Rethinking the Slur/Neutral Counterpart Relationship: Towards a Prototype Semantics of Slurs

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People who use slurs often say things like this:

(1) Obama is black, but he isn’t a n*****.
(2) My boss is Jewish, but he isn’t a k***.
(3) I’m gay, but I’m not a f*****.

They also often say things like this:

(4) I don’t tip n*****s. [said to an Arab taxi driver]
(5) They should tax the k***s on Wall Street [said about investment bankers]
(6) The president won’t let f*****s in the military. [said about an executive ban on transgender military personnel]

Indeed, some reflection (or a few minutes on Twitter) reveals that utterances of sentences like (1)-(6) are unfortunately commonplace, making up much of everyday slur use.

In this paper, I motivate and defend a view on which commonplace utterances like (1)-(6) feature semantically basic uses of slurs. Specifically, I offer a prototype semantics on which slurs, like other category expressions, lexically encode prototype structures, theoretically represented as sets of more or less stereotypical features, satisfaction of which admits of degree. On this view, two uses of a slur have the same semantic content when and because they encode the same ranked set of stereotypical features. Sentences (1), (2), and (3), then, feature uses of slurs with the same semantic contents as the uses of slurs in (4), (5), (6), respectively.

Most theorists are committed to the view that the uses of slurs in (1)-(6) must be nonbasic, or somehow semantically derived. This is because they analyze slurs in terms of their putative “neutral counterparts.” Putative neutral counterparts (hereafter, PNCs) are nonpejorative (social) group expressions that bear an intuitively close semantic relationship to paradigmatic slurs. For example, the intuitive neutral counterparts of ’n*****’, ’k***’, and ’f*****’ are ‘black’, ‘Jewish’, and ‘gay’, respectively. Most theorists, then, hold that the semantic contents of PNCs provide a reliable proxy for, or otherwise help fix, the semantic contents of the corresponding slurs. Call this the proxy assumption. A strong version of the proxy assumption is what Adam Croom (2015) calls coreferentialism, according to which slurs and their PNCs are coextensional and truth-

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1. This paper is about slurs, and unfortunately mentions many of them. Slurs are, by their nature, very offensive expressions. To reduce potential for harm, I have censored all of the slurs mentioned in this abstract with asterisks (*). Examples (1) and (4) are borrowed from Jeshion (2013a: 314-5).
2. Other prototype views of slurs have been given by Croom (2011, 2015) and Neufeld (manuscript).
3. Of course, speakers could use a neutral counterpart in an offensive way, as with a contemptuous intonation. Likewise, speakers could use a slur in an inoffensive way if the term has been appropriated within their community. For the purposes of this paper, I’ll set these kinds of uses aside.
conditionally equivalent. If slurs and PNCs are coreferential, then when slurs are predicted of a subset of the individuals picked out by their PNCs, as in (1)-(3), or to individuals who are not picked out by their PNCs, as in (4)-(6), the most plausible thing to say is that those slurs are being used in a polysemous or otherwise semantically derived way.

The proxy assumption and especially coreferentialism have obvious intuitive appeal. In particular, they offer elegant accounts of the intuitive relationship between paradigmatic slurs and their PNCs, which theorists have in turn used to explain a wide variety of phenomena. But coreferentialism also faces serious challenges. In particular, I argue that it has trouble accounting for intuitively slur-like expressions which behave just like paradigmatic slurs in the context of certain kinds of denials. The prototype semantics I propose better explains this behavior.

On my proposal, slurs lexically encode sets of similar but differentially ranked stereotypical features. That is, I propose that the semantic relationship between slurs and PNCs concerns, first, which prototypical features are encoded in the set and, second, how those features are ranked within the set. But even if, as I argue, most slurs and PNCs are not strictly coreferential, it does not follow that there is not significant overlap in their extensions. Indeed, the more similar the ranked sets of features encoded in a slur and its PNC are, the more overlap we should expect in their extensions. This explains why some slurs, especially paradigmatic ones, seem very closely related to their PNCs; some seem less closely related to their PNCs; and some, like ‘nerd’ and ‘chav’ do not seem to have any PNC at all. Consequently, the view affirms an important, if nonstandard, semantic relationship between slurs and their PNCs.

This relationship seems to generalize to other category expressions, including, for example, the movie genre terms ‘romantic comedy’ and ‘chick flick’. Many movies that are called ‘romantic comedies’ are also called ‘chick flicks’. However, some reflection on usage again suggests that the two expressions do not mean the same thing. For example, consider the 2016 remake of the film Ghostbusters, which featured an all-female cast. Though many people said things like (7) upon the movie’s release, it is doubtful that anyone said (8):

(7) The new Ghostbusters is a chick flick
(8) The new Ghostbusters is a romantic comedy.

This is easily explained if, as I propose, ‘chick flick’ and ‘romantic comedy’ encode similar but distinct sets of ranked features. While many of the features plausibly encoded in ‘romantic comedy’ are also plausibly encoded in ‘chick flick’, the features that are intuitively most important to membership in ‘chick flick’—e.g., being a film made (exclusively) for women and (so) not made for men—are not as important to membership in ‘romantic comedy’. Indeed, the relative importance of these features seems critical for understanding why so many people thought (7) was true. For people who said things

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6 e.g., how slurs differ from other pejorative expressions (Hom 2008; Camp 2013; Hornsby 2001); how they contribute to the compositional meanings of sentences (Williamson 2009; Whiting 2013; Jeshion 2013b; Bach 2014), and how they offend in the distinctive ways that they do (Anderson and Lepore 2013a, 2013b; Camp 2013; Bolinger 2015). Some theorists (notably, Hom (2008) and Richard (2008)) maintain that slurs have neutral counterparts that help fix their meaning, but deny that slurs have any non-empty extension. These theorists accept the proxy assumption but reject coreferentialism.

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like (7) presumably did so because they judged that, despite its action plot, its all-female cast marked it as a film made for women—and that this was enough for it to count as a chick flick.

Though the view I offer preserves the intuitive relationship between slurs and PNCs, it also vindicates the intuition, suggested by sentences (1)-(8), that slurs and their PNCs often mean different things. Such explanatory resources, I conclude, make the view a plausible and powerful alternative to traditionally coreferentialist theories of slurs, as well as give us reason for optimism about the prospects of prototype semantics generally.