An Essentialist Theory of the Meaning of Slurs

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The aim of this paper is to propose an essentialist model of the semantics of slurs. In particular, I will defend the view that the semantic mechanism behind slur nouns is similar to the one behind kind terms: slur concepts, from which slur terms inherit their meaning, encode mini-theories which represent an essence-like element that is causally connected to a set of negatively-valenced stereotypical features of the social group in question. Thus, slur concepts encode three central elements: 1) a causal component, which is the ‘hidden unobservable’ that gives rise to and explains the superficial, stereotypically observable features and actions of members of the social category in question, and which we call the ‘essence’ of the category, 2) a causal, law-like relationship between the essence and the surface features of the social category in question, and 3) a set of negatively-valenced stereotypical features of the social group, which members of the social group are predisposed to instantiate and which thus deliver a heuristics for the identification of individuals of the essentialized group.

It is widely accepted that the semantics of kind terms, such as ‘water’ or ‘gold’, is essentialist in nature. According to my theory, then, slur nouns can be seen as belonging to the category of kind terms and thus parallel their semantics. Soames (2008) describes the meaning of ‘water’ fixed as being whatever underlying physical characteristic is shared by all ‘water’-members and explains and gives rise to the paradigmatic features of water. Slur terms, then, work in a comparable way. For example, slurs for women are true of those people who share the ‘womanhood essence’ – whatever this essence is –, which is causally responsible and explains stereotypical negative features associated with women. Slurs for male homosexual persons are true of those people who share the ‘gayness essence’ – whatever this essence is –, which is causally responsible and explains stereotypical negative features associated with gay people. Or, to put it more general: For a given slur S of a social group G and a person P, S is true of P iff P bears the ‘essence’ of G – whatever this essence is –, which is causally responsible and explains stereotypical negative features associated with G. Slur terms, then, encode this kind of mini-theory, which correspondingly is embedded in our conceptual representations of slurs.

However, although slurs are introduced with the intention of designating natural kinds, in most cases, they actually fail to do so. In contrast to ‘water’, ‘gold’ or ‘tiger’, there obviously will be no underlying, unified causal explanation for the set of features that is supposed to be explained by the essence. More concretely, there is no such thing as a ‘gayness essence’, ‘womanhood essence’, ‘blackness essence’, ‘Chinese essence’ or what have you, which disposes members of the group in question to exhibit stereotypical properties associated with it. Thus, the semantic contents of slurring words are empty, and sentences containing slurs in extensional contexts come out meaningless or false.

My model straightforwardly accounts for one of the central desiderata of theories of slurs, which is to explain why they have the derogatory and degrading effects they have, both at the individual and the collective level. When the racist, bigot, xenophobe or homophobe applies a slur, he thereby makes the target in question – and anyone who ‘shares the same essence’ – part of the mini-theory, subjugating her to an extreme form
of causal determinism and thus depriving her and other members of the social category of human autonomy and self-determination. Members of the targeted group are not evaluated by their individual acts or in relation to their external circumstances, but by (pre-) determined membership in a group. According to the slur user, the target is just predisposed to have despicable traits, whether she currently exhibits them or not. Crucially, the attributed essence is seen as disposing their bearers to act badly, or to exhibit negative features. Thus, by carrying the relevant ‘group essence’, the target is seen by the slur user to always be predisposed to carry negatively-valenced traits – even if all available evidence indicates otherwise. Taken together, it is easy to see how the application of an essentialized slur term is derogating, demeaning and dehumanizing to the target and the entire social group she is a member of.

Consider again the analogous behavior of other kind concepts. We know from developmental psychology that young children think that kangaroos growing up with goats will nevertheless be good at hopping – they are just made to hop (Gelman, 2003; Gelman, 2004; Gelman & Wellman, 1991). So just as a kangaroo cannot lose its ‘kangaroohood’ if it is raised in a goat family, and is dispositionally ‘made’ to hop also if it doesn’t do so (cf. for an empirical overview Gelman, 2003, 2004), so are the members of the social groups in question not evaluated by their individual circumstances or self-determined acts and decisions. This is precisely what is responsible for the dehumanizing power of slurs, as the attribution of ‘essences’ that pre-determine the target’s dispositions, character traits, attitudes and behaviors creates a picture of the target according to which she lacks the full spectrum of human autonomy and self-determination that we associate with personhood.

Next, I show that my theory satisfies another core desideratum for a theory of slurs: to match and predict the linguistic behavior of slur terms in a variety of compositional contexts. My theory can straightforwardly account for the distinctive linguistic behavior of slurs that has been recognized in current theoretical discourse (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Bolinger, 2017; Hom, 2008; Jeshion, 2013) such as so-called ‘G-extending’ uses (Jeshion, 2013), in which a slur is applied to a member of a social group not predominantly associated with the slur, or ‘NDNA’ (non-derogatory, non-appropriated) uses (Hom, 2008), in which the use of a slur seems non-derogatory. Moreover, because my model entails null-extensionality of slurs for many uses, it accounts for our intuition that many sentences containing slurs are false.