


Pejoratives, Contexts and Presuppositions

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Abstract. Kaplan started a fruitful debate on the meaning of pejoratives. He suggests that a dimension of *expressive meaning* is required, separated from the straightforward “at issue” content. To account for this, writers have elaborated on this suggestion, by arguing that the separated expressive meaning of pejoratives and slurs is instead either a *conventional or conversational implicatures*, or a *presupposition*. I myself prefer a presuppositional account; however, in order to deflate a very serious objection that has been raised against accounts of that kind, it is on the one hand essential that we take what is presupposed to be genuinely expressive, and, related, it is also essential that we adopt a more complex view than the one usually assumed on the nature of the context relative to which speech acts make their contributions.

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Kaplan [21] started a fruitful debate on the meaning of pejoratives – as in ‘that bastard Kresge is famous’ – including slurs and racial epithets as in ‘there are many chinks in our neighborhood’. Kaplan suggests that a dimension of *expressive meaning* is required, separated from the straightforward “at issue”, asserted or truth-conditional content, which would just be in the latter case that there are too many Chinese people in the neighborhood. Hom [15] makes a case for a straightforward account, which avoids separated expressive dimension. Thus, according to him ‘chink’ makes a truth-conditional contribution akin to that of other predicates such as ‘Chinese’. This would be a property determining an on his view necessarily empty extension, which can be roughly expressed as: *ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and ..., because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundering, and ..., all because of being Chinese* (Hom [15], 431). A serious problem for this view ([19], 316–319) lies in the *projection behavior* of these terms: when sentences such as those mentioned above are negated (‘there are not many chinks in our neighborhood’), are antecedents of conditionals (‘if there are many chinks in our neighborhood, it will be easy to find a good restaurant’), or embedded under modal operators (‘there might be

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many chinks in our neighborhood’) or non-declarative mood (‘are there are many chinks in our neighborhood?’), they still derogate the relevant targets.

To account for this, writers have elaborated on Kaplan’s suggestion, by arguing that the separated expressive meaning of pejoratives and slurs is instead either a *conventional implicature* [32] or a *presupposition* [27, 28, 37].¹ In defense of his account, Hom ([17], 398–401) appeals to generalized conversational implicatures to explain the projection data. Now, in my view a presuppositional account is preferable; however, in order to deflate a very serious objection that has been raised against accounts of that kind, it is on the one hand essential that we take what is presupposed to be genuinely expressive, and, related, it is also essential that we adopt a more complex view than the one usually assumed on the nature of the context relative to which speech acts make their contributions. Moreover, the other two proposals – the conventional implicature account, and even Hom’s generalized conversational implicature view – would also need to assume the extra complexity in contexts I will show we need, so their proponents might also benefit from the proposal that I’ll argue for in this paper.

It is not easy to tell apart presuppositions (*that someone broke the computer*, for the cleft-construction in ‘it was John who broke the computer’) and conventional implicatures (*that somehow being poor contrasts with being honest*, for ‘but’ in ‘he is poor but honest’; *that John is married*, for the non-restrictive wh-clause in ‘John, who is married, will come to the party’). Both are *semantic*, by two counts: first, they are conventionally associated with some lexical items or constructions; second, grasping them is required for full competent understanding.² Both are ways of conventionally indicating “non-at-issue” content. This is the reason why they both project: thus, the negation in both ‘he is not poor but honest’ and ‘it was not John who broke the computer’ negates the “at issue” content, and as a result the same conventional implicature and presupposition indicated above are expressed. Neither can therefore be rejected by means of straightforward denials, and as a result speakers must resort to oblique means such as Saddock’s “hey, wait a minute” objection ([33], 2521–2522; [3], 341–342).

Some researchers appeal to subtle projection differences [31, 43], but there is no agreement on this among linguists. In particular, the behavior of conventional implicatures and presuppositions when they occur in ascriptions of beliefs or acts of saying does not neatly distinguish between them. Presuppositions do not typically project in such cases, but conventional implicatures might behave like them in some (Bach [1],

¹ Williamson [45] argues for a similar view. He classifies the expressive contents he proposes as conventional implicatures, but he understands that category in a traditional way, wider than the one I assume following Potts’s work (*ibid.*, 151, 153). I take his view to be compatible with the presuppositional account assumed here as much as with Potts’s view. All these proposals can be viewed as different ways to elaborate on Kaplan’s view that pejoratives should be accounted for by adding a “use-conditional” layer of meaning.

² In the case of presuppositions, Stalnaker and other writers dispute this; [11] defends it, for constructions such as the one just given for illustration.

338–343).³ Conventional implicatures typically project in such environments, but presuppositions might also project in some cases ([37], 244).⁴

Presuppositions and conventional implicatures have different natures ([32], 2012). Conventional implicatures have the job of providing new information, exactly like assertions, except that it is information which (even if relevant) has a relatively background character. Felicitous presuppositions articulate (for some relevant purpose) part of what is already commonly known. Unfortunately, this fails to offer either a straightforward distinction, because speakers exploit the fact that a sentence carries a presupposition to provide uncontroversial background information, by inviting the process called *accommodation* [25]. Nonetheless, I am convinced by the arguments by Macià and Schlenker that the data of projection and rejection, given clear-headed assumptions about the respective nature of the two phenomena, show that the best way of classifying the expressive meanings of pejoratives and slurs counts them as presuppositions, understood as differing from conventional implicatures in the just described way: they impose requirements on the common ground, as opposed to providing potentially new but background information.

However, perhaps guided by simple-minded assumptions about context that I want to expose here, both Macià and Schlenker give an inadequate characterization of the expressive presuppositions of pejoratives, which opens their view to spurious criticism. Schlenker ([37], 238) offers this characterization for the slur ‘honky’: *the agent of the context believes in the world of the context that white people are despicable*. This is a clear-cut condition on a context as understood on the classical Stalnakerian account, “a body of information that is available, or presumed to be available, as a resource for

³ As I have pointed out elsewhere ([10], 45–47), in spite of its title [1] in fact does not show that conventional implicatures (or presuppositions, for that matter), as understood here following Potts, are a “myth”. Bach only shows that they are not part of “what is said” in his “illocutionary” sense, which is just to say that they are not part of the “at issue” content of declaratives. Rather they are, according to him, part of “what is said” in his “locutionary” sense. But this just means that they are conventional, semantic in the sense that they need to be grasped for full competent understanding. This is part of current standard views on conventional implicatures, such as Potts’s. Hom ([15], 424–426; [17], 391–392) appears to have been misled by Bach’s suggestions in his criticisms of the conventional implicature view. Similarly, in his defense of a Conventional Implicature account Whiting ([44], 274–275) fails to properly take this point into consideration.

⁴ Ascriptions of propositional attitudes and speech acts are notoriously context-dependent; this explains the existential quantifications. In his interesting discussion of hybrid theories of evaluative terms, modeled on the views on pejoratives I am discussing, Schroeder [38, 39] places a strong emphasis on a distinction between hybrid expressions whose expressive content project even in attitude ascriptions, and those that do not. But, as [14] points out, these are not properties of expressions themselves: we can only trace tendencies here. Slurs tend to project in ascriptions, but, as the examples by Schlenker and others show, they do not always do so. Such tendencies are orthogonal to the divide between conventional implicatures and presuppositions. Quoting [1] (a work that he, unlike Hom – see previous fn. – appraises properly, cf. *op. cit.*, 287–288, fn. 19), Schroeder shows that ‘but’ might well not project in some ascriptions; but, following [31], I am taking non-restrictive wh-clauses as paradigm cases of conventional implicatures, and they do typically project in attitude ascriptions: *John said that Peter, who will be coming soon, is welcome to the party*.

communication” ([41], 24).⁵ But, as Williamson points out ([45], 151–152), it cannot be right, because it does not capture the normative status of slurs. Confronted with slurring utterances like the above, we would challenge the speaker (using perhaps some variation of the “hey, wait a minute” strategy) to retract the derogation of Kresge or Chinese people; but we would hardly challenge her to retract the suggestion that she believes that Kresge or Chinese people are despicable. For all we care, she might well believe it. We do not need to question this; we do not need to dissociate ourselves from the assumption that they hold such beliefs when our interlocutors utter slurs we find objectionable. As Camp ([3], 333) points out, Potts’s conventional implicature account has the same problem, for he just posits a condition on the subjective emotional state of the speaker – something to the effect that s/he actually is in a heightened emotional state ([32], 171; [33], 2532).⁶

How, then, should expressive meanings, and the contexts to which they contribute, be understood? This depends on what emotions, and the speech acts conveying them, are. What pejoratives and slurs express, in my view, is that a certain emotional state (which can contextually vary along different parameters, cf. [3, 15, 32], among others) is *fitting* or *appropriate*. Some philosophers argue that emotions are a particular kind of judgment, to the effect that an object or situation instantiates their “formal objects”, say, that Chinese people are worthy of contempt, in our example (cf. [8, 42], and references there). If this is right, then we do not need to go beyond the Stalnakerian context. That a speaker of ‘there are too many chinks in our neighborhood’ takes it to be common knowledge that Chinese people are worthy of contempt explains the appropriate reaction to the utterance by non-prejudiced participants in the same conversation. [45] seems to assume something like this.⁷

This would be a way of dealing with pejoratives analogous to the one offered by a certain *flattening* strategy that was popular for a while for non-declaratives. Let me digress for a moment in order to elaborate on this. It is relatively uncontroversial that, while questions make contributions to context, their contributions differ from those that declaratives make. To account for this, elaborating on previous work by Carlson [4]

⁵ This is formally modeled as the “context set” – the set of possible worlds compatible with the presumed common knowledge of the participants. For present purposes, I take Lewis’ [25] model as a variant of the Stalnakerian model.

⁶ [2] provides a hybrid account of pejoratives and evaluative terms in the framework of “success” semantics, along the lines of the Davidsonian proposals in [22, 26]. This is compatible with the main claims I am making here. However, like Schlenker and Potts, Boisvert assumes a psychological expressivist, non-normative account of the non-declarative additional speech acts that his account posits, which make it in my view similarly inadequate. To illustrate: there clearly is a semantic tension between uttering ‘thank you for *p*!’ together with ‘shame on you for *p*!’, but this cannot be adequately captured by an account on which the sentences merely indicate that the utterer actually feels grateful and disappointed regarding *p*; for, of course, there is no inconsistency in having such feelings regarding the same situation ([2], 34). In contrast, an account on which the sentences indicate acts subject to norms such that for them to be correct the same situation is to be both worthy of gratitude and of indignation does capture the tension.

⁷ Likewise, [28] poses as the expressive presupposition of ‘chink’ *that speakers in the context are willing to treat Chinese people with a certain kind of contempt, on account of being Chinese*. This is better than Schlenker’s and Potts’ subjectivist proposals, but is still objectionable along the lines that I develop in the main text.

and others, [35] suggests that contexts are structured by a “question under discussion” (QUD) for which discussants try to provide adequate answers.⁸ The QUD might have been explicitly asked, but it can also be merely implicit; in some cases, it may be very general, including the “Big Question”, *what is the way things are?*

If this is so, contexts should be thought of as structured by including contents taken with different illocutionary forces: at the very least, a QUD, in addition to the Stalnakerian context of commonly accepted propositions updated by ordinary utterances of declarative sentences. Contexts thus include the Stalnakerian set of propositions to which speakers are committed in the way they are committed to their beliefs, updated by accepted assertions; but they include also a separate class of propositions to which speakers are committed in the way they are to the questions that direct their inquiry, updated by new questions and by the assertions that partially answer them. Both components are mutually known, in felicitous cases.

Now, as [23] suggests, questions can be taken as a particular kind of directive (what literal utterances of imperative sentences signify); and directives in general independently help to establish the same point about the complex illocutionary structure of contexts. Several writers have advanced semantic accounts on which these are semantically distinctive objects, distinct from assertions (what declarative sentences literally signify), just as questions (what interrogative sentences signify) are; [13, 18, 30] provide good overviews. Along the lines of [40], researchers such as Han, Portner and Jary & Kissine suggest that strong directives also have a content to be added (when successful) to a collection of propositions. However, these are not those constituting the Stalnakerian common ground, but rather a “To Do List” or “Plan Set” representing something like the active projects of the addressee.

In sum, contexts are illocutionarily structured in complex ways, including different classes of propositions to which speakers are committed in different modes: in the way we are committed to our beliefs, but also in the way we are committed to our intentions, and to the questions guiding our inquiries. And, as we pointed out above, in felicitous contexts it is all these different commitments that are matters of mutual knowledge. As Stalnaker’s [40] account of assertion emphasizes, an accepted assertion comes to be presupposed afterwards, allowing for the satisfaction of presuppositional requirements later on in the discourse. Similarly, an accepted directive is taken for granted afterwards, constraining the legitimate moves that can be made in the discourse game, and the same applies to the QUD.

Now, we could avoid all that complexity if we adopted a well-known suggestion to deal with non-declaratives by taking them to be synonymous with explicit performatives, and then taking the latter to have, from a semantic standpoint, the truth-conditions they appear to do compositionally [5, 24]. Thus, ‘take bus 44!’ would just mean, from a semantic point of view, the proposition *that the speaker thereby requests the audience to take bus 44*. Cannot we just adopt this line and avoid having to ascribe to contexts the complex structure we have so far posited? By taking questions and

⁸ [36] offers a clear, short presentation of the idea.

directives to express the propositions self-ascribing speech-acts that these views envisage, we could just stick to the Stalnakerian view of context as a set of propositions. This is what I am calling the *flattening scheme*, or simply *flattening*. In previous work [9, 11] I have argued that these views are unmotivated.

Like the flattening suggestion for directives and questions, however, the corresponding view of emotions and their expression outlined above is controversial, and is rejected by many researchers ([6], 67; [7], 18–21). If emotions are instead, as I believe, *sui generis* normative states [6, 7, 29], and their expressions speech acts defined by distinctive norms, then in order to properly incorporate the presuppositional view of pejoratives we should add further illocutionary structure to the context set. This additional structure will be constituted by the intentional objects of the emotional states (say, Chinese people, with their (alleged) condition of generically having such-and-such features in the case of ‘chink’), taken as subject to the normative condition that they are thereby worthy of contempt and hence adequate recipients of mistreatment. On this view, the “formal object” of the emotion – the property of being contemptible in this case – is not part of the represented content, but the normative condition that allegedly justifies addressing the emotional attitude towards it.

On the suggested view of emotions and the speech acts expressing them, the additional “emotive” structure of contexts should be assumed not only on a presuppositional account of pejoratives, but also on one on which they are conventional implicatures. For, even if the expressive content of pejoratives is background but novel “information”, if unchallenged it would become part of the context set, licensing presuppositions down the line. The fact that we need to dissociate ourselves from such a prospect explains our normative reaction to utterances including slurs we disapprove of. This is why, even if Potts [32, 33] is right that such contents are conventional implicatures, his subjective characterization of the expressive implicatures should be revised to incorporate the present view of contexts.

Presuppositions are “filtered” in some contexts: they do not project when their triggers occur in the consequent of a conditional whose antecedent states them, or in the second conjunct of a conjunction whose first conjunct states them: *if someone broke the computer, it was John who broke it; someone broke the computer, and it was John who did it*. Schroeder ([39], 176) uses this point to dismiss the view that the expressive contents we are considering are presuppositions: “I cannot see how to construct a sentence of the form “if P, then Mark is a cheesehead” that does not implicate the speaker in disdain for people from Wisconsin”.

This is right, but it is just as a straightforward consequence of the fact that the expressive contents we are discussing – be they presuppositions, or conventional implicatures – are not just forceless propositions, which is what antecedents of conditionals or conjuncts must be. It only follows that we cannot use the filtering behavior to discern whether the relevant contents are presupposed or conventionally implicated. The fact leaves open whether such contents are presented as requirements on the common ground (and hence have a presuppositional character), or as new background commitments (and hence are conventional implicatures). Schroeder’s argument is one more example of the misleading consequences of ignoring the main claim about the

nature of the expressive contents of pejoratives and slurs, and the contexts on which they make an impact, which I am making here.⁹

Some of Hom's ([16], 176–179; [17], 390–391) criticisms of the presuppositional and conventional implicature view have already been discussed, others have received adequate replies in the literature. The data about projection and “cancellation” are less clear than he assumes, and in any case can be accounted for by both proposals [28]. Intuitions about the truth-values of utterances are much less clear-cut than he and others take them to be (cf. [19], 317), and again can be accounted for by both the presuppositional and the conventional implicature proposals. Hom mentions “non-orthodox” cases that lack derogatory implications; but, again, defenders of alternative views have shown them to have enough resources to deal with them, as pragmatic effects or cases of polysemy ([20], 326–330). Last but not least, what Hom ([16], 177) thinks is the “more fundamental problem with the presupposition account” can be adequately resisted if expressive meanings and contexts are assumed to have the sort of illocutionary complexity I am arguing for. This is how he summarizes it:

To focus on slurring as a means of efficiently entering information into the conversational record is to miss the fundamental point of slurs, namely, that they are typically used to verbally abuse their targets, with no regard to whether the negative content actually gets accommodated within a framework of rational, cooperative behavior.

He (*ibid.*) summarizes this by approvingly quoting Richard ([34], 21): rather than trying to enter something into the conversational record, “someone who is using these words is insulting and being hostile to their targets”. Now, the reply that the present proposal allows should be obvious. The contrast that Hom and Richard presume between making a requirement on the conversational record (or making an attempt at smuggling it there) and insulting/being hostile to some target presupposes a view of expressive meanings and the contexts to which they contribute of the sort I have been rejecting here. The contrast vanishes if what is presumed to be in the context is a represented target taken as fitting the normative condition that it is contemptible and thereby poised for mistreatment: for this is precisely what the insult and the hostility amount to. It should be granted that Hom's and Richard's presumption that presuppositions merely concern “information” in the conversational record is shared by most of the theorists they oppose, but it is nonetheless wrong.

Actually, it is not at all obvious how Hom's own view properly captures the insulting character of utterances including slurs. His proposal is a form of the already mentioned flattening strategy for straightforward truth-conditional treatments of non-declaratives – the view that emotions are ordinary judgments, and their expression corresponding assertions. As we said, an immediate concern this raises has to do with the “projective” behavior of all such expressions under negation, conditionalization, etc.: as we have seen, intuitively expressive contents “escape” the operators under which they are embedded in such cases, while, if the expressive content is just

⁹ It is a particularly revealing one, because it occurs in a paper that is otherwise admirably clear about the distinction between contents and forces; Schroeder's ([39], 278–280) toy formal model is as clear as [12] when it comes to the proper articulation of meanings that, like expressive contents in my view, are propositions-cum-illocutionary forces.

straightforward truth-conditional content, it should remain embedded. But in fact, the problem already affects simple positive sentences: in principle, an assertion that a command is given can occur without the command being given; and an assertion that an emotional state, or the occasion for it, obtains (that something is frightening or contemptible) can equally occur without the emotional state obtaining (without the fear or contempt occurring).¹⁰

As indicated above, Hom ([17], 398–401) purports to explain the generation of the expressive content (in embedded and simple constructions) as a Gricean generalized conversational implicature.¹¹ I have serious doubts that this proposal can work on its own terms, but this need not concern us here. I want to make a point about it related to the one made above regarding Potts’ conventional implicatures account. In some cases, generalized conversational implicatures are not projected, but rather generated “locally”, i.e. interacting with the compositional determination of contents, exactly as “implicatures”/“explicitures” are. The data suggest that, in some cases, expressive contents are thus generated locally ([37], 244). It remains to be investigated whether these should be truly handled locally by our best theories; but, if they are, a full theoretical account of the data will need to contemplate the structurally enriched contexts we have advanced, even if we classify the generation of expressive contents as a generalized conversational implicature.

In this paper I have assumed a broadly Stalnakerian view of contexts, the concrete situations relative to which linguistic exchanges take place; I have assumed, that is, that they are meanings shared by the speakers participating in the relevant linguistic exchange. I have rejected Stalnaker’s “info-centric” view of such contexts: they cannot be just propositions, or more in general representational contents, but rather these contents together with commitments towards them by speakers in different modes. This should be clear just on the basis of the fact that conversations involve not just assertoric utterances, but also directives and questions. With respect to this familiar fact, I have rehearsed the familiar “flattening” strategy that attempts to reduce non-declaratives to declaratives, and the reasons that have been advanced against it. In this framework I have discussed the semantics of pejoratives and slurs. I have suggested that flattening will not work in that case either, and I have provided what I take to be a stronger form of a presuppositional account on which such constructions indicate as requirements on the content expressive meanings additional to “at issue” contents.

¹⁰ The same can intuitively obtain in the opposite direction: the non-cognitive attitude/act (the command or the derogation) can occur, without the cognitive one (the belief/assertion that the command or the derogation takes place) taking place, because the thinker/speaker lacks the conceptual resources to describe the non-cognitive state/act. Hom deals with this apparent necessity-failure of his account by appealing to semantic externalism: semantically the equivalence obtains, even if ordinary speakers lack the resources to appreciate it.

¹¹ The semantic externalism to which Hom appeals to deal with the apparent necessity-failure (see previous fn.) puts a strain on his appeal to conversational implicature to deal with this sufficiency-failure, because implicatures are supposed to be *derivable*. It is difficult to understand how ordinary speakers intuiting the allegedly implicatured condition – in our cases, the derogation of Chinese people, which is what everybody perceives in utterances of ‘there are too many Chinks in our neighborhood’ – can make the inferences, if they themselves lack the resources to articulate the content of Hom’s truth-conditional analysis.

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