Raising hell:
On the hyper-projectivity of slurs

David Beaver[1] and Jason Stanley[2]

[1] The University of Texas at Austin
dib@utexas.edu
[2] Yale University
jason.stanley@yale.edu

Abstract

Mere mentions of a slur have the potential to do harm, assaulting a listener, perpetuating marginalization of oppressed groups, and solidifying oppressive practices. Whereas most projective meanings, such as presuppositions, are typically assumed to be blocked by quotation, some effects of slurs are found even when the slur is quoted. In this sense, slurs are *hyper-projective*. Our goal is to explain why. The material here is drawn from: David Beaver and Jason Stanley, *The Politics of Language*, Princeton University Press (in press), primarily from Chapter 10, "Oppressive Speech."

The resonances of swearwords and slurs (particularly when used in acts of slurring) inflict themselves painfully on hearers, and, like an inebriated gatecrasher at a party, draw collective attention, brash, enervating, and obdurate. These effects seem almost magical. How do we explain this in terms of the conventional properties of those words? We do not think slurs are magical. Quite the opposite. There is, unfortunately, no language more ordinary than slurs.

At the very least, a theory of slurs must account for three properties. Slurs are:

Ideologically revelatory: bringing a "complex of historical facts and constructed attitudes [...] to attention" although it's "hard [...] to discern exactly what those attitudes are, or what the precise historical facts being deployed are", as McCready and Davis [7] put it.

Exigent: forcibly impacting hearers' emotional states.

Hyper-projective: blurring the distinction between use and meaning.

We focus in this extended abstract on the last of the three properties.

Let us first briefly state the features of the framework we introduce in *The Politics of Language* [3], in terms of which our account of slurs will be stated. Words have *resonances*, all the things that are found in the contexts in which they are used. The degree to which a feature of context is a resonance of a communicative behavior is proportional to the boost in probability of the feature given that behavior. People and collections of people have *attunements*, which are ways of behaving, thinking and feeling about things. When people have attunements to a word, that means not only that they have theoretical knowledge of what the word means and how it fits into the grammar, but also that they have practical knowledge. That means that both their use of the word and their reactions to use of the word are appropriate for the community of practice within which the word is found. As we have set things up, resonance and attunement are two sides of the same coin. To be attuned to any practice is to have a tendency for change of behavior and state in accord with the resonances of the practice. Our notion of *harmony* concerns the fact that people feel dissonance when they sense a clash of salient attunements, and consonance when they feel alignment and coherence. As we have defined it, an *ideology* is a system of collective attunements of a community of practice, a system which the community has harmonized around. An important sub-type of ideologies for current

purposes are *discriminatory ideologies*, those that include attunements to in-group/out-group distinctions, and in which members of out-groups are valued less than members of in-groups, and hence as inherently deserving of less than equal treatment or resources.

Let us turn now to *hyper-projectivity*, which, as the name suggests, is a special type of *projectivity*. Projectivity is commonly thought of in terms of special inferences associated with expressions. What makes the inferences special is that they are found even when the expressions they are associated with are embedded under operators that tend to block ordinary entailments. For example, conditionals block entailments, so it is no surprise that the entailment from "Your car is worth over $5000" to "Your car is worth over $4000" is blocked when inside a conditional; the latter does not follow from "If your car is worth over $5000, you should sell it." However, another inference is associated with "Your car is worth over $5000", namely that the addressee has a car. This inference is not blocked by the conditional, since it follows from "If your car is worth over $5000, you should sell it." that the addressee has a car. Accordingly, the hearer's ownership of a car can be described as a projective inference. In this case, the explanation is standardly said to be that the possessive "your car" is a presupposition trigger, and the inference that the addressee has a car is said to be a presupposition.

The details of how presuppositions project in meta-linguistic environments (for example from quotative contexts) remain under-explored. Perhaps that is because projection in such environments has been assumed to be so limited that it cannot usefully be used to diagnose presupposition. What is empirically clear is that while presupposition projection is standardly taken to be more-or-less blocked by meta-linguistic embedding, some resonances of slurs project strongly from meta-linguistic environments. This is in fact the reason we, like many authors, avoid even mentioning the N-word (as opposed to referring to it indirectly with the awkward locution "the N-word"). Hyper-projective resonances are those which are clearly not plugged, but project from meta-linguistic environments.

Note that we speak of resonances rather than inferences. The idea is that neither the gut-punch effect on a target, nor the social-positioning effect, are simply propositions that a speaker intends to convey. Furthermore, we do not think it would be appropriate to term these effects *perlocutionary*. That would suggest that the function of the slur was to convey a certain proposition, and then there just happened to be some pragmatics that a sly speaker could exploit in order to strategically engineer negative effects on those slurred. While we do not argue the case in this short paper, we take it that both gut-punch and social-positioning effects are central to a slur's conventionalized function. Although our notion of what it is to be part of an expression's conventionalized meaning is itself somewhat non-standard, it will suffice for current purposes to think of the resonances of an expression as all aspects of the context that are to some extent conventionally present when the expression is used. These aspects of context include those that are effects of the use of the expression.

Some theories of slurs explain their effects in terms of presuppositions, and still others explain those effects as conventional implicatures. As regards hyper-projectivity, both presuppositional accounts and conventional implicature accounts make some headway. But it is hard for extant presuppositional accounts to explain why some presuppositions should be more projective than others. And while it is well established that conventional implicatures tend to be more projective than most presuppositions, neither conventional implicature accounts nor prior presuppositional accounts can explain why mere mentions should lead to any projection at all.

Now let us turn to our own theory of slurring. Here are the main points:

1. Slurring labels a target using a negatively evaluative term, a slur.

2. The label identifies the target with a disdained, despised or hated out-group category associated with stereotypical properties within a discriminatory ideology. Stereotypical

properties might include submissiveness, voicelessness, or technical incompetence.

3. The discriminatory ideology is presupposed by the slurring action. Labeling someone using the slur category draws attention to those aspects of the discriminatory ideology which define the category, and to any differences between the slurring ideology and other salient ideologies (such as that of a co-existing non-discriminatory ideology).

4. The resonances of the slur include these attentional and emotional effects on the target group, a range of attunements belonging to the presupposed discriminatory ideology, a demarcation of in-group and out-group, and power differentials between these groups.

5. For an in-group member, attunement to the slurring practice includes feeling such emotions as hatred, superiority, and alignment with the in-group when involved in a slurring interaction as speaker or hearer.

6. For an out-group member exposed to the slurring practice, attunement implies experience of painful loss of face, painful confrontation with the discriminatory ideology to which attention has been drawn, and further dissonance. The dissonance involves a dramatic conflict between desired private face and public face, and in many cases between a desired way of life and life as a member of an oppressed group.

As an example, let's pick the relatively mild slur "muppet", which is conventionalized in the UK to suggest something similar to "airhead" in the US. The resonances of "muppet" build on associations with the soft puppets that came to fame in the US children's show Sesame Street, and are suggestive of someone who tends not to act or speak in an incisive, intelligent, or self-directed way. The resonances of "muppet" include not just the features that an individual so-described might be expected to have, but also emotions, dispositions, and cognitive attitudes.

The emotions, dispositions, and cognitive attitudes on the speaker's side are different than those on the target's side. Emotionally, it is clear that the speaker looks down on the intelligence of the target. The speaker is expected to feel superior, and the target inferior. Dispositionally, the resonances include ways of using "muppet", and ways of reacting to it. A resonance of the term is that it is not simply used to insult people, although it can be, but is also used to upbraid people in a mildly affectionate manner - "You muppet!" To be attuned to the UK "muppet" practice is to use it appropriately, and to react to its use appropriately, for example not feeling cut to the bone when somebody calls you a muppet, but rather feeling a little sheepish about whatever unfortunate thing you have done without thinking properly.

The ideology associated with slurring use of "muppet" includes various practices of using the word, but also ideas about the type of intelligent and independent behavior that can be expected of people. Insulting uses of the term betray people's values: the slurring use of "muppet" always belittles the target's competence, and a harsher use ("Get the f- out of my way you stupid f-ing muppet"), although far from being a strong slur, further betrays a perceived differential in competence, and possibly power, between speaker and target.

Similar remarks apply to the Southern US use of "precious", in phrases like "Aren't you precious!", except that here being fully attuned to it means reacting to its use in a way that reflects the fact that you are probably not being complimented, but insulted. Southern US "precious" and other expressions which damn with praise ("Bless your heart!") are associated with an ideology in which a distinction is made between two types of people: those that have got it together and keep things running as they ought, and a second group about whom the best we can say is that they are, e.g., cute, or at least deserving of the good lord's love, but are functionally less than fully competent. It is important to our analysis that slurs do not merely label, and do not merely draw attention to ideology, but simultaneously produce negative and often painful emotions. Slurs destroy self-image, publicly shame, and can thereby also silence.

They have power. To resist the immediate attentional and emotional effects of the slur is difficult. But it is certainly possible to actively resist the silencing effect of slurs. In reaction to the use of the N-word by white TV personality Bill Maher, the rapper Ice Cube, who is Black, compared the power of the N-word to the stab of the knife, which wounds independently of the intentions of the speaker: "You know, it's a word that has been used against us. It's like a knife, man. You can use it as a weapon or you can use it as a tool. [....] It's not cool because when I hear my homie say it, it don't feel like venom. When I hear a white person say it, it feel like that knife stabbing you, even if they don't mean to." (Real Time with Bill Maher", 9 June 2017) [5].

The primary point of names is to draw attention to individuals. Descriptive names like vocative uses of the appellations "Professor" or "Private," simultaneously draw attention both to a person and to a role. The attention any name draws to an individual is hyper-projective. Even if one uses a name within quotation marks, the audience's attention is still drawn to its referent. In a similar way, the function of insults is to draw attention to despised characteristics of an individual. To slur is to label an individual or group with a despised role within a discriminatory ideology. Note that simply naming an ideology draws attention to the ideology, but is not offensive. We can refer to fascism, racism, or sexism without offending, unless someone thinks that by doing so we are also labeling them as having a despised ideology. Using the terms does not necessarily cause anyone to lose public face. The victim of a name-calling act of slurring loses public face, and will recognize that public loss of face to the extent that they are attuned to the utterance situation. The offensiveness and hurtfulness of a slur depends on its drawing attention to aspects of an ideology which are offensive to a person who is slurred, because the ideology debases that person, and normalizes oppressive practices against them.

We take the hyper-projectivity of slurs to consist in the fact that mere mentions of some slurs, including quotative uses, can cause offense. The N-word is the clearest case. Here is Jyoti Rao, an academic psychotherapist, discussing situations in which the N-word is mentioned or quoted as an object of study at academic conferences [8]:

> What happens after the slur is uttered has been equally consistent, and equally notable. Some small part of the group, typically comprising the few people of color and others present who come from marginalized backgrounds, attempt to bring attention to what they have just experienced. Often, they express palpable pain, clearly expressing the destabilizing effect of hearing a word strongly associated with white supremacy spoken at a conference. Aside from occupying a marginalized social identity, those speaking are frequently earlier in their career; hold positions as graduate students, junior faculty, or analytic candidates; are less financially secure; and are speaking to people with greater institutional, organizational, and other forms of power. In response to hearing from these participants, the user of the word, and several other white people in the group, seem mobilized to counter what has been reported about the consequences of the epithet's use. They begin to explain that speaking the n-word is benign, even salutary, and advocate for why the word should be used freely by white people and psychoanalysts. In all the cases I have seen, the person using the word, as well as the people roused in support, have appeared unmoved, unreceptive, and unapologetic, even when it is repeatedly pointed out to them that their speech has caused harm.

Mere mentions of a slur have the potential to do harm. They perpetuate marginalization of oppressed groups, and solidify oppressive practices.

Note here that the philosophy and linguistics literature is peppered with slurs. We take it

that those quoting or mentioning slurs in this literature are not being intentionally vindictive. Rather, it is the result of an error, due to the acceptance of a certain interpretation of the use-mention distinction, a distinction at the heart of contemporary analytic study of meaning. According to this dogma, merely mentioned or quoted language is in some sense inert. It is as if quotes or italics were a lead-lined box, so the scholar who uses these devices cannot possibly be risking harm with the radioactive material inside. But theoretical prejudice should not interfere with reality. So let us just say this. How can the scholar know that their belief that a quoted slur will cause no harm is correct? If some evidence should arise suggesting that someone was harmed by exposure to a mere mention, would that not indicate that maybe it would be better to treat at least certain slurs a little more carefully, perhaps being very sure that there is no reasonable alternative to mentioning them before doing so?

Even if, like Bianca Cepollaro [4], one has a theory that treats slurs as not capable of being contextually cancelled, it remains mysterious, on any standard account, why even quoting slurs should be objectionable, or how it could possibly be a source of harm. We can explain this straightforwardly in terms of attention. Drawing attention to something does not require use. The mere mention of a word can suffice to draw attention to something. If in a report on an important news event, say concerning revelations of spying, one paragraph includes a quote from an anonymous official that mentions you by name, you are sure to soon find reporters at your door. By mentioning you, the report has drawn attention to you. If someone mentions the combination of a safe in a quote, e.g. "I heard Marie muttering the number 1673", they have drawn attention to the number, which may or may not have security implications.

Let us briefly head off a potential objection to our suggestion that attention is primary. Some might point out that when something is mentioned, the Gricean maxim of Relevance can then explain the communicative significance of the mention. On this view, when a hearer encounters a mention of a term, they must then reconstruct the intention of the speaker in mentioning whatever it is. The reason why Jason keeps mentioning figure skating news, the hearer might reason, is because he wants people to think about his recent Olympic figure skating success. We completely agree that such reasoning processes occur, and that they can explain aspects of the communicative significance of mentions, including mentions of slurs.

Joe Biden once caricatured former New York City Mayor Rudolph Guiliani by saying "There's only three things he mentions in a sentence – a noun, a verb, and 9/11." What he was referencing was Giuliani's habit of drawing attention to the terrorist destruction of the World Trade Center, and hence his role in the city's recovery. Although it might be argued that Giuliani was simply obsessed by the event, it seems more plausible that, as Biden was implicitly suggesting, Giuliani was strategically mentioning 9/11. Donald Trump has a habit of beginning sentences with "People say...." and related locutions. The discursive logic of this strategy is multifaceted, but at least part of it is that allows Trump to draw attention to ideas without taking responsibility for them. An authoritarian leader needs to be a master of attention. Sometimes the strategic point of an utterance is to draw attention to something.

However, as an explanation of the direct emotive and attentional effects of slurs, such a strategic explanation is backwards. Relevance does not explain attentional effects. It's rather the case that a premise of relevance-based argumentation is that the speaker has drawn attention to something. The question the Gricean theorist asks is: why has the speaker drawn attention to it? The question we ask is: given that the speaker has drawn attention to something, what effects will that have independently of what the speaker's intention was. We do not dispute that there are effects that should be explained in terms of the speaker's intention, or indeed that such reasoning is important in considering what form of counterspeech is appropriate (e.g., blame and censure vs. education). What we dispute is that considerations of the speaker's

motivations are needed to explain the exigent power of the slur, its hyper-projectivity, or its ideological revelatoriness. And our explanation for hyper-projectivity centers on a claim that we take to be somewhat self-evident: **the attention drawing power of any construction is not plugged by quotation, or, for that matter, by other meta-linguistic embeddings**.

Uses of slurs in labeling and address practices are associated with a diverse mixture of other practices that form part of the oppressive ideology to which the slur belongs. For example, the use of a racial slur might be associated with practices of commanding, prohibiting, punishing, or blaming. All of these further practices have linguistic dimensions, but their existence does not need to be explained by a special theory of the linguistic properties of slurs. It is rather the case that part of the power of (some) slurs is derived through the resonances they have due to other practices that they are associated with. Using a slur to name-call can presuppose the right of the speaker, and all within the speaker's in-group, to command, prohibit, punish or blame the addressee, and all within the addressee's in-group. These are powerful presuppositions. But again, one does not need a special theory of slurs, or of presupposition, to explain that power: the power is derived from the system of oppression within which the slur is set, combined with the far more general account of social attunement and presupposition.

In a series of papers, Luvell Anderson, Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone [1, 2, 6] explain various properties of slurs, including hyper-projectivity, as resulting from the existence of taboo. Leaving aside the question of whether this counts as an explanation (one might worry that the "explanation" is that it is offensive to mention slurs because they are unmentionable without causing offense), or whether it can possibly explain which specific resonances project and which don't, there is something right about it. The fact that something is taboo means that mentioning it will immediately catch listeners' attention, and indeed lead to the suspicion that the purpose of mentioning it was to call it to the listeners' attention. Perversely, the social development of taboos around slurs strengthens their effectiveness, by increasing their attention-drawing power. However, the development of these taboos does not so much explain anything about slurs, as add to the complexity of generalizing. For a taboo is itself an idiosyncratic complex of practices. These practices include counterspeech, censorship and education, all of which are applied in different ways for different slurs, and for which their application varies over time. What have been deemed as acceptable mentions of the N-word have evolved continuously during our own lifetimes. We do not have hard data on the nature of any changes in which uses or mentions of the N-word by which people offend which other people in what way and to what extent, but we feel confident in saying that the facts of the matter have not been static.

The non-taboo nature of "muppet" and the oft-slurring adjective "precious" is illustrative of a problem with using taboo as the basis of an explanation, rather than something that itself needs to be theorized, because the taboos relevant to even the paradigmatic cases of racial slurs are complex. It would be at the very least a gross oversimplification to maintain that in the reconstruction-era South the N-word was taboo, when an officer of the law could openly use it as a term of address. It was a word in general use in a powerful community of practice. And it was a powerful word. How can the power of a word, it's *exigence* as we have termed it, be explained by the illicitness of using it if those with power feel its use is licit? Similarly, the *revelatoriness* of slurs, their ability to bring to the fore an ugly discriminatory ideology, is not explained by their taboo nature, but is rather largely responsible for the imposition of societal taboos. Last, the *hyper-projectivity* of slurs is not explained by their taboo nature. Rather, hyper-projectivity is part of what makes the taboos against using some slurs so sweeping.

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