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Slurs in Ordinary Language: Their Properties and Developments

Lin Tang¹

¹ College of international studies in the Southwest University, Beibei, Chongqing, 400715, China

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Abstract

Slurs are derogatory and offensive linguistic expressions that pose difficulties in the study of names in philosophy of language. Their dual nature as descriptive and expressive has piqued the interest of philosophers working in this field. Philosophers of language, primarily centered on Williamson, have debated the properties, origins, interpretation of slurs, and their implications on philosophical topics such as non-truth-conditional meaning, the semantics-pragmatics interface, and the interplay between descriptiveness and expressiveness. This paper first defines slurs and describes their associated properties before delving into their sources, mechanisms, and functions, with the goal of elucidating current slur developments and providing references for future research on slur phenomena in Eastern Asia.

Keywords

Slurs, philosophy of language, pejoratives, derogatory and offensive, descriptive and expressive

1. Introduction

Words can be used to convey information, communicate ideas, coordinate behavior, and express emotions, as well as to inflict, harm, insult, degrade, and humiliate others. Hurtful words include “nigger (Note 1),” “slut,” and “chink,” which are linguistic expressions used to denigrate a specific group or a member of a group based on descriptive characteristics of that group such as gender, race, religion, belief, sexual orientation, and so on (Hom, 2008; Richard, 2008; Williamson, 2009; Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2013; Hess, 2021). These words describe and express attitudes and evaluations about the groups to which they refer. As early as the 1970s and 1980s (Note 2), this two-sidedness brought slurs to the eyes of many philosophers interested in the theory of meaning, but only as a special or problematic case in general semantic theory. Disparagement did not become an important topic in philosophy of language until the early twenty-first century, with the publication of seminal articles and books by Hom (2008) and Richard (2008). At this point, articles on the study of slurs started to appear.

Slurs have become a popular topic in philosophy of language because the properties they possess challenge some philosophical theories of meaning such as the theory of direct reference and shed new light on some traditional philosophical problems such as the meaning of non-truth-conditional content, the interface between semantics and pragmatics, and the relationship between descriptiveness and expressiveness. Because slurs are linked to many problems in philosophy of language, philosophers of language have attempted to explain the source and mechanism of these slur characteristics from various perspectives. Although the study of slurs has exploded in Western countries (Liu, 2022), Eastern Asian scholars appear to have overlooked slurs as an intriguing linguistic phenomenon. This paper describes slurs in everyday language, focuses on their characteristics and application to clarify the current development of slurs, reflects on the problems and shortcomings of existing research, and serves as a reference for future research in Eastern Asia.

2. Slurs and Their Properties

Language can be harmful. A slur is a hurtful word that can be used to derogate and offend another person or group of people. Slurs have some characteristics that set them apart from other hurtful language and provide topics for slur research.

2.1 *The Definition of Slurs*

A slur, as the name implies, is a derogatory term. Referring to others as “nigger” or “faggot” is a very hurtful way of implying that they are demeaning and disparaging because they are black or gay. It is clear that a slur is a term used to disparage and offend others. However, if all words that can cause this effect are referred to as slurs and only the intention with which the word is used is taken into account, the range of derogatory terms is broadened. A slur is any word that is intended to denigrate, offend, or hurt someone. It also confounds slurs with the act of slurring. Slur is a derogatory noun with its own meaning. The act of slurring is the use of derogatory terms, which can be accomplished with both slurs and non-slurs (Legaspe, 2020). When discussing slurs, it is important to distinguish between the act of slurring and slurs, the derogative and offensive meanings of which can be created on their own.

Distinguishing between slurs and the act of slurring leads to slurs being classified as derogatory. Dummett established the category of slurs as a type of derogatory. He (1973, p. 397) examined the derogatory word “boche” and argued that its meaning is inherently offensive. This offensiveness occurs in almost all cases when used in a specific context. Slurs are similar to general derogatory terms in this regard, but they differ significantly (Bach, 2018). To begin, a derogatory term is only a slur if it demeans another person because of their race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or political ideology. The term “chingchong” is a slur because it implies derogation and discrimination against the entire Chinese population. Second, while some derogatory words are purely expressive, slurs contain both expressive and descriptive content (Note 3). Slurs are only pejoratives that describe a specific group and pass a value judgment on it. Slurs include terms like “bastard” and “stupid.” This also highlights another distinction between slurs and general pejoratives: the object of slurs is usually a

group or members of a group. Individual pejoratives fall outside the scope of slur. As a result, slurs are not only derogatory, but they also target specific groups.

Slurs are pejoratives that denigrate and offend a group based on race, belief, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and other characteristics. Furthermore, slurs have some distinct characteristics. These characteristics set slurs apart from similar words and provide topics and directions for future research. So, what are the characteristics of slurs?

2.2 *The Properties of Slurs*

Slurs have several properties. The first and most important, and frequently discussed, characteristic of slurs is that they are descriptive and expressive. Donnellan distinguished two uses of definitive descriptions, namely referential use and attributive use, which are related to descriptive and expressive concepts. When a speaker employs the referential use of definite descriptions, he or she is attempting to enable the listener to recognize who or what is being discussed and to say something about that person or thing. A speaker, on the other hand, uses the attributive use to say something about whoever or whatever fits the mimic (Donnellan, 1966). Slurs, unlike most expressions, have both a referential and an attributive use, referring to the object of the contemptuous group and expressing a demeaning attitude toward that group. The offensiveness (Note 4) of slurs is often considered transgressive because the listener, even if he or she is not the intended audience, may feel offended if slurs are used (Hess, 2022, p. 452), like the following slurs:

- (1) nigger
- (2) chicks with dicks
- (3) Mary Kay girl

“Nigger” is a racial slur used to describe people with black skin. Another highly offensive slur for pornography and transgender people is “chicks with dicks.” A slur for someone with poor fashion or makeup skills is “Mary Kay girl.” When these words are used, they are referring to the target people and convey negative attitudes toward them.

Slurs are projective. The projective nature of slurs means that they can retain their demeaning content even when embedded in other complex sentence types (for example, negative, modal, conditional, and propositional attitude clauses) (Croom, 2008; Croom, 2011; Camp, 2013; Jeshion, 2013a; Jeshion, 2013b; DiFranco, 2014; Bolinger, 2017). As examples,

- (4) He is not a chink.
- (5) He may be a chink.
- (6) If he is chink, he should go back to China.
- (7) I believe he is not a chink.
- (8) He is a chink.

The pejoratives expressed in the first four sentences above are consistent with the fifth sentence, which embeds “chink” in negative, modal, conditional, and propositional attitudinal clauses, respectively. Furthermore, it is claimed that slurs remain derogatory even when quoted (Anderson & Lepore, 2013;

Camp, 2013; Tenchini & Frigerio, 2020). Despite the fact that most scholars agree that slurs are characterized by projectivity, Hom and May (2013) provide some examples of projective failure to demonstrate that disparaging content is not projective, such as,

(9) Marry is not a kike, she is Jewish,

The pejorative content of “Kike” in sentence 9 is not projective. They argue that the projective nature of slurs is merely a psychological manifestation of their offensiveness. According to Cepollaro and Thommen (2019), the examples given by Hom and May in which projection appears to fail should be interpreted as a meta-linguistic use of contempt rather than a genuine use.

Slurs have a polar opposite. A neutral counterpart is a term used to describe a group of people in a non-derogatory, non-offensive, and neutral manner. The polar opposite of “Chink” means “Chinese.” “nigger” has a neutral counterpart “black.” This property of neutrality distinguishes slurs from purely affective expressions (e.g., “fuck” and “holy shit”), because these affective words have no effect on the truth conditions of the sentence. If and only if “The sun is red,” “The sun is fucking red” is true. Slurs add to the sentence’s truth value, and its truth-conditional content appears to be the same as the corresponding neutral word. The sentence’s truth value does not change if slurs are replaced by their corresponding neutral words. The truth values of the sentences “Smith is a nigger” and “Smith is a black man” are identical; the difference is in the different subjective thoughts and cognitive attitudes assigned to them by the speaker, coloring and revaluing them (Frege, 1990; Du & Li 2022). Notably, DiFranco (2015), Jeshion (2016), and Ashwell (2016) rejected the notion that there is a neutral word for every slur because some gender-based and metaphorical slurs lack appropriate group counterparts, and others, such as “bitch,” refer to only some of the group members rather than the entire group.

Slurs are autonomous. Slurs’ autonomy refers to the fact that the demeaning content is independent of the speaker’s attitude and always indicates a demeaning attitude on the speaker’s part, even if the speaker does not hold or intend to convey any negative attitudes toward the group (Hom, 2010, p. 169). Nonetheless, researchers such as Croom (2011, 2013) believe that this type of devaluing autonomy is wrong. He has explicitly argued against this characterization. He claims that not all uses of slurs indicate a demeaning attitude on the part of the speaker, and that slurs can also be used in a non-demeaning manner.

Slurs, on the other hand, are descriptive ineffability. Slurs’ derogatory content cannot be accessed through paraphrasing (Potts, 2007, p. 176; Hom, 2010, p.166; Whiting, 2013, p. 365; Legaspe et al., 2020; Liu, 2022). Slurs, in other words, are difficult to convert with purely descriptive discourse because converting slurs to some neutral descriptive expressions would result in a loss of some of their contempt. “Niggers” cannot be easily transformed into “low-IQ blacks” or “criminally inclined blacks.” Neither “chink” nor “squinty-eyed Chinese” can be translated “Chinese who are cunning and frugal.” This could be because slurs are frequently associated with evil and harmful stereotypes (Note 5), making it difficult to transform them into neutral descriptions while retaining their entire meaning.

Slurs, as expressions used to denigrate and offend others, are descriptive and expressive. They almost

always have a neutral counterpart that cannot be replaced by neutral descriptive expressions. Furthermore, their derogatory content is autonomous and projective. These characteristics distinguish slurs from other similar terms and point the way forward for slur research. The theory of slurs must explain and clarify these properties, such as the relationship between disparagement and offensiveness, as well as the content of truth conditions, why scorn is difficult to paraphrase, and why slur disparagement can transcend syntax limitations, and so on.

3. The Current Developments of Slurs

Slurs not only refer to their target group, but they also express disdain and offense towards that group, both descriptive and expressive, displaying exciting characteristics. Among them, the fact that slurs are offensive and demeaning has been central to the description and explanation of contempt theory, and the fact that slurs are projective has also piqued the interest of many scholars. Furthermore, some intriguing phenomena in the everyday use of slurs have gained attention (such as the non-disparaging offensive use of contempt and the difference in the strength of contempt's offensiveness).

3.1 *The Source and Mechanisms of Slurs' Derogation*

The source and mechanism of slur derogation have been the center and focus of slur study in philosophy of language, and it is also the most intensely debated issue in slur theory at the moment. The study of slurs must explain the source of slur derogation as well as the relationship between derogation content and truth condition content. In this regard, various theories explain such derogation as having different content, such as being a part of semantic content, a pragmatic effect, or a result of breaking social rules.

3.1.1 Derogation as a Part of Semantic Content

The semantic content of slurs includes derogation, which is determined by the semantic conventions that govern them, i.e., the rules that give them their literal meanings (Hom, 2008; Hom & May, 2013; Vallée, 2014; Bach, 2018). Hom (2012) and Hom and May (2018) are examples of this point of view. They contend that derogation is a component of truth-condition content and that it is functionally related but not equivalent to the neutral counterpart of slurs. The operator PEJ (X) represents this functional relationship, so the slur "nigger" is equivalent to PEJ (Black). According to them, the specific content of each slur is determined externally by racist institutions or social practices and includes descriptive stereotypes and normative judgments, all of which should be linked to the target group's identity. As a result, "chink" should mean "should be held to a higher standard of college admissions, should be barred from managerial positions due to squinty eyes, cunning, money laundering, and all because they are Chinese" (Hess, 2022, p. 457). This truth-conditional reading demonstrates that slurs have no allegation because no one should be discriminated against because of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other characteristics.

The impact of Hom and May's viewpoint is far-reaching and thus contentious. Some scholars have argued that slurs contribute to the truth-conditional content of the sentence in which they are embedded,

but that this contribution must be distinguished from the element responsible for demeaning and offending. Slurs have two meanings: one is truth-conditional content, and the other is responsible for demeaning and offending. The truth-valued conditional content has the same denotation as the neutral counterpart of slurs (Whiting, 2007, p. 192; Potts, 2007; McCready, 2010; Bach, 2018), whereas the second component is understood differently. Bach (2018) interprets the second component as containing the content of a secondary proposition expressed by slur sentences. This secondary proposition attributes some general negative characteristics to the target of slurs. Potts (2007), McCready (2010), Whiting (2013), and others have argued that the second constituent expresses a non-cognitive attitude toward the object of slurs, relegating the derogatory aspects of slurs to the realm of presupposition or conventional meaning. According to this viewpoint, slurs have offensive content because they indicate the speaker's negative and hostile attitude toward the target group. Bach (2018) interprets the second component as containing the content of a secondary proposition expressed by slur sentences. This secondary proposition attributes some general negative characteristics to the target of slurs. Potts (2007), McCready (2010), Whiting (2013), and others have argued that the second constituent expresses a non-cognitive attitude toward the object of slurs, relegating the derogatory aspects of slurs to the realm of presupposition or conventional meaning. According to this viewpoint, slurs have offensive content because they indicate the speaker's negative and hostile attitude toward the target group. This expressive and evaluative content can be expressed simultaneously and automatically using slurs; it is not canceled out as conversational meanings, but it is distinct from truth-conditional content. This viewpoint demonstrates an important slur intuition: the contribution of slurs to a sentence is not what is said but how it is said. This "how" component has less to do with true or false propositions and more to do with negative attitudes and emotions toward the target of slurs.

The offensive or demeaning line can be read as part of the semantic content of slurs. While some argue that it is a component of truth-value content and others argue that it is a self-contained component of semantics other than the truth-value condition, it is generally agreed that slur derogation is part of the conventional meaning of words. The inability to account for non-derogatory uses of slurs is one of the drawbacks of restricting the derogative content of slurs to the semantic content. As a result, other theoretical approaches must be considered.

3.1.2 Derogation as a Pragmatic Effect

Interpreting slur derogation as semantic content presents several challenges and unexplained phenomena, so some scholars have proposed explaining it from a pragmatic standpoint (Schlenker, 2007; Cepollaro, 2015; Nunberg, 2018; Camp, 2018; Liu, 2021a). According to this viewpoint, the truth-value content of slurs is the same as the content of their neutral counterpart, and derogation results from different discourse effects. Schlenker (2007), Cepollaro and Stojanovic (2016), Cepollaro (2017), Marques and Carpintero (2020), and Guercio (2021) have all argued that slurs' derogatory nature stems from pragmatic assumptions. However, introducing the derogatory content of slurs as a presupposition may lead to the assumption that the listener has a negative attitude or evaluation of the

target group as well. Presuppositions are thus classified as subjective or objective: subjective presuppositions express the speaker's contempt for the target group, whereas objective presuppositions are direct portrayals of the target group as despicable and hateful (Predelli, 2010; Cepollaro & Stojanovic, 2016). The presupposition is also problematic because presuppositions are typically filtered out and cannot be projected when embedded in complex sentences such as conditional sentences, whereas slurs can.

Some scholars have used speech acts to explain the disparagement and offensiveness of contemptuous claims, in addition to interpreting derogation as a pragmatic presupposition (e.g., Langton, 2012; Anderson et al., 2012; Bianchi, 2018; Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018; Kukla, 2018; Williamson & Navarro, 2021). Sentences containing slurs display both illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. Statements containing slurs display demeaning and offensive behaviors toward the target group, resulting in illocutionary acts. Perlocutionary acts, on the other hand, are accomplished because the insulting statement is harmful to the target group. According to Camp (2018), slurs, on the one hand, predict the members of the group and thus contribute truth to the proposition, while on the other hand, they perform an act of devaluation, demonstrating a negative attitude. While agreeing that slurs demonstrate two types of speech acts, Liu (2021b) and Liu (2022) distinguish between derogation and offensiveness, arguing that they each accomplish two different kinds of speech acts: derogation belongs to the illocutionary act, while offensiveness belongs to the perlocutionary act.

Scholars have also experimented with different interpretative perspectives. Nunberg (2018) defines derogation as a type of conversational meaning. According to Bolinger (2017), this derogation is a result of speakers' contrastive choice between slurs and their neutral counterparts. Furthermore, some scholars explain it in terms of non-traditional meaning dimensions, such as Camp's (2018) "perspectives," Pullum's (2018) "metadata meta-data," and Legaspe et al. (2020) "register." While these perspectives explain slur derogation from various angles, they all agree that derogation is unrelated to conventional meaning.

3.1.3 Derogation as a Violence of Social Norms

Both of these points of view explain the derogatory nature of slurs in terms of the meaning of the discourse. At the same time, some scholars argue that slur derogation does not contribute to semantic content and does not convey any offensive content (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Lepore & Stone, 2018; Berkovski, 2022). Slurs are derogatory and offensive because they violate social norms. Slurs are considered taboo language, and some social norms forbid their use; therefore, any discourse that includes them violates those social norms. Such violations can be upsetting and offensive to those who value social norms. Slurs are thus offensive and derogatory not for what they convey, but because they are words that are forbidden by social norms.

Many issues arise when interpreting the derogatory and offensive nature of slurs as a violation of social norms. For starters, it fails to differentiate between offensiveness caused by the use of slurs and offensiveness caused by the violation of social taboos, or between offensiveness to the audience or

target group. Furthermore, it fails to account for the variability of the projective nature of slurs, which would make every slur offensive.

3.2 The Projectivity of Slurs

The fact that slurs are projective refers to the fact that the derogatory nature of scorn remains even when embedded in complex sentences such as question, negation, imperative, modal, conditional, and so on (Kaplan, 1999; Potts, 2005; Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Sullivan, 2022). Current research looks into whether slurs remain derogatory in paraphrasing, negation, and citation sentences. Carrus (2017) investigated the negative connotation of contempt in negation sentences. Techini (2021) empirically confirmed the derogatory nature of slurs in indirect reporting and who is to blame. He discovers that none of the current slur theories can fully explain the problem, and that only a sufficiently “liberal” theory can fully explain what the experimental data show. Anderson and Lepore (2013) disagreed on whether slurs remain demeaning when quoted, claiming that quoting renders the derogatory content inert, preventing projection. According to Rinner and Alexander (2021), quoted slurs continue to be psychologically offensive and create or reinforce negative attitudes toward the target audience.

Some scholars have also specialized in determining whether derogatory content is being reclaimed, withdrawn, or cancelled, and have attempted various explanations. Jeshion (2013a), Sennett and Copp (2015), Ceppollaro and Stojanovic (2016), and Camp (2018) investigate the indelible nature of derogatory content. The irreversibility of derogatory content is addressed by Camp (2013), Jeshion (2013a, 2013b), and Ceppollaro and Stojanovic (2016). While reflecting on the reclamation of derogatory content, Zurita and Navarro (2021) focused on the cancellation of derogatory content.

3.3 The Non-derogatory Use of Slurs

Non-derogatory slurs are those that are no longer demeaning or offensive when used by an in-group member. For example, a black person using the slur “nigger” to a friend may convey a sense of intimacy and friendliness. Indeed, the phenomenon of some slurs being used in different contexts is simple to explain. The difficulty, however, is that this non-derogatory use is usually limited to members of the target group. This is referred to as a reclamation concern by Ritchie (2019). He contends that this is possible by requiring that the lexical meaning of a reclaimable slur include a hidden indexical term, “we,” to resolve it. This index word “we” ensures that in-group members use slurs and explains why out-group members find it difficult to use slurs. Ceppollaro (2017) disagrees with Ritchie, arguing that the essence of this non-derogatory use is essentially “echoic,” an ironic or inverted reuse of the pejorative use based on Wilson and Sperber’s theory of relevance. Bianchi (2014), who offers a similar solution, agrees with Ceppollaro. Unlike Belleri (2020), who distinguishes between different types of disparaging references (such as genuine uses, pedagogical uses, and artistic uses), it is argued that non-derogatory behavior must be examined through the lens of the use-reference distinction. Non-derogatory uses are not true uses, but rather referential uses. Furthermore, Hess (2020) contends that derogatory use is embedded in various social practices, which could explain why non-derogatory slur users can only be members of the target group.

Other issues concerning non-derogatory uses (Note 6) have also received attention. Brontsema (2004) questions whether reclamation can be completely separated from the derogatory content. Herbert (2015), Jeshion (2020), Popa-Wyatt (2020), and Technau (2016) discuss the structure, process, and contexts of reclamation. Stillman (2021) explains why slurs are not offensive in some contexts but are offensive in others. According to Torrenco (2020), this unstable state of scornful offensiveness creates semantic uncertainty. Scholars such as Cromm (2014b, 2015b, 2018) have also investigated the use of slurs in specific languages such as English, Spanish, and Native American.

3.4 Variance in the Strength of Slurs' Offensiveness

Variation in the offensiveness of slurs means that the offensiveness of slurs can vary depending on the person or context in which they are used, with some slurs being more offensive than others (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018). For example, there is a difference between calling a Chinese businessman “sui” and “chink,” with “chink” being more offensive than “sui,” which is more intense than “chink.” Simultaneously, “nigger” is even more offensive than “chink” (Jeshion, 2013b, p. 309). Furthermore, the degree of contempt and offense of some of the same-accusative contemptuous terms varies. (Hom, 2008; Whiting, 2013; Bolinger, 2017). “Nigger” and “negro” are both slurred terms for Black people, but “nigger” carries a much higher level of demeaning and offense than “negro”. “The dirtiest, filthiest, nastiest word in the English language,” according to Christopher Darden (Kennedy, 2002, p. 23). Furthermore, the offensiveness of the same slur varies depending on the audience. Different reactions will be produced depending on factors such as the listener’s acceptance and sensitivity to the slur. Finally, the offensiveness of a slur can vary depending on the speaker or context in which it is used, as in,

(10) A white man says to an African-American: “You are one lazy nigger”

(11) An African-American says to an African-American: “You are one lazy nigger”

(12) A white man tells an African-American: “Hey, my nigger, long time no see, missed you so much.”

(13) An African-American says to an African-American: “Hey, my nigger, long time no see, missed you so much.”

Examples 10 and 11 are intended to be demeaning, whereas examples 12 and 13 are not. In-group members use examples 10 and 12, while out-group members use examples 11 and 13. Examples 10 and 11 are more offensive than Examples 12 and 13, while use by out-group members in Examples 11 and 13 is more powerful than use by in-group members in Examples 10 and 12. If the speakers in examples 11 and 13 do not intend to express contempt, the offensiveness expressed in the two sentences differs. Why does the offensiveness of slurs vary depending on the words, how they are used, or who is hearing them? Although Hom and May do not address the issue of offensiveness directly, they acknowledge (2013, p. 10) that “the meaning of the words may explain the offensive use of such words.” Unlike Hom and May, Kukla (2018) and Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018) contend that this phenomenon is related to the social roles, power dynamics, and harmful ideologies that slurs seek to achieve.

In addition to the aforementioned issues and phenomena, several other slur-related issues have received attention, including what exactly is the derogatory content of slurs, the historical development and creation of slurs over time, how slurs are interpreted by listeners in everyday communication, dictionary codification, and so on (Camp, 2013; Jeshion, 2016; Mišćević, 2015; Lepore & Stone, 2018; Pullum, 2018). The study of slurs has expanded to several levels and made significant progress thanks to the efforts of many scholars, but it has also revealed some issues that need to be addressed.

4. Implications for Further Research on Slurs

Scholars have studied the nature, meaning, and use of slurs from various perspectives and in various ways in recent years. However, there are still some issues that need to be addressed, and doing so can help to supplement and improve the theoretical study of slurs.

First, there is no clear definition of slurs or the judgment standard. Despite a large body of literature on slurs, there is no consensus on the definition of slurs, as well as the standards and requirements of the judgment. Most studies use a broad definition, believing that slur is a derogatory term for certain groups. The distinction between groups and individuals, on the other hand, is inherently ambiguous. Assume an individual is a characteristic, behavior, or lifestyle choice aimed at a specific person. In that case, a group is a trait, behavior, or way of life shared by more than one person, a collection of individuals. Individual pejoratives can thus be viewed as miniature group pejoratives (Legaspe, 2020). Furthermore, some scholars have equated slurs with thick terms based on the fact that slurs can refer to groups and express evaluative content at the same time, but not all thick terms can be considered slurs, and the two can only be related similarly (Cepollaro, 2020). Further harmonization and clarification of the conditions to be met and the factors to be considered in order to qualify as a slur term are required.

Second, much of the current research on slurs has focused on the derogatory content of slurs rather than other features and specific uses of slurs. “There is now a good deal of literature exploring slurs,” write Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018, p. 2883), “but this literature is primarily concerned with the question of whether the derogatory nature of slurs is a matter of meaning and whether the meaning should be located semantically or pragmatically.” Too much emphasis on derogation and offense has resulted in a lack of focus on other aspects of slurs, such as slur non-transposability. Furthermore, scholars have addressed the issues of what exactly is the derogatory content of slurs, the evolution and creation of slurs over time, how slurs are communicated in daily life, and the conditions for the use of slurs, but there has been little in-depth discussion.

Third, too much emphasis on derogation and offense has resulted in a lack of focus on other aspects of slurs, such as slur non-transposability. Furthermore, scholars have addressed the issues of what exactly is the derogatory content of slurs, the evolution and creation of slurs over time, how slurs are communicated in daily life, and the conditions for the use of slurs, but there has been little in-depth discussion.

Fourth, current research on slurs focuses solely on the characteristics and use of slurs in English, with little coverage of scorn in other languages. A morpheme is a human product with significant social and cultural implications. Morphemes have a variety of other properties aside from phonological, syntactic, and semantic structures, such as etymology, history, region, culture, social relations, and so on (Pullum, 2018, p. 8). Their criminal behavior is based, at least in part, on these cultural-historical characteristics (Tenchini, 2021). So, slurs are used in both Chinese and other languages? Do these slurs have the same properties as slurs in English?

Fifth, the use of slur-related terms is not consistent. Scholars use various terms for the same phenomenal feature, causing conceptual confusion and failing to ensure cognitive consistency and accuracy. There are several different explanations for how the derogatory nature of slurs can be maintained without being governed by syntax, such as “scoping-out,” “scopelessness,” “non-displaceability,” “embedding failure,” and “projectivity” are all terms used in this context. Non-derogatory uses of slurs are described in a variety of ways, including “non-derogatory use,” “reclamation,” “reappropriation,” “appropriation,” and “appropriation.”

To summarize, the future study of slurs should focus on the definition of slurs, other characteristics of slurs, the specific use and application of slurs, cultural differences of slurs, and the unification of terminology, in order to further promote the development of the study of slurs.

5. Conclusion

Slurs are words used to insult and offend others, and their linguistic properties have challenged some of the meaning problems in philosophy of language, attracting the attention of many philosophers of language and becoming a research hotspot in the field of philosophy of language at the moment. Philosophers of language have contributed to the development of slur theory by interpreting the nature, characteristics, and use of slurs from various theoretical perspectives. Future research on disparagement should pay more attention to some other features of disparagement, such as the definition of slurs, the specific use and application, the unity of terminology, and cultural differences, in order to further expand and improve the research on slurs.

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Notes

Note 1. All slurs mentioned in this article are only for research purposes and are not meant to be demeaning or insulting to the members of the groups involved. Please forgive the author if an offense occurs.

Note 2. Sociology, linguistics, and social psychology research on slurs dates back to the 1840s and 1850s.

Note 3. This feature links slurs with thick terms. For related researcher on slurs and thick terms, see Cepollaro (2017).

Note 4. Offense to the target audience and offense to the listener are two distinct dimensions that must be clearly distinguished (Hom, 2008; Hom & May, 2013). Furthermore, some scholars argue that derogatory content and offense should be distinguished: derogatory content is semantic content and is a devaluation of the target group, whereas offense is a psychological phenomenon and is the effect produced on the listener (Hom & May, 2013; Cepollaro & Thommen, 2019; Hess, 2021). It is worth noting that most academics still regard offensiveness as an abstract attribute associated with a sense of devaluation rather than an actual communicative effect.

Note 5. Some scholars classify slurs as having characteristics associated with harmful stereotypes, such as Hess (2022). For more information on slurs and stereotypes, see Jeshion (2013), Croom (2015), Orlando & Saab (2021).

Note 6. Please see Cepollaro & Zeman's (2020) article for more information on a related review of research on the non-derogatory use of slurs.