Naïve & Non-Derogatory Slurs:
Delimiting the Linguistic Community
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1   Starting Platitudes

- Slurs have two aspects of meaning (i) identifying a target group and (ii) derogating them.[1]

- The reason to avoid using slurs is that (a) as a linguistic fact, the term t derogates the group, and (b) as a moral fact, we should avoid derogating them.

- Whether a term is derogatory...

  - is independent of uptake in a given context of utterance. *(Uptake Independence)*
  - does not depend on speaker intent *(Derogatory Autonomy)*
  - depends on the broader sociolinguistic context. *(Social-Context Dependence)*
  - is language-dependent, and varies between linguistic communities. *(Locality)*

- A speaker's ability to use and understand a language L has two components: her *idiolect* (representation of the literal meanings of lexical items of L), and her *world knowledge*.

- She makes a *linguistic error* only if the meaning she assigns to an expression t of L deviates from the meaning of t in L.

2   Disagreement

Assume that two speakers A and B both agree that one should avoid derogating the group identified by t, but disagree about whether t is derogatory. There are three broad possibilities:

1. *non-slurring*: A is right, t is not derogatory in their language L.

2. *ignorant slurring*: B is right, t is derogatory, and A made a linguistic mistake.

   - Naïve – children, second-language learners
   - Obtuse – uncontested slurs occurring in compound expressions/idioms
   - Stubborn – linguistic holdouts who insist people are mistaken to think t is derogatory

3. *speaking past* – A and B are members of different linguistic groups; while t is derogatory in L, it is not in L*.

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[1] I'm staying neutral whether 'meaning' here is semantic or wider.

3   Languages & Linguistic Errors

The Problem: Both *ignorant slurring* and *speaking past* involve speakers whose ideolects deviate from others' about whether t is derogatory. We want to say that *stubborn* speakers make a linguistic mistake; t is in fact derogatory and so they should avoid it. But dominant views about what *language* is makes it very difficult to distinguish in a principled way between stubborn and speaking past.

Languages aren't monolithic; even English is not one but many languages, with many hundreds of regional dialects (microlanguages) and varieties.

- L* *extends* L iff insofar as they overlap, lexical items in L have the same meaning as lexical items in L*, and L* has some lexical items not in L.

- L* *deviates* from L iff the lexical items in L and L* significantly overlap, but there are at least some items for which L assigns a meaning that conflicts with the meaning assigned by L*.

Prescriptivists (who take the grammar, lexicon, pronunciation, etc of L) to have normative force over speakers of a deviating L* are mistaken.

Speakers of L can have practical reasons to insist that speakers of a deviating L* abandon it, but stubborn L*-speakers do not make a *linguistic* error.

what we need: To vindicate B's prescriptivism about whether a stubborn speaker A should avoid t, we need a characterization of the relation between speakers and languages that says that (i) A clearly speaks the same language L as B with respect to the meaning of t, and so (ii) A is making a linguistic error in taking t to be non-derogatory, and this characterization (iii) must be consistent with the UPTAKE INDEPENDENCE, DEROGATORY AUTONOMY, SOCIAL-CONTEXT DEPENDENCE, and LOCALITY of derogatory terms.

4   Individuals, Languages, and Linguistic Communities

4.1   EXTREME INTERNALISM

The linguistic meaning of t is given by the speaker's idiolect (her internal representation of t.)

→ L is something A *constructs* over time, and cannot be mistaken about. (2) and (3) are both mere differences.

→ Accommodates drift and LOCALITY and UPTAKE INDEPENDENCE, but fails DEROGATORY AUTONOMY and in tension with SOCIAL CONTEXT-DEPENDENCE

4.2 Extreme Externalism

> The linguistic meaning of *t* is given by the lexicon of the language L; if an L-speaker's idiolect deviates, she makes a linguistic mistake.

Who are the L-speakers?

- Speakers have incomplete and inaccurate knowledge of their language, so can't individuate by ideolects; L-speaker if disposed to defer to L-speaking linguistic authorities.

- A makes a linguistic error only if the meaning she assigns to *t* conflicts with *the meaning assigned by those whose uses she aims to coordinate with or defer to*.

Setting conventional meanings-in-L:

- Static: whether *t* is derogatory in L is a stable/timeless fact about L that speakers can discover, like referents of natural kind terms

- Causal chain: whether *t* is derogatory depends on whether it was originally introduced as a derogatory term.

Problems:
1. Stubborn speakers aren't disposed to defer to others about *t*.
2. Can't accommodate pejoration or amelioration.

Tentative lesson:

- Derogatory origins or etymological links are neither necessary nor sufficient for *t* to be a derogatory term. Etymology is like Latin grammar: a cross-linguistic consideration that does not give us a reason to change current linguistic practices.

- Widespread ignorance has a strong effect on which terms are derogatory: mistaken belief that *t* involves a derogatory term make it the case that *t* is, if widespread enough.

4.3 Moderate Community-based determination

> The linguistic meaning of *t* in L is determined by the conventions of the community that speaks L; if a speaker in this community has an idiolect that deviates, she makes a linguistic mistake.

- socio-linguistic conventions secure common meanings and use via disapprobation practices, and there are practical and moral reasons for this, so a speaker who deviates is rightly criticised. →*secures some normativity*

- new meanings propagate through the community at different rates, and sub-communities speak 'varieties' of L. →*accommodates drift, social-context dependence*

- BUT: It's vague, indeterminate, or interest-sensitive where the boundaries of a linguistic community are (vs. the microlanguages).

5 Upshots

If we can't supply a notion that vindicates B's prescriptivism, insisting to stubborn speakers that the linguistic meaning of *t really is* derogatory—and that they are mistaken to think otherwise—is no better than the prescriptivism of insisting that others use one's preferred dialect.

- It will end up being indeterminate, in some cases, whether *t* is a derogatory.

- Are the reasons a stubborn speaker should avoid contested terms (examples: 'retarded', 'Oriental', 'gypsy', 'redskin') different in kind from the reasons an American should avoid using the American-English meanings of 'lemonade' or 'biscuit' when in England?

Two ways to think about what we're doing when we tell stubborn speakers to avoid slurs:
1. Correcting their linguistic mistake and insisting they update their use to match.
2. Offering moral reasons to abandon their dialect in favor of ours.

tentatively: (1) and (2) come apart more dramatically if you locate the badness of slurs in their *linguistic meaning* rather than in the social practices surrounding their use. The latter aren't affected by the considerations raised here.