Slurs and obscenities:
lexicography, semantics, and philosophy

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Draft of January 16, 2016

1 Introduction

I need to begin this chapter with a parental warning. I will be discussing language that US Federal Communications Commission regulations would class as "so grossly offensive to members of the public who actually hear it as to amount to a nuisance." The fact that I mention or exemplify the expressions in question, and never use them, would make no difference to the FCC: broadcasters are fined for even accidental and unforeseen mentions of such terms on the air between 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. Nor would it make any difference to most members of the general public: ordinary people do not typically draw or recognize the use/mention distinction as applied to offensive words. Mere acoustic or inscriptional realization of these words, no matter what the intent, causes the offense (or at least, gives people grounds to act as if offended: the offendedness is not always genuine).[1]

Some of the words I will be discussing are also forbidden in material published by *The New York Times* and those publications that follow its style (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, for example): *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* states that the newspaper "virtually never prints obscene words, and it maintains a steep threshold for vulgar ones" and "also forgoes offensive or coy hints" such as *full of s--t* for *full of shit* (Siegal and Connolly 1999:241).

Yet explicit mention of the phrases in question is essential for the purposes of the linguistic and lexicographical work I undertake here. I have witnessed not just journalists but philosophers of language employing prim euphemisms ("the N-word") or awkward circumlocutions with variables

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[1]A professor at York University in Toronto in 2011 explained in the first session of a class on "Self, Culture, and Society" that he would not allow arbitrary expressions of opinion in class discussion: you can't say something like "All Jews should be sterilized" and represent that as acceptable just because it's your opinion, he explained. He was promptly reported by a 22-year-old senior for anti-semitism. When it was pointed out to her that he had not been making the assertion complained of, but expressing disapproval of any such assertion, she responded that the words "still came out of his mouth." See the *Toronto Star*, September 14, 2011 (http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2011/09/14/jewish_prof_forced_to_defend_himself_against_antisemitism_claims.html).

("consider a slur term S"), but such techniques would not be feasible here. So I give fair warning: if you object to seeing obscene words or offensive epithets in print, this is not a chapter you should be reading.

2 Dimensions of meaning

Modern philosophers of language are familiar with the fact that there are many distinct aspects to the extraordinarily complex matter of the impact of uttering a sentence. Following Potts (2005), I distinguish at least the following components: (i) the '**at-issue**' propositional content—the core of what is linguistically represented in a direct way; (ii) the **presuppositions** of the asserted content; (iii) the associated **conventional implicatures**; and (iv) what is conveyed through **conversational implicature** when the sentence is uttered in a specific context.

Some aspects of context-dependent utterance effects would fall under the heading of meaning only under an extremely vague construal of that term. For example, the complex and subtle notion of "social meaning" explored in Eckert (2008) would not be recognized as meaning by most philosophers of language. She considers what are known as "variables" within sociolingistics— potentially quite subtle utterance properties like saying *singin'* instead of *singing*, or making a clearly audible *t*-sound rather than a virtually silent one at the end of a word like *right*—and notes that "variables do not have static meanings, but rather general meanings that become more specific in the context of styles."

She holds that the meanings of sociolinguistic variables "are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings—an indexical field, or constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable." This is highly relevant to the use of (potentially) offensive words like *fuck* or (potentially) abusive terms like *dyke*, but it would not be considered to fall within the area of semantics and pragmatics as standardly understood in philosophy or theoretical linguistics, and I will prescind away from it here.

What I shall be concerned with is mostly other such additional facts about linguistic expressions that competent speakers usually know, facts that do not form part of the inherent meaning of the expressions but may influence pragmatic interpretation or have other effects on the impact of an utterance in context: style and tone; esthetic properties; social effects of honorific forms; vulgarity or politeness; offensiveness or coarseness; and so on.

Oy! is a rude way to get someone's attention; *whom* is formal, even pompous; *pulchritude* may mean "beauty" but sounds ugly; *madam* may sound oleaginously fawning rather than just polite; *dick* is a coarser word for "penis" than *willy*; that sort of thing.

All sorts of properties of words, including those that Eckert would call variables, are tacitly perceived, to varying degrees, by ordinary speakers. For example, nearly all speakers of English perceive the pompous character of *whom*: its frequency at the beginning of a sentence or clause has fallen to approximately zero in modern conversation (Biber et al. 1999:214). Using it (*Whom do you wish to visit?*) might imply exalted status of the utterer, or coldness and distaste for the

addressee. Its non-normal flavor is a very important fact about it, sociolinguistically, but cannot be said to be a fact about its linguistic meaning: *Whom did you meet?* means exactly what *Who did you meet?* means.

To refer to such extraneous facts about the properties and effects of words, I will use Geoffrey Nunberg's useful term **metadata** (Nunberg, 2015). I think my use of it is roughly consistent with his; if I diverge, I hope my examples will make it clear how.

To some extent there may be metadata facts about grammatical constructions as well as words: preposing prepositions in open interrogatives (*At which station did you leave it?*) is distinctly formal, possibly even pompous; the *WXDY* construction studied by Kay and Fillmore (1999) (*What are you doing hiding behind the couch?*) implies that the utterer regards the condition specified after *doing* as somehow inappropriate or incongruous; and so on. But here I will leave properties of constructions aside, and concentrate on metadata properties of the individual words that are listed in dictionaries.

3   Expletives

In *The Logic of Conventional Implicatures* (2005), Christopher Potts proposes a theory of the meaning contributions of expressions that provides explicitly for conventional implicatures. It represents natural language semantics as more elaborate than traditionally assumed: each sentence has both a main and a subsidiary meaning contribution, the main one being the at-issue meaning with its attendant presuppositions and the subsidiary one being a conventional implicature.

The latter term, when introduced as something of a side issue by Grice (1975) in his study of the logic of conversation, was somewhat nebulous, but Potts clarifies things considerably, stressing that a conventional implicature of a word or grammatical construction conveys a proposition other than the main contribution such that (i) the commitment to that proposition is uncancelable in the sense that the utterer cannot consistently deny it; (ii) the proposition does not arise pragmatically but stems from part of the conventional meaning of the word or grammatical construction; (iii) the commitment to the proposition is attributable solely to the utterer, in virtue of the utterer's decision to pick that word or grammatical construction; and (iv) the proposition is logically independent of the main contribution in the sense that it could have a different truth value.

Parenthetical *as*-phrase adjuncts are an example of a construction conveying conventional implicatures. Suppose I utter this sentence:

(1)   *War, as Churchill said, is hell.*

The main contribution is that war is hell. But in addition, (i) it conveys that I am committed to the subsidiary proposition that Churchill once said "War is hell," and I cannot consistently deny that; (ii) it conveys the subsidiary proposition because of the conventional meaning of parenthetical *as*-phrases; (iii) the subsidiary proposition is attributable solely to me; and (iv) whether Churchill once made the statement expressed in the subsidiary proposition is logically independent of whether war

is hell (even if Churchill never said "War is hell," which is probably the case, that doesn't make (1) false; its truth depends solely on whether war is hell).

The adjective *damn* also conveys a conventional implicature in a sentence like (2), which conveys an uncancellable commitment of a rather vague sort, roughly that the utterer is distinctly emotional about the current situation, most likely irritated by it:

(2)   *Someone's stolen my damn phone.*

That commitment is solely due to the conventional meaning of the expletive, and is attributable solely to the utterer. Importantly, *damn*, though in the structural position of an attributive modifier, does not denote any property attributed to the phone, which may be much-loved and indispensable. (It is one of the attributive-only adjectives described in Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Chapter 6, and it is a clear counterexample to the traditional definition of adjectives as words used to qualify the meaning of nouns.) And again, the attitudinal content conveyed by *damn* is logically independent of the assertion about the phone having been stolen.

One further example of a class of items conveying conventional implicatures (all three examples will be of use later) is found in pejorative anaphoric epithets like *bastard* in (3).

(3)   *I need Doug here in the office, but Sue says <u>the bastard</u> is drunk.*

This conveys (a) an uncancellable commitment to a deprecative attitude toward Doug that is (b) due to the conventional meaning of the epithet *the bastard*, (c) attributable solely to the utterer—not, for example, to Sue—and (d) logically independent of the assertion, which is true given only that the utterer needs Doug in the office and Sue says Doug is drunk.

4   Swearwords and slurs

Words like *fuck* (and its derivatives), whether in their swearword uses or their literal uses, are widely judged crude and offensive in many contexts. In some ways they are as taboo as abusive terms for minority groups like *nigger* and *dyke*, though the legislative backdrop for them is the FCC regulation of offensive speech rather than the laws and regulations relating to hate speech. However, words like *fuck* differ linguistically from slurs, which will be my main concern, in crucially important ways, and I need to distinguish the two classes of word clearly. For this reason, before proceeding, I need to explain why I regard Hom (2012) as entirely misguided in making his surprising attempt to unify the literal uses of obscene words like *fuck* with their purely expletive uses, under the auspices of a theory that also covers ethnic slur terms.

Hom defends a view that he calls **combinatorial externalism**, under which the straight descriptive component of a verb like *fuck* (primarily, that it denotes the act of copulation) is combined with some complex additional content. His semantic analysis of *fuck* is based on a generalized version of his analysis of slurs like *nigger* or *dyke*. For the most part I will try to step around the details of his complex formalization (which may not accurately reflect his intent: see footnote 2).

We can take the word *dyke* as a relatively simple example. In broad outline, Hom would claim that there is a dramatic difference of a semantic nature between using the term *dyke* and using the term *lesbian*. Saying that someone is a lesbian merely says she is a woman sexually oriented toward women. But using *dyke*, in Hom's view, amounts to saying that the referent ought to be subject to various discriminatory practices $p_1, \ldots, p_n$ on the grounds that she possesses certain stereotypical properties $d_1, \ldots, d_k$ in consequence of being a lesbian.

For concreteness we can assume that the discriminatory practices $p_1, \ldots, p_n$ would be such things as being denied accommodation in bed-and-breakfast places, being banned from working with children, etc.; and the stereotypical properties $d_1, \ldots, d_k$ would presumably be such things as being sinful, lustful, immoral, and given to unnatural practices. According to Hom, the user of a term like *dyke* actually attributes properties of this sort, simply by using the word.

One curious consequence of Hom's view—which he insists is one of its virtues—is that **slurs have empty extensions**. The set of people who ought to be subject to discriminative practices solely because of their immutable characteristics, he reasons, is the empty set: no one can ever be identified or referenced by such a noun. A statement like *There's a dyke at the table by the window and she says her soup is cold* cannot ever be true, because the existential in the first conjunct cannot be true.

Moreover, for Hom it is **a priori** that slurs have an empty extension: he regards it as an obvious conceptual truth that no one deserves contempt in virtue of an inherent aspect of their nature. (This seems to me to conflict with Stephen Jay Gould's famous dictum that human equality is a contingent fact of history: if there were a genetically definable class of people whose biology made them inherently murderous and depraved psychopaths, I think we might appropriately be prejudiced against them, and it is surely only a contingent fact if there aren't any.)

Hom (2012) generalizes his analysis of slurs to cover verbs like *fuck* by allowing for the normative property to have arbitrary arity: the meaning of *dyke* is unary, and the meaning of the verb *fuck* is binary, but the rest of the analysis is similar: the verb *fuck*, he maintains, conveys in addition to the core meaning "have penetrative sexual intercourse with" a slew of judgmental overtones related to the societal disapproval of sexual intercourse under some conditions.

Let $F(a, b)$ stand for the proposition corresponding to English *Albert had penetrative sexual intercourse with Beryl*. Hom sees *Albert fucked Beryl* as entailing that Albert ought to be subject to various deontic prescriptions $p_1, \ldots, p_m$ because of having the undesirable properties $d_1, \ldots, d_j$, and Beryl ought to be subject to various deontic prescriptions $p'_1, \ldots, p'_n$ because of having the undesirable properties $d'_1, \ldots, d'_k$, all of this being a consequence of the proposition $F(a, b)$.

Here the $p_1, \ldots, p_m$ (the practices Albert deserves to be subject to) might be things like being scorned as a cad, ostracized from decent society, and/or condemned to eternal hell fire; the $p'_1, \ldots, p'_n$ (the practices Beryl deserves to be subject to) might be things like being treated as damaged goods, regarded as less desirable, and/or condemned to hell; the $d_1, \ldots, d_j$ (bad properties stereotypically attributable to Albert) might include being lustful and dissolute; and the $d'_1, \ldots, d'_k$ (bad properties stereotypically attributable to Beryl) might include being impure, unladylike, de-

filed, and/or sinful.[2]

Having proposed that this is all built into the lexical semantics of the verb *fuck*, Hom then sets out to account for the expletive uses of the word by connecting their force to the connotations of transgressiveness in the meaning of the verb, generally through a kind of metaphorical extension. Thus *fuck up* can mean 'damage or make worse' because one of the components of the complex property that *fuck* expresses is the property of being damaged; *fucker* can mean 'disagreeable person' because one of the components of the complex property that *fuck* expresses is the property of being blameworthy for a norm-transgressing act; and so on.

But Hom does not attempt a systematic review of all of the senses of this versatile root and its derivatives. I attempt such a list in Table 1 (it is probably not exhaustive).

ROOT	CATEGORY	EXAMPLE
fuck	verb of sexual activity (intransitive)	*Let's fuck.*
	verb of sexual activity (transitive)	*Rex fucked Priscilla.*
	prepositional verb with *off*	*I wish he'd just fuck off.*
	prepositional verb with *around*	*Don't fuck around with that.*
	prepositional verb with *up*	*Just don't fuck (it) up.*
	prepositional verb with *over*	*We really got fucked over.*
	noun denoting sexual activity	*We enjoy a good fuck.*
	noun denoting a despised person	*I'll strangle that little fuck.*
	noun used as *wh*-word augment	*What the fuck was that?*
	interjection (intransitive)	*Oh fuck, it's from the IRS.*
	interjection (transitive)	*Fuck you!*
fucked	adjective ("in trouble")	*Now we're really fucked.*
fucker	noun ("disagreeable person or thing")	*Don't go out with that ugly fucker.*
fucking	intensificatory degree adverb	*Her talk was fucking good.*
	expletive adjective signaling irritation	*Where's that fucking cat?*
	expletive adverb signaling irritation	*It turns out they'd fucking sold it.*

Table 1: Some uses of the protean root *fuck* and its derivatives

I submit that it is more than just somewhat far-fetched to attempt to unite all of these items under a single semantic description as Hom suggests; it is a clear lexicographical mistake.

For one thing, as Hom notes (2012: 386–387), Potts (2005, 2007, 2012) provides evidence that the expletive uses are syntactically distinct from the literal ones, in virtue of at least two special syntactic properties.

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[2] In the paragraph above I have corrected some consequences of Hom's formalization (2012: 395) that I don't think he could have intended. His formulation appears to entail that $p_1, \ldots, p_m = p'_1, \ldots, p'_n$ and $d_1, \ldots, d_j = d'_1, \ldots, d'_k$, hence that $m = n$ and $j = k$. But it is clear from his text that he assumes the discriminatory practices and bad properties might in fact be different for the different arguments of the predicate F.

The first property is that the expletives can be infixed into words under a rather peculiar partially phonological condition that is basically limited to a very small range of items, overwhelmingly dominated by swearword adjectives (*fucking*, *bloody*, *goddamn*, etc.).

The resulting form has a playful, expressive character; infixing is not a normal feature of ordinary English word formation (Zwicky and Pullum 1987). The precise conditions may vary slightly from speaker to speaker (McCawley, 1978), but simplifying a bit we can say that an infix must be located immediately before a heavily stressed syllable and must have a syllable with at least some stress preceding it in the word (for a more technical treatment of the details, see (McCarthy, 1982)). The Randall Munroe cartoon in Figure 1 testifies that nonlinguists are at least partially aware of the conditions.
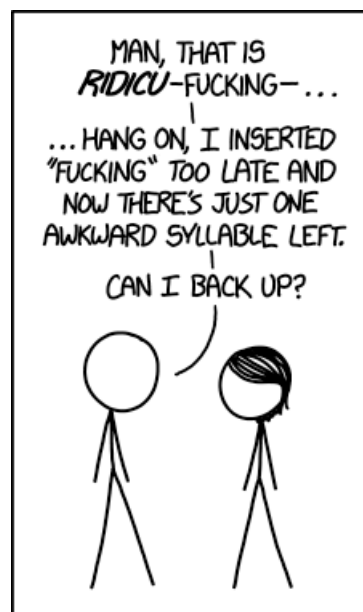

Figure 1: An xkcd cartoon by Randall Munroe

It is particularly striking (indeed, unprecedented in the rest of English morphology) that the infixation can put the expletive not just between words in a phrase (*Good bloody luck*) or between morphemes in a polymorphemic word (*inter-goddamn-national*), but even interrupting a monomorphemic word such as a place name or personal name, if the word has the right prosodic structure:

(4)   a.   *I don't care what Ara-bloody-**béll**a thinks.*

        b.   **I don't care what **Jénn**-bloody-ifer thinks.*

        c.   *I'm not going all the way to Kalama-fucking-**zóo**!*

        d.   **I'm not going all the way to **Kán**-fucking-sas!*

The second syntactically special feature of expletives is that they can interrupt constructions that normally appear to demand exact identity between specific phrases (see Potts et al. 2009 for a survey of a number of these constructions). For example, constructions like *as <u>rich</u> as <u>rich</u> can be* and *<u>personal bodyguard</u> or no <u>personal bodyguard</u>* superficially seem to demand exact identity between the underlined parts. Nonidentity seems to wreck the acceptability:

(5)   a.   **He was as rich as fortunate can be.*

        b.   **We'll get him, personal bodyguard or no hired protection.*

However, expletive modifiers do not count: they can interrupt such constructions quite freely:

(6)   a.   *He was as rich as fucking rich can be.*

        b.   *We'll get him, personal bodyguard or no goddamn personal body-fucking-guard.*

(For an explanation of why it is precisely those items that are exempt from the identity-checking, which actually depends on inertness with respect to at-issue semantics, see Pullum and Rawlins 2007.)

Hom queries this linguistic evidence, but quite unconvincingly. The two generalizations are well confirmed on the basis of attested data as well as intuition. I will not rehearse the arguments in detail; they are given in Potts's work and in Pullum and Rawlins (2007).

Hom does propose an account of how we could get from the verb that he regards as meaning (roughly) "have morally impermissible sex" to the truth-conditionally inert expletive. He claims (2012:399) that it is a matter of **conversational** implicature. Starting from a literal interpretation of *fucking couch* as meaning "couch where morally impermissible sex takes place" he holds that hearers may reason their way to the correct expletive reading for an utterance like (7).

(7)   *The dog is on the fucking couch.*

If in the context there is no reason to raise the topic of morally impermissible sex or to connect such sex with the couch (say, if the couch has only just been delivered and no one has even sat on it yet), Hom proposes that the hearer will assume that the intent must be to convey the strong emotional reaction that would attend upon any reference to a couch where morally impermissible sex takes place.

But this simply will not generalize. Suppose two mathematicians are collaborating on devising a proof that will only go through if all the numbers in a certain set X are prime, and suddenly one of them, realizing that the proof is doomed because 974,069 has to be in X, exclaims:

(8)   *Damn it; 974,069 isn't a fucking prime!*

Hom has to posit a conversational implicature computed from a literal meaning involving prime numbers that are somehow associated with morally impermissible sexual intercourse. Indefinitely many such cases show that his story about the conveyed meaning of expletives is completely implausible.

So from here on I will assume that at least the literal sexual sense of an item like *fuck* must be kept separate from the diverse expletive uses of items based on that root. (I also assume that Potts's conventional implicature account of the force of the expletive use of *fucking* is correct. That will have little or no relevance to what follows, but see the Appendix.)

5   The lexicography of slurs

I now return to the expressions commonly known as slurs. I argue that they are very different from expletives. First, they do not have any special syntactic properties: they are just very ordinary common nouns. And second, they do not entail or conventionally implicate the derogatory attributions that they are commonly held to incorporate as part of their meaning.

English has many words that might be classified as slurs or at least mildly derogatory terms, differing widely in their offensiveness. Some examples are given in (9).

(9)   *asshole*, *bastard*, *bitch*, *chav* [BrE], *chink*, *cunt*, *dick*, *doofus*, *dyke*, *harridan*, *minx*, *moron*, *nigger*, *pig*, *prick*, *queer*, *sissy*, *slob*, *slut*, *twit*, *vixen*, *weasel*, *wimp*, *witch*

Some of these receive accurate definitions in dictionaries, but others, particularly in *The American Heritage Dictionary* (*AHD*), show peculiar semantic errors. The following subsections provide examples.

5.1   Straight entries

For some slurs or slurlike derogatory words, *AHD*) gives reasonably accurate and unproblematic accounts of the semantics. The following is a nonexhaustive selection of examples taken, for convenience, from the *AHD*'s online edition.

(10)   **asshole**   n.   *Vulgar Slang*
                          1. The anus.
                          2. A contemptible or detestable person.
                          3. The most miserable or undesirable place in a particular area.

(11)   **doofus**   n. *Slang* An incompetent, foolish, or stupid person.

(12)   **twit**   n. 1. *Informal* A foolishly annoying person.   . . .

(13)   **twat**   n.   1.   *Vulgar Slang* The vulva.
                           2.   *Offensive & Vulgar Slang* A woman or girl.
                           3.   *Vulgar Slang* A foolish or contemptible person.

(14)   **wimp**   n. A timid or unadventurous person.   . . .

These meaning descriptions tell it like it is. For example, according to (14) you're a wimp if and only if you're timid or unadventurous.

However, other words that are similar in their general affect and style level, are given meanings that get the truth conditions hopelessly wrong. I will group them according to the kind of entry they get in *AHD*.

5.2   The 'considered to be' entries

The underlined words in (15) have the curious function of turning a basically defensible entry for the word into one that assigns a completely wrong meaning.

(15)   **bitch**   n.   1.   A female canine animal, especially a dog.
                           2.   *Offensive* A woman <u>considered to be</u> mean, overbearing, or
                                contemptible . . .

The problem here should be immediately apparent, but since *AHD* editors seem not to have appreciated it, I will make it explicit. The problem is that when I claim some woman is a bitch I do not intend to claim that she is considered by a person or persons unknown to be mean, overbearing, or contemptible. That would be a claim about the wider society. I mean (roughly) that the woman actually IS mean, overbearing, or contemptible. My claim is about her, not about other people's opinions of her.

The entry for *bitch* is not an isolated slip. Here are some more examples from the same dictionary.

(16) **minx** n. 1. A girl or young woman who is <u>considered to be</u> impudent or very flirtatious.
2. *Obsolete* A promiscuous woman.

(17) **moron** n. 1. A person who is <u>considered</u> foolish or stupid...

(18) **prick** n. 7. *Vulgar Slang* A person <u>considered to be</u> mean or contemptible, especially a man.

(19) **slut** n. 1. *Often Offensive* A person <u>considered to be</u> sexually promiscuous...

(20) **witch** n. 1. A person, especially a woman, claiming or popularly believed to possess magical powers and practice sorcery.
2. A believer or follower of Wicca; a Wiccan.
3. a. *Offensive* An old woman <u>considered to be</u> ugly or frightening.
b. A woman <u>considered to be</u> spiteful or overbearing.
c. *Informal* A woman or girl <u>considered to be</u> charming or fascinating.
4. One particularly skilled or competent at one's craft...

5.3   The 'regarded as' entries

Another class of wrong glossed slurs have entries containing the phrase "regarded as" or "regard as being". Consider the *AHD* entry in (21):

(21) **sissy** n. 1. A person <u>regarded as</u> timid or cowardly.
2. *Offensive* A boy or man <u>regarded as</u> effeminate ...

Tommy, the protagonist in the country song "Coward of the County" (by Roger Bowling and Billy Ed Wheeler; recorded by Kenny Rogers in 1979) is the perfect counterexample. Tommy was universally regarded as timid rather than brave: "Everyone considered him the coward of the county," the lyrics tell us; "He'd never stood one single time to prove the county wrong." But in due course (in revenge for the gang rape of his girlfriend) he reveals both courage and aggressiveness,

and in a three-on-one bare-knuckle fight with the Gatlin Boys he leaves all of them unconscious on a barroom floor. Yet under the *AHD* definition, Tommy was a sissy: he was "A person regarded as timid or cowardly." The truth conditions the *AHD* provides are completely wrong.

Numerous other entries have the same problem. Here a selected few:

(22) **bastard** n. 1. *Offensive* A person born to parents not married to each other.
                    2. *Slang* a. A person <u>considered to be</u> mean or contemptible. . . .

(23) **dick** n. 1. *Vulgar* A penis.
              2. *Vulgar* A person, especially a man, <u>regarded as</u> mean or contemptible.

(24) **harridan** n. 1. A woman <u>regarded as</u> critical and scolding.

(25) **pig** n. 1. a. Any of various mammals of the family Suidae . . .
            2. a. *Informal* A person <u>regarded as being</u> piglike, greedy, or disgusting.
                b. *Derogatory Slang* A police officer.
                c. *Slang* A member of the social or political establishment, especially one holding sexist or racist views.

(26) **slob** n. *Informal* A person <u>regarded as</u> slovenly, crude, or obnoxious.

(27) **vixen** n. 1. A female fox.
              2. A woman <u>regarded as</u> quarrelsome or ill-tempered.

(28) **weasel** n. 1. Any of various carnivorous mammals of the genus Mustela. . .
              2. A person <u>regarded as</u> sneaky or treacherous.

Again, the dictionary makers have botched the truth conditions. You don't get to be a weasel by being merely regarded as sneaky or treacherous; you have to actually be sneaky or treacherous to merit that description.

5.4 The 'used as' entries

There are also some entries that avoid giving a gloss altogether, and simply talk metalinguistically about what the word is used for, as if it were like *hello* or *ouch* or *whoops*:

(29) **chav** n. *Chiefly British Offensive Slang* <u>Used as a disparaging term for</u> a poor or uneducated young person, especially one who behaves in a brash or vulgar manner and wears ostentatious clothing and jewelry.

Hom's example *Chink* also gets a 'used as' entry:

(30)   **Chink**   n.   *Offensive Slang* <u>Used as a disparaging term for</u> a person of Chinese
          descent.

And so do a number of other words:

(31)   **cunt**   n.   1. *Vulgar Slang* The vagina or vulva.
          2. *Offensive Slang*
          a. <u>Used as a disparaging term for</u> a woman.
          b. <u>Used as a disparaging term for</u> a person one dislikes or finds
          extremely disagreeable.

(32)   **dyke**   n.   *Offensive Slang* <u>Used as a disparaging term for</u> a lesbian.

(33)   **queer**   n.   1. *Offensive Slang* <u>Used as a disparaging term for</u> a gay man or a
          lesbian.   …

The most notorious word among the "used as" entries is the most central and controversial slur term of them all, a word that newspapers will not print, even though it has entire books devoted to it (Asim 2008; Kennedy 2003): the word *nigger*. Here is the *AHD* entry:

(34)   **nigger**   n.   *Offensive Slang*
          1.   a. <u>Used as a disparaging term for</u> a black person: "You can only be
               destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls
               a nigger" (James Baldwin).
               b. <u>Used as a disparaging term for</u> a member of any dark-skinned
               people.
          2.   <u>Used as a disparaging term for</u> a member of any socially,
               economically, or politically deprived group of people.

As Nunberg (2015) notes, 'used as' glosses are an odd kind of cop-out, an evasion of the task of supplying a meaning, for the *used as* device "is ordinarily reserved for words like interjections, as in 'used to express surprise'." Dictionaries don't normally say what nouns, verbs, or adjectives are "used as"; they paraphrase the meaning of the words. They don't say that *murder* is "used as" a term for the unlawful, deliberate, and premeditated killing of a human being. They simply say that *murder* means "unlawful, deliberate, and premeditated killing." That's what we expect from a dictionary: to define the word by saying what meaning it has. We do not expect to see this replaced by a comment on what the word is used for, unless there is essentially no meaning to supply, as with words like *ouch* or *ooh* or *ugh*, which denote nothing at all, so that the only thing to be said about them is a description of their expressive use.

And surely *nigger* is not a word of that kind. Certainly, its occurrences in speech may frequently be associated with negative animus and expression of hostility, but it is nonetheless a noun

with a denotation. There is such a thing as referring to someone as a nigger, and whatever the concomitant emotive or abusive force, that entails a claim that they belong to a dark-skinned race of people (typically, that they have African ancestry—a detail that *AHD* chooses not to incorporate). This is a point I return to after some further discussion of Hom's contrasting semantic claims about slur terms.

6 Hom on the meaning of slurs

Hom (2012) builds the derogatory part of slur terms into their semantics via what he calls a "complex normative property": where N is some common noun that casts a slur, the property he envisages is something like (35).

(35) "is an N, and ought to be subject to discriminative practices $p_1, \ldots, p_n$, because of having stereotypical properties $d_1, \ldots, d_k$ in consequence of being an N"

Here $\{p_1, \ldots, p_n\}$ is a set of deontic prescriptions externally derived from a set of discriminatory practices (racist, sexist, homophobic, or whatever), and $\{d_1, \ldots, d_k\}$ is a set of negative properties externally derived from a discriminatory ideology.

Thus, if I understand it correctly, Hom's proposed paraphrase for *dyke* would be something like this:

(36) "Lesbian, and deserving of contempt and being banned from working with children, etc., because of being grossly immoral, as a consequence of being a lesbian."

But such semantic accounts surely cannot be right. Consider Hom's analysis of (37).

(37) *Obama is not a Chink.*

It comes out meaning something like (38)

(38) "Obama does not instantiate the property 'being Chinese and therefore deserving of discriminatory practices $p_1, \ldots, p_n$ because they have bad properties $d_1, \ldots, d_k$ in virtue of being Chinese'."

But this is hopeless: it predicts that (37) is **not** derogatory of the Chinese. On Hom's view neither Obama nor anyone else has the property referred to in (38), and it in no way denigrates the Chinese to say so. The reality is that we judge (37) to be just as offensive as *Yao is a Chink*, simply because it USES the term *Chink*.

One might suggest that Hom could fix this by keeping the derogation outside the scope of the negation, so that *Obama is not a Chink* would mean something like (39), where for clarity I supply a rough approximation of the logical form:

(39) "All Chinese are contemptible and deserving of discriminatory practices $p_1, \ldots, p_n$ because they have bad properties $d_1, \ldots, d_k$ in virtue of being Chinese, and Obama is not one of them."

$(\forall x[\text{Chinese}(x) \rightarrow (x \text{ deserves } p_1, \ldots, p_n \text{ because Chinese}(x) \rightarrow (d_1, \ldots, d_k(x)))]) \quad \wedge$
$(\neg \text{ Chinese}(\text{Obama}))$

This gets the derogatory content about the Chinese out of the assertion about Obama not being Chinese and into the mouth of the utterer, as desired. But now we have a problem with the semantics of this sentence:

(40) *It is false that Obama is not a Chink.*

$\neg ((\forall x[\text{Chinese}(x) \rightarrow (x \text{ deserves } p_1, \ldots, p_n \text{ because Chinese}(x) \rightarrow (d_1, \ldots, d_k(x)))]) \quad \wedge$
$(\neg \text{Chinese}(\text{Obama})))$

This comes out true and non-derogatory. Yet it is surely both untrue of Obama and derogatory of the Chinese.[3]

One might suggest that meanings similar to Hom's could be locked up in Potts-style conventional implicatures (Hom argues against this, but his critique of Potts is not at all convincing: see Appendix). But the insuperable difficulty is that we would still face a problem of unwanted tautologousness. Consider the air of pointless redundancy in (41).

(41) *War, as Churchill said, is hell, and Churchill said that.*

The question would be why, assuming the Hom-style meaning (36) for *dyke*, we do not have the same reaction to (42).

(42) *Dykes are contemptible because they are grossly immoral.*

A Hom-style analysis entails that for an anti-gay bigot this is **analytically true**. Even under a conventional implicature account it should feel heavily redundant, like (41). But surely a homophobe would take it to be true, informative, and not redundant at all.

The conclusion has to be that a semantic account like Hom's does not represent the facts correctly. And in fact I think this is true for all semantic accounts. The disparaging content of slurs should not be incorporated into their lexical meaning, either as at-issue content or as conventional implicatures.

Hom's radically externalist account seems to me wildly counterintuitive. The array of derogatory properties that for him are part of the at-issue semantics of slurs will go way beyond the very simple cases that first made externalism plausible. It is one thing to say that *elm* means "tree of the elm species" and *beech* means "tree of the beech species" and we trust experts to handle the distinguishing properties on our behalf. It is quite another to say that when an antisemite uses a

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[3]These semantic points are essentially due to Nunberg (2015).

term like *yid* or *kike* or *heeb* they are actually expressing a claim incorporating the bafflingly miscellaneous conjunction of properties that are supposed to be the unpleasant truth about Jews (that they are devious, miserly, over-privileged, clannish, cruel, conspiratorial, radical, cosmopolitan, Christ-killers, or whatever) and the claim that because they possess those properties they deserve whatever are the relevant kinds of discrimination: being picked on in school, denied membership in certain golf clubs, unwelcome as a marriage partner of oneself or one's children, targeted by terrorists, etc.

In short, Hom wraps up whole Nazi hate-leaflets of racist ideology into invisible and unacknowledged parcels of semantic content that slur users implicitly assert. This is not the modest tacit appeal to tree-species experts that we have become accustomed to for distinguishing elms from beeches; this is externalism gone mad.

7   What went wrong with the *AHD*

Let me now return to my shelved question: How could expert lexicographers have made semantic mistakes as gross as saying that *bitch* means "woman considered to be mean, overbearing, or contemptible" (as in (15) or that *sissy* means "person regarded as timid or cowardly" (as in 21)? And why would the blunders occur only with clearly derogatory words?

7.1   The possible intent of the non-straight entries

The "considered as," "regarded as," and "used as" definitions are apparently intended deprive us of certain key entailments: that a bitch (in the abusive sense 2) is a woman; that a nigger has racially determined dark skin; that a dyke is sexually oriented toward women; that a Chink is a Chinese person; and so on. Yet it seems to me that we have to bite the bullet of accepting these entailments. Like it or not, the correct lexical entries of slurs **do** carry this descriptive content. Nonetheless, people (including many philosophers of language) shy away from any such idea. And it is possible that lexicographers do too.

Could the "considered as," "regarded as," and "used as" entries conceivably be regarded as a kind of shorthand way of making the sense relative to the user? That is, when *harridan* is defined as "A woman regarded as critical and scolding," could we take it to be saying that *harridan* simply means "woman" but is employed with that meaning only by people who regard the referent (perhaps unjustly) as critical and scolding? When *pig* is glossed as "A person regarded as being piglike, greedy, or disgusting," could they perhaps mean that *pig* in the *AHD*'s sense 2 simply means "person," but referring to a person with the word *pig* is something that would only be done by someone who regarded that person as piglike, greedy, or disgusting?

I have made some effort to see the entries in question in such a light; but after reflecting on the matter for some time I have found it impossible to convince myself that any such reading of their entries is plausible. In fact the inconsistencies in the *AHD* make it look like there is no definite policy to discern.

The crucial point at which *AHD* seems to have blundered is that if Mr. Smith calls Mrs. Brown a harridan, the situation is not correctly described by saying that he called Mrs. Brown a woman (and happens to be a man holding certain unfavorable attitudes toward her): he called her a harridan.

If Mrs. Brown says, *Smith is such a pig*, we cannot sum up the state of play by saying that she called Mr. Smith a person (though by using a word that would only be used by someone who privately held the opinion that he is piglike, greedy, and/or disgusting).

One way to make this vivid might be to consider what would or would not constitute slander. If I say *You're a sissy*, I should not be allowed to avail myself of the defense that I merely saying claimed you are a person (while incidentally happening to be a person who regards you as timid or cowardly or effeminate). Make no mistake about it, I'm actually calling you timid and/or cowardly and/or effeminate, and (assuming claims like that are defamatory) you've been slandered.

There seems to me to be no sensible construal of the strangely qualified entries in the *AHD* that gets this sort of thing right. And rewriting them along the lines Hom suggests would not improve them at all. The fact is that the derogatory aspects of the conveyed effect of slurs, the part of them that we do not like or approve of, should be covered not in the specification of literal meaning, which is what the *AHD* seems to be trying to do (while guarding itself against being accused of voicing the derogatory associated attitudes), but—as Nunberg (2015) proposes—in the metadata associated with the word. The *considered to be*, *regarded as*, and *used as* entries in the *AHD* need to be rewritten.

7.2   Correcting the *AHD*

Let me give some examples of what I think would be more accurate dictionary entries for some of the words discussed above. I'm not suggesting this is easy, or that my proposals are lexicographically perfect; there is plenty to debate about all of them, but the following drafts may serve as a preliminary indication of the way I think things should go:

(43)   **moron**   n.   *Semantics*: very stupid person.

(44)   **pig**   n.   1.   *Semantics*: a. any of various mammals of the family Suidae . . .
2.   a. *Semantics*: piglike, greedy, or disgusting person. *Metadata*: informal register.
b. *Semantics*: police officer. *Metadata*: derogatory slang.

(45)   **prick**   n.   7.   *Semantics*: person mean or contemptible person, usually a male. *Metadata*: vulgar slang.

(46)   **sissy**   n.   1.   *Semantics*: timid or cowardly person .
2.   *Semantics*: effeminate person.

(47)   **slob**   n.   *Semantics*: slovenly, crude, or obnoxious person. *Metadata*: informal.

(48) **slut** n. 1. *Semantics*: sexually promiscuous person. *Metadata*: usually offensive.

(49) **vixen** n. 1. *Semantics*: female fox.
2. *Semantics*: quarrelsome or ill-tempered woman. *Metadata*: offensive.

(50) **weasel** n. 1. any of various carnivorous mammals of the genus Mustela...
2. *Semantics*: sneaky or treacherous person.

(51) **chav** n. *Semantics*: poor or uneducated young person, especially one who behaves in a brash or vulgar manner and wears ostentatious clothing and jewelry. *Metadata*: chiefly British; offensively disparaging slang.

(52) **dyke** n. *Semantics*: lesbian. *Metadata*: slang, generally disparaging or offensive.

(53) **nigger** n. *Semantics*: black person, especially with negroid racial characteristics. *Metadata*: highly charged, offensive and contemptuous; characteristically used by racists and associated with oppression, though nonetheless used jokingly without offense in vernacular discourse within some African American and Afro-Caribbean communities; sometimes metaphorically extended to members of other socially, economically, or politically deprived groups; avoided in nearly all print sources.

Notice that I have not made any mention of the reclamation of offensive terms by the groups they offensively refer to. It is well known that such terms can be used in a friendly way within the stigmatized groups. It may be that such information should be included in dictionary entries (since it can certainly be relevant to a full account of how and by whom a word can be appropriately used), or possibly not (since it relates not to any particular word but to a whole class of them, rather like the fact that archaic words are often not well known to nonspecialists, or that terms for particular political positions are often used as insults). I don't want to make a commitment here to either view of what to put in the dictionary.

8   Words are things

One crucial point to grasp, I think, is that the many years of philosophers talking about the relation between words and things have blinded us to the fact that **words ARE things**.

Words, though abstract, are human artifacts that in addition to phonological, grammatical, and semantic structure have all sorts of other properties. They have etymology, history, regional or foreign provenance, field restrictions (anatomical, botanical, etc.), currency (obsolescence, rarity,

etc.), tone (archaic, humorous, etc.), discourse level (slang, formal, etc.), collocational associations (there are other words whose company they typically keep), proscriptions (word taboos), offensiveness levels, degrees of insultingness, and unsavoury associations. Some of them are no more neutral and inoffensive than a concealed switchblade. That is the key to the power of both slurs and curses.

Are there philosophical conclusions we can draw regarding externalism in semantics, as Hom (2012) suggests? Only very weak and negative ones, I think, and certainly not his "combinatory externalism" with its elaborate ideological stances packed into the meanings of simple derogatory words. We do occasionally need help from experts regarding words: we want to be able to use words like *elm* and *beech* for distinct tree species despite needing experts to help us with the distinguishing features of elms and beeches. But slurs do not really illustrate the point.

Chink means "Chinese person," and we know enough about how to identify them (they come from families that were originally native to China, and so on); *sissy* means "wimp or effeminate male," and we are competent to decide whether someone satisfies that description; *bitch* (in the abusive sense) basically means "woman"; and so on. These are semantic facts about words that it is the primary duty of dictionaries to record, and we do not feel the same kind of uncertainty about their application that we may feel about elms and beeches.

But what we may need some expert help with, and what foreign learners often need some expert help with, is the metadata facts. You could in principle know that *dyke* means "woman sexually attracted primarily to other women" without knowing that it can be abusive and insulting, and normally is when used as an accusation by straight men.

Take the case of the 8-year-old English girl who once walked across a classroom to inform a classmate (my son), quite calmly, apropos of nothing: "I hate you, because you're a nigger." Although her racial attribution was strictly correct, how plausible is it that the little girl had any clear grasp of the properties stereotypically attributed to negroid peoples by those who make use of the word *nigger*? She had not really been in any position to learn a significant amount about African, Afro-Caribbean, or African American people, or what bigots believe about them. She just knew, perhaps from her parents, that *nigger* was the word to use for black people if you wanted to convey that you disliked them, and she had perhaps been given the impression that you should dislike them.

The fact that *nigger* means "person of negroid ancestry" is a linguistic semantic fact, but the fact that if you choose that word people will find it offensive is a social fact about its associations, and in a sense is a nonlinguistic fact.

This shouldn't be too surprising: we frequently have recourse to dictionaries for all sorts of nonlinguistic information about words. Most dictionaries deliberately muddle the conceptual distinction between dictionaries and encyclopedias by including clearly nonlinguistic information about numerous words (and I am not suggesting it decreases their usefulness). The following *AHD* entry would need massive correction if we were to insist it should be rigorously linguistic in its content:

(54) **tiger** n. 1. a. A large carnivorous feline mammal (Panthera tigris) of Asia, having a tawny coat with transverse black stripes.
b. Any of various similar wild felines, such as the jaguar, mountain lion, or lynx.
2. A person regarded as aggressive, audacious, or fierce.

This correction would get rid of the gratuitous encyclopedic information in the entry:

(55) **tiger** n. 1. a. ~~A large~~ ~~carnivorous~~ ~~feline~~ ~~mammal~~ `animal of the species` Panthera tigris ~~of Asia, having a tawny coat~~ ~~with transverse~~ ~~black~~ ~~stripes~~.
b. Any of various similar ~~wild felines~~ `animals`, such as the jaguar, mountain lion, or lynx.
2. ~~A person regarded as~~ aggressive, audacious, or fierce `person`.

We don't want contingently true statements like "Tigers eat meat" or "Tigers live in Asia" to be represented as analytic in the sense of simply following from the dictionary meaning. And we don't want contingently false statements like "Niggers are contemptible" to be analytically true for racist utterers. Truth should not be so cheaply purchased for racist claims: anyone who wants to paint a whole racial group as contemptible or inferior should fact a heavy burden of proof. Hom clearly agrees on this, but the semantics he suggests, unfortunately, fails utterly to implement or reflect it.

9 Why Elvis Costello got punched

Nunberg (2015) summarizes his position on slurs very effectively in an epigrammatic remark:

> Here's my thesis in a nutshell: racists don't use slurs because they're derogative; slurs are derogative because they're the words that racists use.

I believe he has it exactly right. And it is a major advantage of his approach is that it enables us to address the puzzling question of why the American singer Bonnie Bramlett once punched out the Irish singer Elvis Costello.

In March 1979, a drink-fueled argument took place in the bar at the downtown Holiday Inn in Columbus, Ohio. Bonnie Bramlett (of Delanie and Bonnie) arrived back from a gig with Stephen Stills to find that Elvis Costello was independently in town for a performance at a different venue, and was in the bar of the hotel, already fairly drunk. They began baiting him, calling British rockers inauthentic and making derisive comments about British rock music.

According to the account Costello later gave at a New York press conference, he wanted to get out of the conversation: "It became necessary for me to outrage these people with about the most obnoxious and offensive remarks that I could muster," he said. So, in addition to addressing Stills as "steel nose" (a reference to Stills's cocaine habit), he deliberately insulted a series of American singers that his interlocutors brought up as proofs of American superiority. Elvis Presley was "a

fucking hillbilly," and America as a whole was "a fucked country," and "American people are second-class white people, compared to first-class English people."

Stills left after a while and went to his room, but Bramlett stayed on, challenging Costello with further examples of great American performers. What about the extraordinary African American showman James Brown? Just a "jive-ass nigger" said Costello. And when she demanded that he say what he thought of Ray Charles, he uttered the sentence that made her knock him down: "Fuck Ray Charles; he's just a blind, ignorant, nigger." (Or it may have been "nothing but a blind arrogant nigger"; accounts differ slightly. Several newspaper and magazine reports appeared, because Bramlett not only punched Costello, she then talked to the press, earning Costello death threats and wrecking his career and social life in the USA for years afterwards.)

Why did she punch him? A Hom-style semantic account of the meaning of *nigger* (recall the analysis summarized in 35) has Costello making three statements about Ray Charles: (i) that he was blind (a true claim), (ii) that he was ignorant (or perhaps arrogant), and (iii) that he was a person of negroid ancestry and thus deserved to be the victim of various discriminatory practices (such as being denied housing, employment, or whatever) because of having various bad properties (being feckless, criminal, stupid, or whatever) in virtue of being negroid.

We have already seen that Hom-style meanings for slurs yield totally wrong consequences concerning the truth conditions of sentences containing them; but here we encounter a different shortcoming, rhetorical rather than semantic. Hom's paraphrase makes it sound as if using the term *nigger* involves presenting a reasoned political argument (albeit with contingently false premises).

But Bramlett couldn't possibly have thought that the factual claims attributed to Costello by a Hom-style semantic analysis represented his opinion. Ray Charles's brilliance as pianist, songwriter, arranger, and orchestra leader was legendary. Frank Sinatra once referred to him as "the only true genius in show business." The nickname "genius" stuck. Everybody in the popular music business admired him. For British rockers he was a god.[4] Costello has made it clear in subsequent interviews that he was always in awe of African American music like that of Ray Charles.

Thus Hom's analysis is refuted by rhetoric as well as semantics: the rational argumentation he builds into his analysis cannot possibly capture Costello's intent. Costello did not want to lay out a reasoned case that Ray Charles deserved to be subjected to practices $p_1, \ldots, p_n$ on the grounds that he had $d_1, \ldots, d_k$ in consequence of having negroid ancestry, because even if it were all true, it wouldn't have served the purpose at hand. Costello didn't want to reason; he wanted above all to make it clear that he was being **un**reasonable.

By putting Ray Charles down with a phrase that everyone knows racists use he thought he stood a chance of ending an unpleasant conversational encounter. Had he been luckier, Bramlett might have just given up on him and turned away as Stills apparently did, recognizing that he was just being deliberately offensive. Instead she responded to the insulting assumption that he could use such racist-associated vocabulary in front of her, and assaulted him.

That's the kind of power the word *nigger* has. Many people (though perhaps too few) will walk

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[4]I speak with some personal knowledge here: five years of my dissolute youth were spent working as a professional rock musician in Britain.

away and shun you if you use it. Or if you're less lucky, they may lay you out on a barroom floor like one of the Gatlin Boys. But that is a metadata fact about the word, not part of its meaning.

10 Conclusion

The right lexical semantics for slurs says that they don't derogate or defame, in and of themselves, any more than the flag of the Confederacy derogated or defamed anyone when it used to fly over the state house in Columbia, South Carolina. Slur words, or flags, may enrage or intimidate or threaten simply in virtue of their associations. And that is their primary motivation for their continued use by those who choose to use them.

I find this a useful and encouraging insight. Suppose we encounter a man whose latest book has been unfavorably reviewed by a female scholar, and he says: "The bitch who wrote that review is giving a paper at the APA meeting." Under the view advocated here, the claim he has made is simply that the woman who wrote that review is giving a paper at the APA. No further claim about the woman (such as that she is nasty or reprehensible) has been expressed, so there is nothing of that sort to rebut or refute. The utterer hasn't, strictly, said anything about the woman other than that she is scheduled to give an APA paper. But he has revealed something about himself that it is useful for us to know.

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