

DEROGATORY AND APPROPRIATED USES OF SLURS

У статті доводиться, що образливі висловлювання не завжди використовуються для того, щоб образити. Упереджені, дискримінаційні лексичні одиниці, окрім власне образи, можуть виконувати низку інших функцій у дискурсі.

Ключові слова: образливе висловлювання, образа, упереджена мова, евфемізм, дисфемізм.

It is generally acknowledged that there is no such thing as an absolute taboo, absolute euphemism or dysphemism, which would hold for all cultures and times: "Like euphemism, dysphemism is not necessarily a property of the word itself, but of the way it is used" [2, 45]. According to the authors, the x-phemistic value of utterances entirely depends on, or in Allan and Burridge's own words 'wedded to' context, place, time and intentions that lurk behind them.

While acknowledging the central role of intentionality and context in assigning x-phemistic values to utterances, Allan (2014) concedes that although particular language expressions are not necessarily euphemistic in all contexts, it ignores reality to pretend that ordinary people do not speak and act as if some expressions are intrinsically euphemistic and others dysphemistic [1].

Allan and Burridge suggest the hypothetical context of "being polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment" as one in which orthophemisms and euphemisms are likely to be used in place of a dispreferred alternative (dysphemism) [2, 21]. As we can see, in naming the middle class politeness criterion (MCPC) as the one that establishes a default condition for resorting to orthophemisms and euphemisms, Allan and Burridge view context as a set of situation-specific socio-cultural extra-linguistic variables-cues, which can constrain the interpretation process.

Similar to the frame-based view of politeness proposed by Terkourafi [17], among others, Allan suggests that such socio-cultural variables take the form of cognitive frames/scripts against which the appropriateness of (linguistic) behavior is evaluated [1]. Different contexts-frames impose different standards of appropriateness.

Socio-cultural contextual variables (e.g. social status, gender, age, etc.) are also considered important in triggering euphemistic interpretations by Senichkina, who suggests that it is possible to test whether a given linguistic unit is a euphemism by applying the following appropriateness conditions: imagining resorting to it while conversing with an interlocutor of a higher social status Senichkina [15, 21]. According to these authors, if a unit is appropriate to use under certain circumstances, fulfills a softening (hedging) function and ameliorates the denotation, then the unit in question is a euphemism.

Sometimes it is very difficult to establish the exact x-phemistic value of the expression with any degree of objectivity without taking sides. This point can be illustrated by a politically charged expression *anchor baby*, which is as a pejorative substitute for a lengthy "a child born of an immigrant in the United States", used as a tool by which a family can find legal foothold in the US, since those children are automatically allowed to choose United States citizenship. The term is generally demeaning to both children and their parents as such 'nicknaming' is based on a dehumanizing metaphor ascribing human children functions of inanimate objects (anchors) in a derogatory reference to the supposed role of the child. It is interesting to note that the fifth edition of the New American Heritage Dictionary initially defined this term, considered to be a racist and deliberate effort to dehumanize immigrant children by many, as neutral:

Anchor Baby, n. A child born to a noncitizen mother in a country that grants automatic citizenship to children born on its soil, especially such a child born to parents seeking to secure eventual citizenship for themselves and often other members of their family.

This sparked controversy in the media and later the label 'offensive' was added to the entry in the online version of the dictionary by its editors to show that in uttering this expression speakers can and often do show their negative attitude to this phenomenon. This example shows that judgments regarding what may or may not be appropriate in certain situations are individual and differ from person to person, let alone culture to culture or different periods of time.

We agree with van Dijk, who argues that it is not the social situation that influences (or is influenced by) conversation, but the way the participants define such a situation [18]. On his view, contexts are subjective constructs designed and updated in interaction by participants as members of groups and communities. He rightfully observes that if contexts were objective social conditions or constraints, all people in the same social situation would speak in the same way. Thus van Dijk assumes a cognitive stance towards context as "subjective participant representations of communicative situations", not as the communicative situations themselves: "[...] contexts are not some kind of

objective social situation, but rather a socially based but subjective construct of participants about the for-them-relevant properties of such a situation, that is, a mental model" [18, 56].

Croom discusses the observation previously made by Hom [11] and Hornsby [12] to the effect that semantic and pragmatic theorists make rather different claims and generally disagree as to the role of intentionality in assessing the x-phemistic value of utterances. He notes, in this respect, that semantic theorists advocate the context-independent view of slurs where the derogatory content of a dysphemistic slur gets expressed in every context of utterance as it is part of its lexical meaning, whereas pragmatic theorists argue that derogatory content is rather context-specific, i.e. that which gets pragmatically communicated by the slur [8]. Let us examine this in more detail.

Slurs are traditionally regarded as a conventional means to express strong negative attitudes towards members of a group. They 'target' racial, ethnic, religious, gender etc. groups by derogating them, e.g. portraying the group as inferior and/or despicable. They also vary in intensity of the conveyed contempt. The 'targeting' is accomplished through, for instance, referring to the hearer or some third person's race, ethnicity, or nationality in such terms as to cause a face affront. The face affront can be caused intentionally as well as unintentionally. The speaker who utters slurs without having racist beliefs or intentions is regarded as having resorted to slurs unintentionally. The unintentionally used slurs are referred to as 'gaffes' by Hill [10, 88], who notes that the actual linguistic content of slurs and gaffes can be identical; one commentator's slur is another's gaffe.

Slurs are characterized as strictly tabooed linguistic expressions (see Anderson and Lepore [3]), along with other pejorative units, such as expletives or swear words and insults (for a taxonomy of pejoratives see Hom [11, 430]. Anderson and Lepore note that, unlike derogatory or pejorative expressions (e.g. *moron*, *dork*), which can target individuals, slurs target whole groups of people: "anyone who uses the N-word slurs all black people, but one who uses 'moron' needn't be slurring every mentally disabled person" [3, 32]. According to Anderson and Lepore, the linguistic role of slurs, which the authors treat as words prohibited not on account of their offensive content, but because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition, is exhausted by picking out the same group as a neutral counterpart. Their account of slurs, which they refer to as Prohibitionism, explains that groups prohibit names not explicitly adopted by them, since calling a group by a name that its members have not chosen may be viewed as an attempt to usurp their authority to choose [3, 45]. On their view, it is the taboo violation resulting from the use of slurs that causes offence.

Croom suggests an alternative semantic account of slurs, according to which by choosing to use a slur instead of some neutrally descriptive term, the speaker *prima facie* intends to express their endorsement of a (typically but not necessarily negative) attitude towards the (prototypical) *descriptive properties* (rather than the agent) possessed by the target of their utterance [8, 295].

Hornsby observes that derogatory words apply to people and are commonly understood to convey hatred or contempt but that for each such word, there is another word that applies to the same people but whose use does not convey these things – there is, that is, a neutral counterpart. Accordingly, since speakers have a lexical choice regarding how they identify their intended targets – i.e., between (a) opting to use a slurring term (e.g. the N-word), which is commonly understood to convey hatred or contempt [12, 128–129], or instead (b) opting to use a slurring term's neutral counterpart (e.g., African American), which is not commonly understood to convey hatred or contempt – that speaker will be *prima facie* expected to choose the term that they consider most appropriate for identifying their intended target.

Croom notes that considering that the choice of words has often determined whether one lives or dies in real-life situations, it is clear that our practical choice of terms often carries immense significance [8, 350]. He goes on to say that speakers may exploit their understanding of the difference in derogatory force between neutrally descriptive terms and non-neutrally slurring terms to strategically choose to use one rather than the other in order to most aptly communicate to others, through their lexical choice, the corresponding attitude that they are intending to express towards the target of their utterances.

Slurs have non-derogatory correlates – or at least there are alternative lexical options available to speakers such that their use of the slur over a neutral counterpart typically expresses a strategic choice that can signal derogatory intent towards a target – and so the speaker's choice to use the slur is often taken to indicate their approval of the slurring term and what it is typically used to convey.

Slurs are derogatory by virtue of being indicative of the intention to show negative/contemptful etc. attitude associated with having selected the particular lexical unit from all the possible available alternatives to refer to some group of people, which the speaker could have resorted to instead of the slur (see Croom [8] for discussion).

Croom points out that although it is true that the utterance of slurs is illegitimate and derogatory in most contexts, sufficient evidence suggests that slurs are not always or exclusively used to derogate [8, 357]. Existing semantic accounts of slurs suggest that descriptions used as neutral references to some stigmatized population groups are part of literal meaning of slurs together with the expression

of a certain derogatory attitude to them along the lines of “x and bad/despicable because of it” where x stands for the neutral description of a stigmatized population group (cf. Hom [11]). Such theoretic proposals are problematic as they appear unable to explain how it is, if derogation is taken to be part of the literal content of slurs, that they can mean something non-derogatory or be felicitously applied in relation to some individuals who do not belong to the group typically associated with the slur. The semantic accounts fail to explain how slurs can communicate non-derogatory meaning between close in-group interlocutors as a means to strengthen the in-group solidarity (usually by representatives of the very in-group that the slur was originally intended to target) (see Croom [8] for discussion).

Some accounts (e.g. Camp [6]) are classified by researchers as ‘pragmatic’ [4], since they treat slurs in terms of conventional implicatures. Since the notion of conventional implicature is not given any theoretical significance in most modern pragmatic theories (including RT and neo-Gricean accounts) and such meanings are considered to be on the semantic side of the divide, I will refer to such approaches as ‘semantic’ as well. According to Carston, most of the linguistic devices allegedly generating conventional implicatures are viewed in RT as encoding *procedural constraints* on the inferential processes involved in deriving conversational implicatures [7]. Carston (2003) notes that certain of these devices are seen in RT as contributing to “what is said” [7, 192], where this is construed as an entirely semantic notion.

Hill [10] discusses Butler’s [5] arguments to the effect that since slurs cannot be completely eradicated from language thought proscription, they must be reshaped to acquire new kinds of subjectivity, i.e. be used as tokens of in-group solidarity. Hill notes, however, that this circulation or ‘resubjectified’ slurs will reinforce the saliency of these lexical units in discourse, thereby making them continually available for potential malign re-appropriation [10, 58]. In such appropriative or in-group uses, a slur is a form of “mock impoliteness” since it is understood as intentionally nonoffensive [9]. Leech has argued that interlocutors may act superficially impolite with one another in order to foster a sense of social intimacy and to reduce relative inequalities between them [13], and Culpeper suggests that the more intimate a relationship, the less necessary and important politeness is. He argues that lack of politeness is associated with intimacy, and so being superficially impolite can promote intimacy [9, 352]. This only works in contexts in which the impoliteness is understood to be untrue such as in communicative exchanges between close friends or in-group members.

From the pragmatic point of view, words don’t possess any literal meaning outside of the actual context of use. Therefore, depending on the underlying intentions or “who says what to whom”, the use of the N-word, for example, can range from the most intensive of slurs to the rapport-fostering indicator of friendship and solidarity and actually by synonymous with ‘my closest friend’ in this ad hoc use.

Some semanticists concur that in cases of non-derogatory appropriated uses of slurs we may be dealing with a change in meaning [11, 417]. The meaning of slurs is altered for the in-group use so that, for instance, ‘camaraderie’ becomes part of the meaning of the N-word. Such accounts, however, leave the mechanism underlying such semantic change unexplicated. Bianchi suggests a solution “compatible with the semantic and the pragmatic perspectives” [4, 36] without postulating a change of meaning in appropriated uses. She regards the appropriated uses of slurs in relevance-theoretic terms as ‘echoing’ derogatory uses in ways and contexts that make manifest the dissociation from the offensive contents.

We suggest that the account regarding appropriated uses of slurs as echoic and dissociative would render them ironic as it is verbal irony that is regarded in Relevance Theory as an interpretive echoic use displaying a dissociative attitude to the proposition expressed [16]. Such an account is only applicable to the appropriated use of slurs by the in-groupers who echo derogatory uses in ways and contexts that make manifest the dissociation from the offensive content conveyed by a slur as an ironical use requires a context where the dissociation from the echoed offensive content is clearly identifiable (see Bianchi [4]).

Bianchi recognizes that, diachronically, the appropriated uses of slurs leads to semantic change and facilitates the appropriation process [4]. When the process is completed the new meaning of slurs becomes open for use by in-groupers and out-groupers alike without conveying any derogatory content.

If we allow that the appropriated uses of slurs are resorted to in their non-derogatory senses by the out-groupers, they could be regarded as echoing the appropriated use of slur (e.g. occasion-specific broadening of the N-word to denote closeness/camaraderie on the account of belonging to the group targeted by the slur as its salient contextually-relevant meaning) by in-groupers echoing the derogatory use of a slur with a dissociative attitude, which out-groupers regard as the new non-derogatory meaning of a slur (e.g. *friend*). The attitude expressed by out-groupers resorting to such appropriated uses of slurs will be one of endorsement of this new meaning rather than dissociation from it and such uses can be treated as phatic (see Padilla Cruz [14]). Viewing such uses as phatic would explain their rapport-management potential, which is one of the functions attributed to the use of phatic utterances since Malinowsky’s (1923) seminal work, describing phatic communication

as a “type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” and where the linguistic expressions are exploited to fulfill a social function [19].

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Summary. *The article argues that although it is true that utterance of slurs is derogatory in most contexts, these lexical units are not always used to derogate. It is suggested that discriminatory language can be analyzed as having several functions in discourse: apart from derogation itself, it can serve the purpose of group solidarity enhancement and face management.*

Traditionally, the offense associated with the use of slur is viewed as stemming from the intentional act of choosing this particular conventionally dysphemistic verbalization out of the available paradigmatic set of co-referential synonyms and used it to refer to someone instead of resorting to some neutral or positive nomination.

Existing semantic accounts of slur are problematic as they appear unable to explain how it is, if derogation is taken to be part of the literal content of slurs, that they can mean something non-derogatory or be felicitously applied in relation to some individuals who do not belong to the group typically associated with the slur. The semantic accounts fail to explain how slurs can communicate non-derogatory meaning between close in-group interlocutors as a means to strengthen the in-group solidarity.

The article shows that speakers can and do resort to swearwords and racist slurs as rapport-enhancing in-group solidarity markers since this kind of “mock impoliteness” is taken by all participants of communication to be intentionally non-offensive, i.e. that in this particular case the speakers has uttered the, otherwise racist, slurs without having racist beliefs or intentions.

Key words: *slurs, derogation, discriminatory language, euphemism, dysphemism.*

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