



# A Puzzle about the Extension of Slurs: Defending a Conventional Implicature Approach

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November 18, 2021

# Overview

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- 2 The three cases
- 3 Theories of slurs
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# What are slurs?

**Slurs** are “words that disparage people on the basis of their membership of a certain group” (Nunberg 2018).

They do not primarily derogate based on the behaviour of an individual but on **behaviour in virtue of belonging to an existing marginalised group** that is referenced.

## The extension puzzle

There are cases where slurs are *not* used based on the targets group membership but on

- presumed membership
- membership + something else
- or where membership is not a criterion

→ the aim is to find a theory that accurately describes and explains the behaviour of slurs with this puzzle in mind

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## Case 1: 'Standard' predicative uses of slurs

Someone from group X (groups based on ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, etc.) is called by a term that references their group membership in a negative way.

- (1) Isaiah is a k\*ke. → antisemitic slur  
(Camp 2018)

## Case 1: 'Standard' predicative uses of slurs

Variations:

- (i) weapon use ("You're a \*\*\*")
- (ii) negated weapon use ("You're not a \*\*\*")

→ in both cases the slur is not used to establish reference, it is only about the negative perspective

→ the derogation stays even in the negated example



## Case 2: GP subset ('not all') uses of slurs

- (2) I would never call a gay guy a f\*ggot, unless he was being a f\*ggot. But not because he's gay.  
(Croom 2015)

Implies that only 'some' members of the group of people (GP<sup>1</sup>) associated with a slur are the intended referents  
→ reference to specific additional behaviour

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<sup>1</sup>term adopted from Technau (2020)

## Case 3: GP extended ('not only') uses of slurs

B made a poster of Spahn, a politician, with the word 'sp\*stic' written across

- (3) A: Hab das Plakat noch nicht ganz verstanden... Geht es darum, dass Spahn unter Spastiken leidet [...] oder geht es darum zu sagen: "Jens Spahn macht seine Politik so schlecht, wie sie sonst nur körperlich Behinderte (Spastiker\*innen) vergeigen könnten". [...]
- B: umgangssprachlich sagt man zu Menschen die man nicht mag, sp\*st. **Ob er an solch einer Krankheit leidet ist mir unbekannt.** (I don't know if [Spahn] is sick.)
- A: Das weiß ich schon. Was ich meine: "Sp\*st" ist nicht beleidigend gegenüber Spahn, sondern gegenüber allen Menschen, die unter der Krankheit leiden und denen damit suggeriert wird, dass sie etwas Schlechtes wären. [...]

Here, the slur usage by B extends beyond GP membership.

## Summary of the three cases

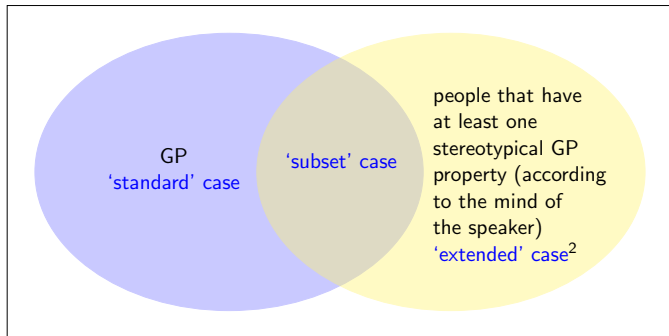


Figure 1: Possible extensions of a slur

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<sup>2</sup>Interpretation of the 'extended' case is part of my analysis.

## What a theory of slurs needs

- explain the prototypical case where the target is in the GP
- allow for readings that are  $\neq$  GP (extension puzzle)
- non-pejorative correlate (NPC) and slur are not co-extensional  
→ e.g. *d\*ke* cannot be substituted by *lesbian*
- the ability to derive that “You’re not a \*\*\*” is still offensive

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## Existing theories of slurs

Current theories either:

- place the derogatory content of a slur in its literal content and work with stereotypes (Croom 2015, Foster 2020), or
- assume a second layer of meaning (non-truth-conditional mechanism is responsible for the derogation (Nunberg 2018, Cepollaro 2015, Camp 2018)).

# Truth-conditional derogation

- the truth-conditional content of a slur is defined in terms of stereotypical GP properties, which warrant derogation (Croom 2015, Foster 2020)
  - stereotypical properties as application condition
  - can account for non-GP reading via stereotypes ✓ and for = GP reading via association with the GP (✓)
- slur and NPC are not co-referential ✓

# Truth-conditional derogation

What about:

the ability to derive that “You’re not a \*\*\*” is still offensive ?

- negating the slur would get rid of the derogation according to their theory because it is all one layer ✗
- there are no people who have negative properties in virtue of their gender, race, sexual orientation etc.
  - the extensions of slurs have to be empty
  - “not \*\*\*” would mean *not nothing* and leads to everything being true of the target (even being in the GP → infelicitous)



## Non-truth-conditional derogation

- the literal content of the slur is the GP and a non-truth-conditional mechanism is responsible for the derogation (conversational implicature, presupposition, conventional implicature)
- negating a slur would only deny the literal content and not the derogative content because meaning that is not at-issue will project (Simons et al. 2010) ✓
- prototypical GP-reading is retained ✓
- slur and NPC are co-referential (except in Camp (2018)) ✗/✓
- do they allow for readings that are  $\neq$  GP ?

## Non-truth-conditional derogation

### Conversational (manner) implicature

Nunberg (2018) proposes that a slur is derogatory because it is a marked alternative to the NPC that is associated with historically negative behaviour towards the GP.

→ Why would X use a slur when the NPC is available? – They must not like the GP.

- not a manner implicature according to Grice (1975)
- co-referentialism clashes with the 3 possible extensions a slur can have (but the NPC cannot) ✗
- the literal content and the implicature make no reference to targets outside the GP ✗

# Non-truth-conditional derogation

## Presupposition

Cepollaro (2015) proposes that a slur describes the target class on the truth-conditional level and conveys via presupposition how the speaker feels about them.

→ *niece* presupposes *having a sister*, \*\*\* presupposes *a negative evaluation*

- logically too dependent on the literal content
- co-referentialism clashes with the 3 possible extensions a slur can have (but the NPC cannot) ✗
- the literal content and the presupposition make no reference to targets outside the GP ✗

# Non-truth-conditional derogation

## Conventional implicature

Camp (2018) exchanges presupposition with a conventional implicature but assumes no co-referentialism with the NPC

→ *damn* conventionally implies *disapproval of the speaker*,

*\*\*\** implies *a negative evaluation by the speaker*

- no co-referentialism by allowing implicated content to be at-issue when GP-membership is in the Common Ground (“You’re a *\*\*\**”) and therefore unnecessary information ✓
- the literal content and the implicature make no reference to targets outside the GP ✗

## Which of the theories can solve the puzzle?

No approach could satisfy both the three possible categories of extensions *and* could explain the projection behaviour/how slurs behave under negation.

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## My proposal for a theory of slurs

For an utterance of “X is a \*\*\*” by a speaker S for a slur \*\*\*:

- (i) Literal content = GP, a set of individuals associated with \*\*\*
- (ii) Conventionally implicated content = *X satisfies at least one feature that S believes is stereotypical for members of GP.*

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→ the literal content is truth-evaluable and can be substituted by the implicated stereotypes when it is relevant, allowing for the three readings of the extension of a slur



## My proposal for a theory of slurs

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→ the literal content is truth-evaluable and can be substituted by the implicated stereotypes when it is relevant, allowing for the three readings of the extension of a slur

→ the implicated content is defined in such a way that negating the implicature denies that the target satisfies at least one feature that the speaker believes is stereotypical for members of the GP, maintaining the belief that GP members (including the target) satisfy those properties and thus still being offensive

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## Solving the extension puzzle: the three cases

### **‘Standard’ predicative uses of slurs**

→ the predication of “k\*ke” of a Jewish person

- literal content (+ at-issue content): anyone who is Jewish
- implicated content derogates target and whole GP by predicating of the target at least one stereotypical feature that the speaker believes is typical for Jewish people

## Solving the extension puzzle: the three cases

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### **Weapon uses of slurs (“You’re a \*\*\*)**

GP membership is in the common ground and the implicated content is at-issue: GP member and whole GP are derogated

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### **Weapon uses of slurs (“You’re a \*\*\*)**

GP membership is in the common ground and the implicated content is at-issue: GP member and whole GP are derogated

### **Negated weapon uses of slurs (“You’re not a \*\*\*)**

The negated at-issue content is: *It is not the case that X satisfies at least one feature that S believes is stereotypical for members of GP*, which still derogates members of GP

## Solving the extension puzzle: the three cases

### GP subset ('not all') uses of slurs

→ the predication of "f\*ggot" of only *some* gay men

- the literal content implies a contradiction (there are gay men who are not gay men), therefore (as the common ground states the target is part of the GP) the conventionally implicated content becomes at-issue
- *S only uses 'f\*ggot' if the target is a gay man AND has at least one property that S considers typical of gay men*
- the negative features still derogate the target(s) by predicating of them at least one stereotypical feature and also restricts possible targets to those GP members where one of those features appears to be 'detected'

## Solving the extension puzzle: the three cases

### **GP extended ('not only') uses of slurs**

→ the predication of “sp\*stic” of of a politician, while the speaker admits to not considering the target a member of the GP

- literal content: anyone who is physically disabled, but the target is known not to be a member of that GP
- the implicated content is at-issue
- the speaker utters something that is literally false and conventionally implicates that the target satisfies at least one derogatory stereotype the prototype is based on that the speaker believes is typical of the GP → enough to warrant slur-usage

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## Summary

- I presented new data that conflict with previous assumptions about slurs → the extension puzzle
- existing theories were analysed with the conclusion that only Camp (2018) comes close to making the right predictions
- substituting her implicated content for a prototype with a list of stereotypical features the speaker associates with the GP ensured the three possible extensions of slurs
- the new approach can accommodate the extensions and explain how slurs derogate, assign truth-conditions, retain the connection to the GP and predict the projection behaviour
- may help theories of reclaiming or blocking/countering of slurs

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