutral groups seems to underpin accurately the sense of injustice grounding BD-restriction.

There is a tiny little detail worth mentioning here. Both (a) and (b) as stated above are incomplete, since both are relative to a culture, perspective or community: a property P can only go against the moral standards or the set of rules or norms *held by a given community*. Therefore, any definition of slurs relying on group neutrality will turn out to be relative. As unfathomable it seems to us, there could be cultures where sexual interest in children was morally correct or permissible. In such a setting, pedophiles would constitute a neutral group, for the membership-determining property would neither be immoral or unlawful. In this setting ‘pedo’ would be as much of a pejorative as ‘lawyer’ in our culture. This poses a question to advocates of BD-restrictive: should we allow the category of slurs change across cultures? Again, this is not the place to address this complex issue, but we can peek into possible answers. Advocates of BD-restrictive could be okay with some words classifying as slurs in some cultures and not in others. Alternatively, they could claim that what settles whether a term is a slur or not is the context where it comes to being: even if holding a property P deviates from the morals or norms in a community A but not in B, the group pejorative E originated in B to derogate the P-set of people counts as a slur *both* in A and in B.

Advocates of BD do not really claim that slurs are group pejoratives, but instead that slurs are pejoratives for *objectively* identifiable groups. BD-restrictive advocates add that slurs target only *neutral* groups. Once we have this solved, we can turn to see the ways BD can be further articulated.

### 3.4 The identity thesis

Many authors rely on neutral counterparts for their definitions of slurs. Neutral counterparts are group terms referring to the group targeted by a slur without any offensive power. According to many authors,<sup>15</sup> the following two sentences have the same truth-conditions, and vary only in the derogatory force they carry or fail to carry with them:

- 5) This building is full of spics.
- 6) This building is full of Hispanics.

These authors commonly define the relation between slurs and neutral counterparts in terms of co-reference or extensional identity:

*The Identity Thesis:* given a slur E, there is an actual or potential neutral counterpart  $NC_E$  such that both  $NC_E$  and E refer to group {G}.

If co-referential, slurs and neutral counterparts are names for the same group of people. For advocates of the Identity Thesis, co-referentiality issues from the fact that these groups are objectively identifiable and neutral. The fact that the membership-determining properties are speaker-independent may help explain why, in most cases, there is another name for the group they determine, while the neutrality of the group may explain why this other term lacks derogatory force.

If you agree with the Identity Thesis, your definition of slurs could look like this:

*Broad Definition-Restrictive1 (BDR1):* the set of slurs is identical with the set of group pejoratives for objectively identifiable, neutral groups, which makes them co-referential with non-pejorative terms referring to those groups.

BDR1 counts ‘spic’ as a slur, since it is a group pejorative referring to the set of Hispanics, an objectively identifiable, neutral group. Because it is an objectively identifiable, neutral group, ‘spic’ happens to be co-referential with ‘Hispanics’, a neutral term referring to the same group.<sup>16</sup> In fact, all paradigmatic slurs agree with BDR1, which is good.

But BDR1 opens the door for to over-classification: all pejorative terms referring to political parties (‘commie’), sports teams, sport fans, and professions (‘shrink’) are now classified as slurs (as long as they are pejoratives and not descriptions). You

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<sup>15</sup> See Williamson (2009, 2010), Whiting (2013) and Copp and Sennet (2015).

<sup>16</sup> Notice that the reference of the slur is not dependent on the reference on the neutral counterpart; although some authors may push forward the requisite of the existence of a neutral counterpart for a pejorative to count a slur, I believe that the requirement of group neutrality is a clearer anchor for the relation. See Ashwell (2016) for a critique of the requirement of a neutral counterpart. I thank the anonymous referee for pointing me in the direction of a better clarification of this point.

could be okay with this result, of course. But BDR1 also under-classifies: it leaves out some terms frequently considered slurs. Consider ‘slut’, ‘bitch’ and ‘faggot’ and almost all gender-based slurs, slurs that apply to the members of a gender that deviate from the pattern of behavior imposed on them.<sup>17</sup> None of them satisfy the Identity Thesis or BDR1. ‘Slut’, for example, is applied to women<sup>18</sup> but not to all women: just to those whose (sexual) behavior escapes the norms imposed to women by our society. ‘Bitch’ is also applied conditionally to women whose behavior is not as submissive as expected. ‘Faggot’ and ‘dyke’ are applied to people whose sexual desire does not pursue the kind of object expected for their perceived gender. The list goes on: in all these cases, the referred group is not neutral, for the membership property fails to be morally or normatively neutral: ‘women that have more sexual partners than it is *correct*’ is a normative-loaded property and ‘promiscuous women’ is a morally penalized trait. Thus, there is no neutral counterpart co-referring with these terms. Advocates of MDR1 should feel comfortable considering that these terms are not slurs at all.<sup>19</sup>

If you, like me, are uncomfortable leaving those terms out of the set of slurs, or with classifying political or sport-related insults as slurs, you may want to consider replacing MDR1 with a weaker version, MDR2. MDR2 too assigns a much weaker role to neutral groups in the characterization of slurs. Like BDR1, it concedes that there is something intuitively right about the Identity Thesis. Slurs refer derogatorily to a group determined by a membership feature that strikes us as neutral: there is nothing wrong per se in having it, and having it doesn’t make people worthy of mistreatment. Due to this neutrality, it is only natural to expect languages to have other terms for these groups. In order to keep that insight in place and avoid the overtly strong Identity Thesis, we can state this weaker requirement as the basis for BDR2:

*Neutral Applicability Conditions:* given a slur E, there is an objectively identifiable, neutral group {G} such that E applies correctly only to members of {G}.

According to this weaker requirement, a slur only applies correctly to the members of an objectively identifiable, neutral group. By ‘correctly’ I do not mean to imply that it is morally, politically or socially correct to use the slur for members of this group, but that using the slur to refer to people outside the group would count as a linguistic mistake –provided the speaker is not mistaking the recipient for a member of the target group, and provided the use is literal.

The Neutral Applicability Condition is based on the distinction between the reference or extension of a term and the set of entities to which it applies correctly, which don’t necessarily overlap. It allows us to keep as slurs group pejoratives whose reference is identical to the set to which they apply correctly (like most ethnical slurs). But it also allows us to include group pejoratives whose reference is

<sup>17</sup> See Haslanger (2012).

<sup>18</sup> Again, in the literal use described by Jeshion (2013).

<sup>19</sup> See Ashwell (2016) for arguments on why this is not a good idea.

more restrictive (i.e., conditional) than the group of people to which they apply correctly: ‘slut’ applies correctly to all women, but it only refers to women that behave in a certain way. This Condition grounds BDR2:

*BD2*: the set of slurs is identical with the set of group pejoratives that apply correctly to members of an objectively identifiable, neutral group.

In focusing on applicability instead of reference, BDR2 allow us to include as slurs gender pejoratives like ‘slut’ and ‘bitch’. However, BDR2 also inherits the problems of BD-restrictive, and it is still unsatisfactory for those of us that think that political or sport-related pejoratives are not slurs.

For many, this is as close as we can get to a proper definition of slurs. However, I want to propose that adding an extra requirement can help get a more refined definition of ‘slur’ that helps with the problems of BD-restrictive and explain away hard cases.

#### 4 The [+derogatory] register

BDR1 and BDR2 characterize slurs as group pejoratives for members of objectively identifiable, neutral groups. However, they classify political or sport-team group pejoratives as slurs, a classification I am not happy with. On the other hand, we would want our definition to provide an answer to questions about hard cases: why does “JAP” sounds as a slur? Why some political pejoratives resonate as slurs but some other don’t? Why is ‘shrink’ not a slur but ‘pig’ (in the Black Lives Matter usage) seems to be almost so? Why is ‘gay’ not a slur but ‘faggot’ is?

At this point, I want to introduce the basics of a novel approach to slur meaning: the register-based theory. The theory is a case application of a broader theory of type-meaning, according to which meaning (particularly the meaning of certain words) is not exhausted by truth-conditional content, conventional implicatures or presuppositions. In teaching a foreigner the meaning of ‘Hello!’ you would not point to the truth-conditional content or the expressive dimension of the word. Instead, you would explain that it is the word English-speakers use to greet newcomers. To give the meaning of some words, then, requires appealing to some extra elements (in this case, a use-theoretical aspect of meaning).<sup>20</sup> This replicates in a more complex way in some other words. In showing a foreigner the difference in meaning between ‘shit’, ‘poo’ and ‘excrement’ you would start by informing that all refer to the same worldly entity (their truth-conditional contribution). But you would also warn about the fact that the first one is very informal and to be avoided in formal contexts, that the second is expected in contexts involving children, that the last one is adequate in scientific contexts. These further considerations pertain to the sociolinguistic notion of *register*,<sup>21</sup> part of the metadata associated to some words that does not affect their

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<sup>20</sup> See Diaz-Legaspe, Liu, and Stainton (2019) for details.

<sup>21</sup> Halliday (1973) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). See Predelli (2013, ch. 5) for its use in philosophy of language.

truth-conditional content, but whose ignorance signals linguistic incompetence.<sup>22</sup> Some words are thus marked or *registered*: they belong to register categories whose main role is to indicate the conversational contexts<sup>23</sup> in which they are expected, tolerated or prohibited.

The register-based approach to meaning claims that the type-meaning of some words comprises the register categories to which they belong, besides the usual elements. Terms like ‘vulgar’, ‘scientific’ and ‘juvenile’, which often appear to the left of the dictionary entries of some terms, name the register categories to which these words belong. Here, I will symbolize them using brackets (to underscore the fact that they are names for register categories, not descriptors) with a  $\mp$  sign indicating their value.

Register is a feature that words gain or lose over time. Interestingly though, most registered words are thus marked from the beginning. In connection to this, registered words often have ‘doublets’, words that make the same truth-conditional contribution they do, but are either allowed in every conversational context (non-registered doublets) or have a different pattern of acceptability (differently registered doublets). This is due to the fact that, typically, registered terms emerge in response to a new practice, a new institutionalized way of doing things that results from sociopolitical and/or economic changes in evolving societies. For instance, a society in which social hierarchies rapidly distance from each other may require new practices for entertaining, dressing and addressing people in order to differentiate the new social stratum. Doing these mundane things differently marks the new social structure and places agents in the new social class. These new practices also impose linguistic demands: if the correct term to address a woman so far was, say, ‘madmoiselle’, women in the higher stratum now have to be addressed differently, say, with ‘ma dame’. The term ‘ma dame’, and its offspring ‘madame’ and ‘madam’, are thus from the beginning registered as polite and respectful ways to address women, with their use restricted to formal gatherings. Registered words are often the linguistic response to the emergence to a new practice, and emerge in contrast to other words thus far used unrestrictedly.

The register-based approach also explains why pejoratives and slurs are grouped together: most pejoratives and slurs are marked as [+vulgar] and [+slang], which makes them either unacceptable or barely tolerated in many conversational contexts. However, according to my take on this theory, slurs are marked as [+derogatory] whereas the rest of pejoratives are not. This register alerts the speaker of the fact that words thus marked are unacceptable in most conversational contexts in a deeper way than terms registered as [+vulgar]. While words marked as [+vulgar] can be insulting and cause offense, use of [+derogatory] terms comes hand in hand with a despise of the targeted group that goes beyond mere dislike and has a strong sociopolitical aspect. Hence, words registered as [+derogatory] are only appropriate

<sup>22</sup> Notice that register does not dole registered words with the ability to convey an extra content above their truth-conditional content or to express emotions or attitudes.

<sup>23</sup> The expression ‘conversational context’ refers to a situation singled out by social components: conversational parties and their kind of relation, medium, type of interaction, physical setting, previous conversation, etc.

in conversational contexts where participants approve of insulting a target group or are indifferent about doing so.

We have then arrived to my intended definition of slurs:

*D*: the set of slurs is identical with the set of group pejoratives that apply to members of an objectively identifiable, neutral group and are registered as [+derogatory].

According to *D*, the paradigmatic ‘spic’, the N-word and ‘kike’ classify as slurs, as do the gendered ‘slut’, ‘faggot’ and ‘bitch’. In contrast, group pejoratives directed at sports-team fans or political party supporters are, for the most part, registered as [+vulgar] and [+slang] but not as [+derogatory], and should not be considered slurs.

However, *D* might leave us with more questions than before. After all, it heavily relies on the [+derogatory] register and its difference with [+vulgar], both raising important questions: why is the utterance of a [+vulgar] term less damaging than the utterance of a [+derogatory] term? Isn’t ad hoc to distinguish slurs from group pejoratives just by endowing the formers with a membership to a register category denied to the latter? Isn’t it circular to claim that slurs are derogatory because they are [+derogatory]? In what sense is that illuminating of the kind of offense caused by their utterance? Last, how does *D* explain hard cases?

The definition is now complete, though; there is nothing else to add. In order to clarify further what being registered as [+derogatory] implies and get answers to these questions, we have to step outside the boundaries of philosophy of language.

#### 4.1 Slurs and dominance

According to the register-based approach, slurs are characteristically registered as [+derogatory]. In what follows I claim that this register category is, so to speak, “imprinted” on words that emerge and are used in concrete sociopolitical circumstances, provided a particular relation is held between users and recipients.

Slurs are not just pejorative terms targeting identifiable neutral groups. They occur in the context of a particular type of social tie between the community of speakers using the slur (call them *Ss*) and the targeted group (call them *Gs*). In all cases, the relation between *Ss* and *Gs* involves marginalization, subordination, oppression and/or discrimination. Of course, all of these terms are extremely complex. For the purposes of this paper I will use then the intentionally vague notion of *dominance* as a placeholder for the set of complex relations between *Ss* and *Gs*. By ‘dominance’ I will refer loosely to the relation between two groups of people such that one (the ‘dominant’) dominates the other (the ‘dominated’). Slurs are, then, the names used by members of *S* to address or refer to the members of *G*, by definition an objectively identifiable neutral group. Typically, *S*’s are in a dominating position over *Gs*, but this is not always the case: there are cases in which members of the dominated group forge a pejorative name for its dominant group,<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Following Matsuda (1993, pp. 24–26) this would be an expected reaction: the abuse received from *Ss* (or even from some *Ss*) cause *Gs* to treat all *Ss* with suspicion in the best case, and with retaliative negative emotions in the worst.

giving raise to what can be called ‘retaliative’ slurs. Hence, retaliative slurs are pejorative group terms for the members of a neutral group that occur in the context of a dominance relation, even though, in these cases, it is the *dominated* group which plays the role of slur-users (S), placing the dominant group as Gs (targets). Retaliative slurs (like Latin-American ‘gringo’ or ‘yanqui’) are a clear indicators of how some complex aspects of slurs depend on equally complex dynamics of dominance relations.

It may be pointed out that not all terms classified as slurs anchor on dominance relations. For example, although there clearly was (is?) a dominance relation between users of the N-word and ‘kike’ over African-Americans and Jews, in what sense are Chinese or Hispanic people dominated by users of ‘chink’ or ‘spic’? The same question can be posed diachronically: terms like ‘boche’ are nowadays considered slurs, even though there is no longer a dominance relation between British and Germans, the original users and targets of the term.<sup>25</sup> Can the register survive the demise of the dominance relation? These objections demand for a further clarification of the notion of *dominance*.

## 4.2 Varieties of dominance

‘Dominance’ works in this paper as a placeholder for a variety of relations sharing certain features<sup>26</sup>:

- (i) *Group-to-group relation*: Although there can be dominance between individuals, here we focus exclusively on dominance as a relation between groups.
- (ii) *Power imbalance*: Dominance involves a status imbalance between both parts; the dominant group has more power of a certain kind than the dominated group.
- (iii) *Arbitrary power*: This status imbalance subjects the dominated group to the arbitrary power of the dominant group, where ‘arbitrary’ refers to being unchecked.
- (iv) *Coercion*: The dominant group has the power to determine some or all aspects of the life of the members of the dominated group in an unjust way or fostering inequity, by the way of threat or coercion, and in the worst case, by actively exercising power.

Dominance relations come in different flavors. In some cases, dominance is absolute, as in the case of slaves and slave-owners. In some other cases, it takes the form of unjust or oppressive economical or political measures. However, by themselves, these relations are not yet sufficient to justify the issuing of slurs. When it comes to dominance relations conducive to the emergence and use of slurs, one more feature has to be added:

<sup>25</sup> I thank the anonymous referee to point to me to this paradigmatic example.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Skinner (2008), Pettit (1997), Lovett (2010) and Honohan (2014).



- (v) *Social discrimination*: The dominant group discriminates against the members of the dominated group in the social dimension, based on a representation of the members of this group as inferior, and/or an attitude of hostility of contempt against them, and/or a bias against them, and/or a statistical belief justifying unequal differential treatment.

The kind of social discrimination I have in mind is observable on the way members of the dominant group behave towards the members of the dominated group. Most saliently, ridiculing or mocking these individuals, i.e., making jokes based on their stereotypical representation (if any), are either permitted or merely not punished among the members of the dominant group. This kind of discrimination promotes a de-humanizing treatment of members of the dominated group, which are instead perceived as mere instances of a social kind, seen only through the lenses of stereotype. Discrimination can materialize in a myriad of practices, grossly grouped together as cases of marginalization (where members of G are pushed to the outer skirts of society and considered as out-groups) or normalization (where they are still considered part of the S-community, but are subjected to normalizing social measures, that is, actions and sanctions imposed on them aimed at adjusting their behavior or self-perception to what is expected from them). Social discrimination, then, has harmful consequences on the members of the target groups, but it is also morally wrong independently of its contingent effects: it prevents treating members of these groups as worthy individuals, in what constitutes a lack of respect and an attack to their dignity as human beings.<sup>27</sup>

I claim that these dominance relations are responsible for imprinting the [+derogatory] register category on terms used by Ss for Gs. Does this mean that dominance relations are necessary and sufficient conditions for registering as [+derogatory] words emerging in them? Answering this question requires digging deeper in the way words are marked into this register category. As registered terms, [+derogatory] words also emerge as a response for the linguistic need brought by a new practice. Also, they often have truth-conditional doublets that are either unregistered or marked into another register category. In this particular case, the establishment of a dominance system places a growing strain between the two groups and the increasing need of setting a differential distance between them. The groups redefine their identities within this framework, and start seeing each other through the lenses of ‘them versus us’. Hand in hand with other aspects of life that start reflecting this tension, the language used so far to refer to members of the other group requires of new alternatives that also reflect this new perception and social setting. In some cases, whatever term was used by Ss to refer to Gs is tainted and becomes derogatory, but more often than not, a new term emerges in contrast to the previous one; one that is to be used in the context of the practices involved by the dominance relation, that marks the new strained distance between both groups. The process is often accompanied by the rejection of Gs to be called by the new term. The new term reflects then the way the targeted group is perceived within the

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<sup>27</sup> Eidelson (2015).

emerging oppressive system, and its use marks the place Ss and Gs have in the new social order.

If this is so, dominance relations are necessary for the emergence of [+derogatory] words: the way I understand this register category, [+derogatory] words only emerge from dominance-related practices. Thus, pejoratives for sport teams, professionals and alike, offensive and demeaning as they are, don't really count as slurs. But it is easy to see why someone could be misled into think they are: sports and other areas of social life mimic dominance relations without being really so. At the end of the day there is no real dominance and hence these words may register as [+vulgar], but not as [+derogatory]. Pejoratives for professional groups ('shrink') are marked as [+vulgar] but not [+derogatory] for similar reasons.

We can turn now to whether emerging from dominance relations is a sufficient condition for a term to be [+derogatory]. This is tricky, since, according to the picture above, there are in fact words coined and used by Ss to refer to Gs that are clearly unregistered or differently registered. Take for example the oppressive relation between men and women and the term 'woman' as the neutral, default choice to refer to females within this setting.<sup>28</sup> The existence of neutral terms for Gs coined by Ss seems to cancel the possibility of dominance relations being sufficient conditions for the marking of [+derogatory] words. However, what makes a word [+derogatory] is not merely the *relation* between the group that creates and uses it and the group targeted by it, but also the *practice* to which it responds. Hence, only word coined by Ss *as a response to the needs brought by new dominance relations* held toward Gs are marked as 'derogatory'. The new term emerges in contrast with words already in use by Ss for Gs that don't reflect the perspective carried on by the new situation. Back to the example, it is interesting to note that the etymology of the term 'woman' anchors in the composed late Old English word 'wimman', an alteration of 'wifman', compounded by 'wif' (root of 'wife' and indicator of servitude) and 'man' ('human being', later specifically 'male adult').<sup>29</sup> The neutral term for females, thus, started as a word indicating the female role in the patriarchal structure, issuing from the need of distinguishing human beings born to lead (males) from those born to serve (females). Over time, the term became the neutral, default lexical choice to refer to females. However, the raise of new values like private property and the new ways to measure male worth and honor by their possessions birthed an emerging form of oppression: one in which women's sexual choices are viewed as a measure for the respect owed to the males "responsible" for them (relatives and husbands). Together with the emergence of this new practice comes the need of a new word to refer to women as perceived within this new form of oppression, in order to differentiate "good" women (those protecting male's honor by repressing their sexual needs) from "bad" women. Thus, terms like 'slut' are coined, emerging from the beginning as [+derogatory] and in contrast to the previous neutral term, 'woman'.<sup>30</sup> If this is so, every term coined by Ss to refer to

<sup>28</sup> I thank the anonymous referee for this example.

<sup>29</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary.

<sup>30</sup> For a difference between marginalizing and normalizing slurs see Diaz-Legaspe (2018).

Gs in the context of an emerging practice of dominance of some kind is bound to be [+derogatory]. Dominance relations are not only necessary but also sufficient to mark this register onto words.

Thus, group terms that emerge and gain currency among Ss to refer to G-members in the context of a dominance practice register as [+derogatory] - regardless of whether Ss are dominant or dominated, and regardless of whether they were previously neutral or brand new words.<sup>31</sup> A common mistake at this point would be to think that these dominance relations are part of the truth-conditional content of slurs, conventionally implicated by their use or, relatedly, that the speaker has to be aware of the origin and usage of the term in these particular settings in order to count as linguistically competent. None of these requirements are part of the register-based approach to the type-meaning of slurs, which only requires the speaker to know that the term is [+derogatory] to ascribe competence. In the same way, speakers don't need to know about other metadata of the words they use, like their etymology, to be competent in their use. As for register, they only need to be efficient in distinguishing the conversational contexts in which registered words are allowed or rejected. Consider [+vulgar] words: in most cases, their origin traces back to a non-vulgar word, and it is certain events in the development of societies and languages what marks them as [+vulgar].<sup>32</sup> However, all the competent speaker needs to know is that the word is registered as [+vulgar] and consequently, that its use should be avoided in certain social contexts.

Dominance relations help explain why slurs are so damaging and offensive (in the sense given to the term above). Particularly, they explains why they are damaging and offensive even when they are used by incompetent speakers or warmheartedly.<sup>33</sup> The choice of these words reinforces and strengthens the dominance relations and systemic patterns of inequity they involve. This is not an exclusive trait of [+derogatory] words, but of registered words in general. Coined in response to a new practice, their ensuing usage systematically reproduces the main features of it. In the midst of our dealings with others, registered words are essential to help us fit into, or even shape, socially structured situations. Like etiquette and manners, they place agents in social roles associated with underlying representations of the participants, which they contribute to revive: opening the door for a woman places her immediately in the role of the vulnerable lady in need of help from a gentleman, indirectly reinforcing the associated patriarchal imaginary. Likewise, using the Spanish 'Usted' (a [+formal] second person pronoun) -by any speaker and in any situation- automatically invests the addressee with a position of respect and/

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<sup>31</sup> Bergen (2016, ch.10) and Nunberg (2018).

<sup>32</sup> Consider 'fuck', apparently rooted in a German word for 'strike' or 'move back and forth'. One of its first appearances goes back to 16th century, in a manuscript of Cicero's *De Officiis*, where an annotation by a monk reads "O d fuckin Abbot". Most likely, the author of the comment intended to express his extreme dismay, but since using the word 'damned' was forbidden due to religious implications, he preferred this other word. The expression got its connotation from its hinted relation to the other that was tabooed back then. (Mohr 2013). Bergen (2016) adds that pejoratives, profanities and expletives are for the most part based on sexual, religious, bodily or social aspects of human life.

<sup>33</sup> Diaz-Legaspe and Stainton, (2018).

or distance, regardless of the communicative intentions of the speaker, her attitudes or emotions. In turn, the use of [+derogatory] terms place the referent at one or the other term of a dominance relation, no matter what speaker or recipient feel or believe, indirectly reinforcing the dominance relation that imprinted the register onto the word.<sup>34</sup>

The use of a slur immediately shapes the relation between speaker and recipient by placing the latter in a position of inferiority, reproducing at least part of the oppressive practice of original Ss against Gs. It is precisely because [+derogatory] terms are not merely offensive, but debasing in the worst way, that speakers typically use them as subordinating weapons.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, there are plenty studies proving that, unlike other profanities, slurs are harmful both physically and emotionally.<sup>36</sup> Even in non-literal, extended usage, they bring to the fore stereotypical features associated to the original targets in the original dominance relation, which, together with the assumption that there is something wrong with these features, make slur usage perpetuate the idea that belonging to the targeted group is bad.

The fact that slurs retain their derogatory force under negation or modals, in conditionals, and in speech reports has fascinated philosophers of language. I will not elaborate this point here, but I believe that considering slurs as registered terms help with these problems too. Since register is part of the type-meaning of the words, it does not just disappear under embedding. Register dictates over the social impact words have in each social setting. In the case of [+derogatory] words, it justifies offense and reinforces dominance or discriminatory relations. It follows that no matter what the linguistic context in which [+derogatory] terms are embedded, their utterance will cause the same (or a very similar) impact. Thus, a Hispanic person is entitled to feel as offended by ‘Maria is not a spic, she is Italian’, ‘If Maria were a spic, she would eat enchiladas all day’, or ‘John said that Maria is a spic’ than she would be by ‘Maria is a spic’. Moreover, the speaker would be held responsible (and probably reprehended) for using the offensive term if these sentences were uttered in conversational contexts forbidding [+derogatory] words, especially when neutral terms and euphemisms are at hand.<sup>37</sup> Again, this happens too with other kinds of registered terms: the insertion of the [+juvenile] ‘poo’ in sentences make them apt for contexts involving children, whereas substituting it for the [+vulgar] ‘shit’ makes them automatically unsuitable for these and more apt for conversations with very close friends.

<sup>34</sup> There are cases in which the referent of the slur is not part of the conversation: non-Jewish interlocutors that use the term ‘kike’ are surely not placing one another in any inferior position. Instead, they are placing someone else in that role, even if that person/s is not present: whoever they are referring to with the term ‘kike’. This differs significantly from a second person pronoun like ‘Usted’, which is always used to address the recipient within the conversation. I thank the anonymous referee for this observation.

<sup>35</sup> See Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018) for an approach to slur usage as a speech act that alters conversational roles by disbalancing power.

<sup>36</sup> See Bergen (2016).

<sup>37</sup> See Bolinger (2017).

### 4.3 Hard cases revisited

More important for the aim of this paper is the fact that the register-based approach and D help, first, establishing a divide between slurs and not slurs that fits better my understanding (and hopefully yours) of what slurs are, and second, understanding better whether hard cases are slurs or not, and in the worst case, why they are hard to classify.

Sociopolitical relations like dominance are complex: they develop, grow and hopefully dissolve over time, and may be inherited by communities other than the originals. It is only natural that this fuzziness translates to the classification of words as slurs, making register be gained and lost over time and contexts. We already saw that D leaves out of the set of slurs professional or sport-related group pejoratives, for there is no relation of domination between users and targets, other than metaphorically and inside the sports field. Their use may offend recipients, but it does not reinforce any unjust or unequal systemic setting. The same thing happens to group pejoratives for political or ideological parties. However, context plays a big role in considering a word [+derogatory]. Thus, in contexts where the labeled group has been part of dominance relations, the term may be considered a slur. Particularly, words for political parties responsible of acts of governmental violence against a neutral groups may become slurs. ‘Commie’, short for the neutral ‘communist’, registered as [+derogatory] insofar it emerged from practices where a communist dictatorship oppressed or persecuted other groups. ‘Nazi’ is another example of a short term for a neutral political group which, in virtue of infamous events in the past, registers as [+derogatory] for the same reason. In contrast, ‘alt lib’ does not emerge in the context of an overt practice of dominance or oppression, and hence is not registered as [+derogatory].

In the same way, D gives a clear sense of why terms for people with disabilities and psychiatric disorders should be considered slurs, after emerging from practices where they are treated systematically as second-class citizens and, in some cases, are systematically deprived of their rights.

Not only context, but time is also key in the emergence, classification and demise of slurs. Dominance relations are fluid and change historically, and so does the membership to the [+derogatory] register category. Since the status as [+derogatory] depends on the dominance relations in which words are imprinted, it is only logical that this register is as dynamic as the relations involved. It makes sense to think that slurs have a life of their own alongside the historical dynamics of their original practice. Thus, a word used by Ss to refer to Gs at the very beginning of a dominance relation may not be considered a slur at that time, but more likely will develop into one as the dominance is more strongly consolidated. The fact that a relation of dominance can fade out in time explains why the register can do so. In some cases, the empowering of members of G as a strong community as a reaction to the dominance explains in part why a slur ceases to be such. Take ‘queer’ or ‘gay’ for example: on the one hand, a relaxation of the oppressive practice of the patriarchal society over males that ‘deviate’ from the imposed choice of sexual object has diminished the derogatory force of these terms. On the other hand, the target group has reclaimed the word for in-group use as a badge of honor, so to

speak: it has helped them recognize themselves as an oppressed minority, finding encouragement to build their own identity and forging strong in-group bonds. Eventually, the term is used with pride. It is up to the group whether to allow out-group members to use the term to refer to them. Often, grating permission leads to the demise of the term as [+derogatory]: once the reclaimed use of the term is out there for all to grasp, it usually stops being considered a slur.

In some other cases, the word remains a ‘residual’ slur, so to speak. Even though the original domination relation dissolves, the term can still retain its register and be known to be an outdated slur (like ‘boche’). Slurs can also be inherited: the Spanish ‘franchute’ is used in Latin-America to slur French people, even though the history of both regions does not justify it. The word is rooted in the complex relation between France and Spain and was inherited by the Latin-American descendants of Spanish immigrants. Last, some hard cases can be explained as slurs in the making: ‘pig’ is used by supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement against police officers. But they are not merely protesting against the police force, but against the embodiment of the white entitlement that permits police brutality against African-Americans. Hence, ‘pig’ has the potential of becoming a retaliative slur over time, if it extends from police officers to the community whose values they represent. Relatedly, even though descriptions are not slurs, acronyms like ‘JAP’ may potentially become words of their own, marked as [+derogatory]: used as a noun by people looking down on gender, race and religion, it undermines the self-worth and dignity of the targeted class, contributing to marginalization.

## 5 Conclusion

Even though English speakers believe they have a good grasp of the meaning of the word ‘slur’, divergent opinions on borderline and hard cases evidences that this is not so. This lack of a clear definition working as a criterion for the classification of words as slurs is particularly problematic for academics researching in areas as diverse as philosophy of language, social philosophy, feminist philosophy, political sciences and law.

This paper aimed to provide a clearer grasp of what slurs are: I have offered four definitions of the term, all equally useful. However, I have also tried to motivate the reader to accept the one I particularly like the most, framed in the register-based approach. This definition has the virtue of explaining why slurs are so slippery, and why a proper definition is so elusive. It helps understand the relation between slurs and politics, economics and discrimination. It helps understand why we hesitate to classify some terms as slurs but we are so certain about others. Last, it contributes to understanding the historical dynamics of slurs, and the historical instability of the status of *slur*.

Slurs are registered words. This means that their type-meaning include their membership to several register categories that, in turn, determine appropriate contexts of use for them. In particular, slurs are singled out by their membership of a particular register category ([+derogatory]) that helps explain all the concerns of philosophers of language. This sets apart slurs as a lexical set. Their emergence and

use in dominance relations help understand why slurs get to be registered as [+derogatory]. A term used within a dominance relation gets tainted by the social burden and political implications of this relation. By using it, no matter her intentions, attitudes or beliefs, the speaker becomes complicit with the status-quo of the relation, and contributes to its reinforcement. Because of that, using these terms goes beyond offense (although they are, generally, offensive in the sense coined above): it is taking a political stance.

**Acknowledgements** This paper emerges as part of a research project conducted in Western University and partially financed by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada through grants to R. J. Stainton. It owes much to many people: the people in the slurs reading group of the Philosophy Department in Western University (Rob Stainton, Chang Liu, Jiangtian Li, Mike Korngut and Julia Lei), the Philosophy of Language and Linguistics group of the SADAF institute in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Eleonora Orlando and Andres Saab, Ramiro Caso, Nicolas Lo Guercio, Alfonso Losada, among others). Comments of another paper presented at the DEX VI Conference in UC Davis inspired and helped put the last details on the original ideas. I thank for this Adam Sennet, David Copp, Tina Rulli, Roberta Millstein, Adrian Currie, Ram Neta, and Tyrus Fisher.

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