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What's wrong with truth-conditional accounts of slurs

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to provide arguments based on linguistic evidence that discard a truth-conditional analysis of slurs (TCA) and pave the way for more promising approaches. We consider Hom and May's version of TCA, according to which the derogatory content of slurs is part of their truth-conditional meaning such that, when slurs are embedded under semantic operators such as negation, there is no derogatory content that projects out of the embedding. In order to support this view, Hom and May make two moves: (1) they point to cases where it looks like projection does not occur and (2) they try to explain away cases where projection seems to occur by appealing to a pragmatic phenomenon that they call 'offense'. *Pace* Hom and May, we argue that the derogatory content of slurs *does* in fact project and, in advocating for our claim, (1) we show that those cases where it looks like projection does not occur are in fact metalinguistic uses in which slurs are *not* really used, by relying on three linguistic tests (Sect. 3); and (2) we refute Hom and May's attempt to explain why speakers would entertain the supposedly wrong intuition that the derogatory content of slurs projects out of semantic embedding, by focusing on the case of slurs for fictional entities (Sect. 4). We conclude that Hom and May's strategies to support TCA ultimately fail.

Keywords Slurs · Truth-conditional account · Projection · Metalinguistic negation · Fictional slurs · Expressives

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1 Introduction

Natural languages have certain pejorative predicates that target groups or individuals on the basis of properties such as their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and the like. Utterances of such expressions typically evoke strong emotional reactions in bystanders and targets, whereas standard predicates usually do not.

Let 'S*' be a slur for German people.[1] Puzzles about pejorative predicates arise from contrasts like the following:

(1) There is an S* downstairs.
(2) There is a German downstairs.

An utterance of (1) will usually convey some derogatory content towards German people that an utterance of (2) typically lacks: where the slur seems to convey some negative evaluative content, 'German' is neutral and objective.[2] One way to account for the difference between (1) and (2) is to claim that the slur and its neutral counterpart are distinct with respect to some relevant dimension of meaning. Scholars have analysed and 'located' the pejorative content of slurs in various ways: at the level of truth-conditions (Hom 2008, 2010, 2012; Hom and May 2013, 2014, 2018), presuppositions (Macià 2002, 2006, 2011; Schlenker 2007; Cepollaro 2015, 2016, 2017a, b; Cepollaro and Stojanovic 2016),[3] conventional implicatures (Potts 2007; Copp 2009; Williamson 2009; McCready 2010), use-conditions (Predelli 2013; Gutzmann 2015), contrastive choice signals (Bolinger Jorgensen 2017), group affiliation (Nunberg 2018, Rappaport forthcoming), speech acts (Langton 2012; Langton et al. 2012; Bianchi 2014b, 2018; Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2018; Camp 2018; Kukla 2018), expressive content (Richard 2008; Jeshion 2013a, b, 2016, 2018), and mental representations (Thommen 2018).

The goal of this paper is to show that truth-conditional accounts of the evaluative content of slurs (TCA) are unsatisfactory, and thus to pave the way for more promising approaches. Some authors, like Sennet and Copp (2015) and Marques (2017), provide arguments against truth-conditional theories of slurs: this work aims to significantly expand this project[4] and focuses on the main existing TCA defended in Hom (2008, 2010, 2012) and Hom and May (2013, 2014, 2018).

The paper runs as follows. In Sect. 2, we present TCA, according to which the derogatory content of slurs is part of their truth-conditional content; from this tenet it follows that for TCA, when slurs are embedded under semantic operators such as negation, there is no content that projects out of the embedding. In order to support this approach, Hom and May make two moves: (1) they point to cases where it looks like projection does not occur and (2) they try to explain away cases where projection seems to occur by appealing to a pragmatic phenomenon that they call 'offense'. Instead, we argue that *pace* Hom and May the derogatory content of slurs

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[1] In this paper, we will use 'S*' to indicate slurs and 'N*' to indicate neutral counterparts.

[2] For a detailed discussion on the alleged neutrality of predicates like 'German', see Nunberg (2018).

[3] For a critical discussion, see Thommen (2017).

[4] In their 2018 paper, Hom and May discuss Sennet and Copp's criticisms in detail.

does in fact project out of semantic embeddings and, in advocating for our claim, (1) we show that those cases where it looks like projection does not occur are in fact metalinguistic uses in which slurs are *not* really used, by relying on three linguistic tests (Sect. 3); and (2) we refute Hom and May's attempt to explain why speakers would entertain the supposedly wrong intuition that the derogatory content of slurs projects out of semantic embedding, by focusing on the case of slurs for fictional entities (Sect. 4).

We conclude that Hom and May's strategy ultimately fails to support a truth-conditional account of slurs and we suggest that other accounts should be preferred.

2 A truth-conditional attempt

As we have said, the aim of any truth-conditional account of slurs is to locate the *evaluative content* of slurs at the level of truth-conditional content: for example, a germanophobic slur would make the same truth-conditional contribution as a complex evaluative predicate along the lines of 'German and worthy of negative evaluation because of that' (Hom 2008: 431–432; Hom and May 2013: 298–300). For TCA, when they occur in a sentence, slurs and their complex paraphrases are interchangeable *salva veritate*.[5] TCA can therefore be described as a reductionist theory of slurs: it aims at reducing their expressive content to the descriptive level without calling on other mechanisms or dimensions of meaning. For TCA, slurs are derogatory simply because they straightforwardly ascribe to individuals negative moral properties such as 'worthy of negative evaluation because of belonging to the group G'.

2.1 Hom and May's semantic and moral claims

Hom (2008, 2010, 2012) and Hom and May (2013, 2014, 2018) defend a version of a truth-conditional view of slurs: they paraphrase a slur 'S*' whose neutral counterpart is 'N*' with 'ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being N*' (Hom 2008: 431–432; Hom and May 2013: 298–300), so that a sentence of the form 'x is S*' entails 'x is N*'. They posit the existence of a function turning neutral terms into their pejorative counterparts with the help of a silent operator: PEJ. Predicates like 'is an S*, 'is a dirty/fucking/damn N*', or even 'is an N*' accompanied by an expression of disgust, are all viewed as different externalizations of one and the same function, PEJ(N*), meaning something like 'ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being N*'[6] (see, in particular, Hom 2008: 431–432; Hom and May 2013: 298–300). This is Hom and May's semantic claim:

Semantic Claim: The pejorative content of slurs is part of their truth-conditional content (S*=PEJ(N*)[7]).

In Hom and May's analysis, the meaning of slurs is made up of three components: (1) a reference to the target class ("being N*"); (2) a negative moral evaluation ("ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation"); and (3) a postulation of a connection between the two: what slurs convey is that one deserves negative moral evaluation *because of* being N*; in other words, slurs convey the idea that having a certain nationality, sexual orientation, etc. warrants *per se* a certain negative evaluation. For TCA, a slur against homosexual people does not just mean 'homosexual and worthy of negative moral evaluation' (this would correspond to components (1) and (2) only), but means 'homosexual and worthy of negative moral evaluation *because of being homosexual*' (components (1), (2) and (3)).

In addition to this semantic claim concerning the truth-conditional meaning of slurs, Hom and May (2013, 2018) also put forward a moral claim:

Moral Claim: "No one ought to be the target of derogation because of their particular group membership." (Hom and May 2013: 299)[8]

The consequence of accepting the semantic and the moral claim together is that slurs have a necessarily empty extension: for the Semantic Claim, slurs ascribe to subjects properties like 'worthy of negative moral evaluation because of being N*'; since, for the Moral Claim, no one is worthy of negative moral evaluation for belonging to a certain group, it follows that "pejorative terms have empty extensions" (Hom and May 2013: 295). In this version of TCA, a slurring utterance like 'John is an S*' is necessarily false and it is derogatory because it ascribes to John a negative moral property.

2.2 The challenge from projection

One of the main challenges for Hom and May—as underlined i.a. in Croom (2011), Anderson and Lepore (2013), Camp (2013), Jeshion (2013a, b), Bolinger Jorgensen (2017)—concerns projection, i.e. what happens when slurs occur under semantic embedding rather than in atomic predications of the form 'John in an S*'.

Suppose that 'S*' is a slur targeting homosexual people and consider the following pairs:

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[7] "PEJ(ξ) functionally combines with any characteristic counterpart term, t, typically designating race, gender, religion, class, and so forth, to form a pejorative, PEJ(t)" (Hom and May 2013: 298).

[8] There is some debate as to whether this version of the moral claim is tenable, that is, as to whether contempt could ever be warranted when directed at certain groups. See Predelli (2010: 184, fn. 15), Miščević (2011: 166), Marques (2017: 7), Nunberg (2018) for a debate on slurs; see Mason (2003) for a discussion on whether contempt could ever be—in her words—"properly focused". About this, Hom and May (2013: 295) claim that "there are no morally evaluable traits (good or bad) that are heritable on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, and the like" and in Hom and May (2018: 115) they provide further clarification: "In a certain sense, mass murderers form a group, and being a mass murderer justifies negative moral evaluation in virtue of the action one must take in order to become a member of that group. Being a member of that group, however, does not justify being the target of pejoration. *Qua* group, mass murderers are no different than any other group in this regard."

(5) a. John is an S*.
   b. John ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being homosexual.

(6) a. John is not an S*.
   b. John ought not to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being homosexual.

For Hom and May, (5)-a and (5)-b are synonymous; but (6)-a and (6)-b show that, although (5)-a and (5)-b may seem synonymous at a first glance, they display crucially distinct behaviours when they are negated. Whatever offensive and derogatory content the homophobic slur 'S*' conveys, it still conveys it under negation in (6)-a, whereas (6)-b is not derogatory. Thus there is something derogatory in the content of the slur that is *not* affected by negation: as we shall argue, the derogatory content *projects out* of embedding. Slurs have a very broad projection profile: their pejorative content scopes out of most (if not all) truth-conditional operators, from modals (7) to conditionals (8), questions (9), quantification over events (10) and so on.

(7) Sue's friend could very well be an S*.
(8) If Mary is an S*, then she won't like that dress.
(9) Is Bob an S*?
(10) Every time I meet three Ss* in a row, I suppose I'm in the wrong place.
(11) John is not an S*.
(12) There are no Ss* at my office.
(13) If Freddie Mercury was an S*, then he was worthy of contempt.

As we have said, for TCA derogation consists in the literal ascription of a negative moral property to a subject.[9] Thus for TCA there should be no 'derogation' in (7)–(13), because the property expressed by the slur is not strictly speaking *predicated* of the subject. However, this is in contrast with the fact that in (7)–(13) speakers detect a pejorative content even if no negative moral property is strictly speaking *ascribed* to subjects. In other words, to many competent speakers, an utterance where a slur is negated—like (11), 'John is not an S*'—sounds as derogatory as the non-embedded corresponding utterance, 'John is an S*'. TCA is not *prima facie* well equipped to account for these projection facts and this constitutes the main problem for the account.[10] In order to overcome this difficulty with projection, Hom and May make two moves: (1) they point to cases where it looks like projection does not occur and (2) they try to explain away cases where projection seems to occur, like (7)–(13), by appealing to a pragmatic phenomenon that they call 'offense'. In the next two sections, we show how both moves fail to rescue TCA

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[9] Note that when we say that for TCA derogation is the ascription of negative moral properties to the subject, such an ascription of negative properties must occur at the level of truth-condition, according to TCA. When we say 'literal ascription of negative moral properties', we are for the time being setting aside the hypothesis that there are other non-truth-conditional ways in which a negative property can be ascribed to the subject and/or to the target class. We will come back to this in Sect. 4.

[10] Embedded uses of slurs *can* have non-pejorative readings. We call them 'non-projectability' data. Note that we do not *a priori* exclude the existence of non-derogatory readings of some utterances involving slurs. We get back to non-offensive readings in Sects. 3 and 4.

from the problem of projection. As announced, in Sect. 3 we show that cases in which, according to Hom and May, projection does not occur are actually metalinguistic uses of slurs, and in Sect. 4 we refute Hom and May's pragmatic explanation of why speakers find utterances like (7)–(13) derogatory.

3 Non-projectability data and metalinguistic negation

Let's acknowledge that it is possible for utterances like 'There are no Ss*' to have a non-pejorative reading, as Hom and May claim. The question is whether such a reading can be taken to prove that the pejorative content of slurs is truth-conditional. In this section, we claim *contra* Hom and May that it does not, and we argue that the non-pejorative reading of embedded slurs is actually brought about by metalinguistic effects.[11] First we introduce the notion of metalinguistic negation (Sect. 3.1), then we propose three tests to support our claim (Sect. 3.2).

3.1 Metalinguistic negation

Consider the following statement:

(14) Yao Ming is not married.

There are (at least) two readings of (14), depending on how negation is interpreted. A *propositional* interpretation of negation gives rise to a reading under which Yao Ming has no husband or wife; whereas a *metalinguistic* interpretation of negation brings about a reading under which the speaker finds that the predicate 'married' is not accurate to describe Yao Ming's marital status. The two readings can be made explicit with the following continuations:

(15) a. Yao Ming is not married, he is single.   PROPOSIT. NEG.
       b. Yao Ming is not married, he is   META. NEG.
          joined in holy matrimony.

Horn describes metalinguistic negation as:

> a device for objecting to a previous utterance on any grounds whatsoever – including its conventional or conversational implicata, its morphology, its style or register, or its phonetic realization. (Horn 1985: 121)

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[11] Jeshion (2013a: 259, fn. 47) makes a similar observation. Note also that the purpose of this section is to investigate whether *standard* embedded uses of slurs can be non-pejorative; a separate issue that we set aside is whether some slurs can have non-pejorative uses *in general*. An interesting case is the case of appropriation, where members of a targeted group use the slur with other in-groups in a non-offensive way. For a discussion on the appropriative uses of slurs, see among others Brontsema (2004), Croom (2014), or Bianchi (2014a), who interestingly also provides a metalinguistic ('echoic') account of the defusing of their pejorative powers. One could even conjecture that all non-pejorative instances of slurs (embedded, appropriated and others) are ultimately metalinguistic.

That is, not as a device that would operate at the propositional level by reversing the truth-value of a proposition (or selecting the complement of a predicate), but as one that would operate at the level of discourse representations.[12]

The phenomenon of metalinguistic negation has been the focus of a lot of attention in the literature, but to our knowledge there is as yet no consensual theory of the phenomenon.[13] Our purpose here is not to develop a general theory, but rather to show that non-offensive uses of slurs belong to this class of uses whose very existence is not debated.

Recall that Hom and May take the non-projectability data—i.e. the non-pejorative reading of utterances like 'There are no Ss*'—to show that the derogatory content of slurs does not project out of embedding, and for them this speaks in favour of a truth-conditional account. They take the availability of non-pejorative readings in (16)–(22) as evidence that different truth-conditional operators successfully affected the pejorative content of slurs.[14] Suppose that 'S*' is a slur targeting Jewish people:

(16) There are no Ss*, only Jews.
(17) No Jews are Ss*.
(18) There are no Ss* at university, only Jewish people.
(19) Yao Ming is Jewish, but he's not an S*.
(20) There are lots of Jewish people at Cal, but no Ss*.
(21) Jewish people are not Ss*.
(22) There are no Ss*; racists are wrong.

A few authors have suggested that the non-pejorative readings of embedded slurs are instances of metalinguistic negation and therefore should not be taken to speak in favour of the truth-conditional analysis (see Anderson and Lepore 2013: 28–29; Jeshion 2013a: 259, fn. 47; Bolinger Jorgensen 2017: 458, fn. 14). However, they suggest such an alternative explanation 'by analogy'. The aim of the present paper is not only to argue that a metalinguistic explanation of the non-pejorative reading of embedded slurs is possible, but that it is in fact correct. We show that the non-projective readings of the embedded slurs are the result of a metalinguistic interpretation of negation by considering linguistic constructions in which metalinguistic negation is not available.

In particular, we consider three such cases: (3.2.1) the prefixal incorporation of negation, (3.2.2) the 'it's false that' construction, and (3.2.3) the 'without being' construction.[15]

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[12] It is no surprise to find in Horn (1985) an example of metalinguistic negation involving embedded slurs: 'It is relevant that metalinguistic negation can be employed by a speaker who wishes to reject the bigoted or chauvinistic point of view embodied in an earlier statement within the discourse context:

(c) I beg your pardon: Lee isn't an 'uppity S* [we have changed Horn's instances of slurs into S*]'—(s)he's a strong, vibrant {black/woman/Jew/Italian/…}. […] 'I'm not a 'gentleman of the Israelite persuasion'—I'm a Jew!'' (Horn 1985: 133, fn. 10).

[13] About the variety of metalinguistic uses, see i.a. Horn (1985, 1989) and Recanati (2001, 2007).

[14] These examples come from Hom (2008) and Hom and May (2013).

[15] Horn proposes a similar test having to do with the distribution of polarity items (Horn 1989: 370, 374, 396). According to Horn, metalinguistic negation should not license negative polarity items (e.g. 'any'), nor inhibit positive polarity items (e.g. 'some'). We prefer not to include such a test because of the controversial and conflicting results that it produces (see Geurts 1998: 278).

3.2 Three tests for metalinguistic negation

3.2.1 'Non-F'

Horn (1985: 140) observes that when one tries to incorporate negation prefixally, metalinguistic readings are blocked.[16] As we have said, 'Yao Ming is not married' is ambiguous between a propositional and a metalinguistic reading. In what follows, we will apply an incorporation test; the material in parenthesis is meant to help the reader accessing the relevant readings, it is not part of utterances.

(23) a. Yao Ming is not married.   AMBIGUOUS (Prop. vs. Meta.)
      b. Yao Ming is not married.   PROPOSITIONAL
         (he is single)
      c. Yao Ming is non-married.   PROPOSITIONAL
         (he is single)
      d. Yao Ming is not married.   METALINGUISTIC
         (he is joined in holy matrimony)
      e. ??Yao Ming is non-married.   —
         (he is joined in holy matrimony)

The test shows that when negation is incorporated, the only reading available is the propositional one (23)-c. Now consider the same test with a slur instead of the predicate 'married' and suppose that 'S*' is a slur targeting Chinese people:

(24) a. Yao Ming is not an S*.[17]   AMBIGUOUS (Prop. vs. Meta.)
      b. Yao Ming is not an S*. (he is Russian)   PROPOSITIONAL
      c. Yao Ming is a non-S*.[18] (he is Russian)   PROPOSITIONAL
      d. Yao Ming is not an S*. (he is Chinese)   METALINGUISTIC
      e. ??Yao ming is a non-S*. (he is Chinese)   —

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[16] Note that the 'Non-F' and the 'without being' tests are designed for utterances of the form 'x is not S*'/'Ns* are not Ss*', 'No Ns* is S*', rather than for utterances of the form 'there are no Ss*'. However, the 'It's false that' test can be applied to all of the cases considered by Hom (2008) and Hom and May (2013). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us to underline this point.

[17] Note also that the comparison of the noun slur (as we take 'S*' to be) with an adjective ('married') does not undermine the point. The results replicate with adjectival slurs, e.g. slurs targeting homosexual people:

   a. John is not S*.   AMBIGUOUS
   b. John is not S*. (he is heterosexual)   PROPOSITIONAL
   c. John is non-S*. (he is heterosexual)   PROPOSITIONAL
   d. John is not S*. (he is homosexual)   METALINGUISTIC
   e. ??John is non-S*. (he is homosexual)   —

Thanks to Timothy Williamson for pointing this out.

[18] Note that English does not have slurs with incorporated negation, but that it seems harmless to use a neologism in this case. Imagine a situation in which speakers divide the world into people who are Chinese and people who are not. They could thus apply the predicates 'Chinese' and 'Non-Chinese'. Racists would similarly apply the pejorative predicates 'S*' and 'Non-S*'. It is harmless to use a neologism here, as what matters the most in this case is the contrast between c-cases and e-cases.

Once more, (24)-a is ambiguous between a propositional and a metalinguistic reading of negation, i.e., it conveys (or not) a pejorative content towards Chinese people depending on the interpretation of negation (readings (24)-b and (24)-d, respectively). The prefixal incorporation of negation in (24)-c encourages the non-metalinguistic reading, under which the slur conveys a pejorative content towards Chinese people. On the other hand, if we encourage a metalinguistic interpretation in the presence of incorporated negation, the result is deviant ((24)-e).[19] Overall, this is evidence that the non-pejorative reading of (24)-a is the result of a metalinguistic effect, rather than truth-conditional computations.

3.2.2 'It's false that'

Constructions like 'it's false that' also block metalinguistic readings of negation (Horn 1989: 416):

(25) a. It's false that John is married. (he is single)
      b. ??It's false that John is married. (he is joined in holy matrimony)

From the ambiguous 'John is not married', only the propositional reading survives when negation takes the above form, just like when it is incorporated. Now suppose that 'S*' is a slur targeting Jewish people and compare:

(26) a. It's false that John is an S*. (he is catholic)
      b. ??It's false that John is an S*. (he is Jewish)

Again, an utterance of 'It's false that John is an S*' gets only one reading, the propositional one ((26)-a); it is not felicitous with a metalinguistic reading. Just like above, from the ambiguous 'John is not an S*', the metalinguistic reading does not survive when negation takes the explicit propositional form. This is new evidence that non-pejorative readings of embedded slurs (i.e. what we have called 'non-projectability data') are *not* the result of a truth-conditional interaction, as Hom and May claim.

3.2.3 'Without being'

'Being F without being G' is just another way of 'being F and not G'.[20] So when one says that 'John is not married, he is F', one could as well say that 'John is F without being married'. This construction of negation also seems to rule out metalinguistic readings. Take the following pair:

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[19] Väyrynen (2013) applies the same test to thick terms, which, according to Williams' (1985) definition, 'mix classification and attitude' (e.g. 'reckless', 'brave', etc.). His working example is 'chaste'-'unchaste'.

[20] Benjamin Spector (p.c.) offers this test, for which he credits Danny Fox.

(27) a. John lives with his partner, he is not married.   PROPOSITIONAL
      b. John is joined in holy matrimony,   METALINGUISTIC
         he is not married.

And now put it under the 'without being' format:

(28) a. John lives with his partner, without being married.
      b. ??John is joined in holy matrimony, without being married.

Again, slurs pattern the same. Suppose 'S*' is a slur targeting Jewish people:

(29) a. John works in Israel, he is not an S*.   PROPOSITIONAL
      b. John is Jewish, he is not a S*.   METALINGUISTIC
(30) a. John works in Israel, without being an S*.
      b. ??John is Jewish, without being an S*.

Once more, an utterance of a slur under negation of the form 'without being' only gets a propositional reading ((30)-a, where it is prejudiced and offensive) and it is infelicitous under the metalinguistic reading ((30)-b). The metalinguistic reading of (29)-b does not survive the 'without being'-transformation. This is further evidence that non-pejorative readings of embedded slurs (non-projectability data) are not the result of a truth-conditional interaction. To sum up, the three tests show that non-offensive uses of embedded slurs depend on metalinguistic uses of negation. Thus, non-projectability data like the non-pejorative readings of (16)–(22) do not count as evidence that the pejorative content of slurs is cancelled by propositional negation; therefore, such data do not show that the pejorative content of slurs is truth-conditional; on the contrary, since the pejorative content can only be cancelled by metalinguistic negation,[21] this strongly suggests that it is *not* truth-conditional. To conclude, our three tests show that Hom and May's first move to support TCA, i.e. pointing to cases where it looks like projection does not occur, ultimately fails.

   In the next section, we consider—and object to—Hom and May's second move, i.e. their attempt to explain why speakers would have the intuition that embedded

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[21] Here we shall address a potential worry, suggested to us by François Recanati (p.c.), and reply to it. One may raise the following objection: what our tests show is that negation is *not* internal under the non-pejorative readings of slurs; this—one may worry—does not automatically mean that negation must then be metalinguistic, since there is also a third option in addition to internal and metalinguistic negation, i.e. *external* negation. There is a straightforward reply to this objection. The material that we have selected for our tests only involves singular terms like 'Yao Ming' or 'John', and when negated sentences involve singular terms rather than quantified predicates like 'All citizens' or 'Some people', internal and external negation give rise to one and the same reading. Thus, for our sentences, where only singular terms are employed, there is no doubt that *if* the negation is not internal, it must be *metalinguistic*.

slurs[22] still carry a pejorative content, given their claim that in fact there is no derogatory content that projects.

4 The derogation/offense distinction

As we have seen above, according to TCA, slurs under negation and other operators are not derogatory, in the sense that they do not strictly speaking *predicate* negative properties of a subject. Nevertheless, Hom and May recognize that an additional pragmatic phenomenon is responsible for the intuition that the pejorative content of slurs does project under semantic embedding. Consider again (11)–(13), repeated here in (31)–(33):

(31) John is not an S*.
(32) There are no Ss* at my office.
(33) If Freddie Mercury was an S*, then he was worthy of contempt.

Hom (2012) and Hom and May (2013) distinguish the phenomenon of 'derogation'—the predication of a negative moral property—from another phenomenon, somehow similar in its effects: 'offense'.

> Offensiveness can be linguistically triggered, because when speakers use predicates, they typically conversationally implicate their commitment to the non-null extensionality of the predicate. (Hom and May 2013: 310)

Their proposal goes as follows. In general, speakers tend to use terms that they believe have a non-empty extension; this is true of any predicate ('table', 'bottle', etc.). For example, if John asks Mary whether she ever speaks to angels, Mary and bystanders will generate the conversational implicature that John believes that angels exist.[23] Likewise, suppose that 'S*' is a slur targeting Italian people. If John asks Mary whether she ever speaks to 'Ss*', Mary and bystanders will tend to infer

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[22] Note that Hom and May also put forward non-projectability data which do not involve negation (suppose that 'S*' is a slur targeting Jewish people and 'S**' is a slur targeting Chinese people):

   (i)   People treating Jews as Ss* are anti-Semitic.
   (ii)   Max doubts that Jews are Ss*.
   (iii) Racists believe that Chinese people are Ss**.
   (iv) Thinking that Chinese people are Ss** is to be radically wrong about the world.

We will not discuss these cases in detail here, we just remark that they all involve propositional attitude expressions, and are therefore good candidates for triggering other so-called perspectival effects (on this topic, see Horn 1985; Carston 1996; Geurts 1998; Pitts 2011; Recanati 2001, 2007; Harris and Potts 2009a, b).

[23] Conversational implicatures are expected to be cancellable. Hom and May call on non-projectability data here to argue that indeed, *offense* (triggered by a conversational implicature) can be cancelled—for example, supposing that 'S*' is a slur targeting Jewish people, in 'There are no Ss*, Ss* don't exist', 'John is not an S* because there is no such thing' or 'No Jews are Ss*'. We have shown in Sect. 3 that these cases are better understood in terms of metalinguistic effects.

that John believes that 'Ss*' exist.[24] For Hom and May this pragmatic inference is responsible for our intuition of projection: any use of slurs, embedded or not, triggers an implicature of non-null extensionality (or 'non-vacuity') and, given the alleged meaning of slurs (something like 'ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being N*', cf. Hom and May 2013: 298–300), such an implicature would generate the effect of offense.

In what follows, we argue that non-vacuity inferences cannot explain the pejorativeness of embedded slurs.[25] Our strategy is to look at a construction where non-vacuity inferences are usually blocked, like the construct 'there is no F'. One does not infer that the speaker believes in the existence of God when she utters 'there is no God'. The same with 'there are no vampires'. Now note that, although vampires do not exist, there are slurs for vampires (e.g. 'fangs') and the same goes for other fictional entities ('pointyear' for elves, 'toaster' for robots, 'furface' or 'moondog' for werewolves[26]). Imagine that Mary wants to reassure John, who is afraid of being bitten by a vampire on his way home. She could utter (34) or (35):

(34) Don't worry! There are no vampires! They don't exist.
(35) Don't worry! There are no fangs! They don't exist.

Since (34) and (35) are instances of the construction 'There is no F', neither should trigger existential inferences and yet the utterance of (35) still conveys Mary's negative evaluation of vampires. We conclude that the negative evaluative content about vampires in (35) cannot be the result of non-emptiness inferences. Therefore, non-null-extensionality implicatures cannot explain the projection of the evaluative content of slurs.[27] Our examples show that Hom and May's second strategy to rescue TCA from the problem of projection—i.e. to rely on a pragmatic phenomenon to explain why speakers have the supposedly wrong intuition that the pejorative content of slurs projects—ultimately fails.

5 Conclusions

In this paper we have considered the main problem faced by the truth-conditional account of slurs, namely how to account for the intuition that the derogatory content of pejoratives projects out of semantic embeddings. We have discussed and objected to the two moves that Hom and May make to solve this problem and finally

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[24] Note that there being 'Ss*' means not only that there are people who are Italian and are worthy of a negative moral evaluation, but that there are people who are worthy of negative moral evaluation *because of* being Italian.

[25] Whiting (2013) deems implausible the explanation of offense in terms of conversational implicatures. The argument we provide below is offered in the spirit of his criticism.

[26] The example of 'fangs' for vampires comes from the HBO tv-series *True Blood*; among the gaming communities, there are slurs for all sort fictional entities (https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FantasticSlurs).

[27] One could instead propose that what triggers offense is not the inference of non-emptiness *per se*, but the inference of *possible* non-emptiness. Suppose that 'S*' is a slur targeting Italian people. 'S*' triggers offense because it suggests that the speaker believes it is *possible* that Italians ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being Italian. This variation will not work either, as Mary could as well reassure John by saying 'Don't worry, there could be no fangs! It is simply impossible that fangs exist'.

concluded that a truth-conditional analysis of slurs is not well-equipped to account for how these pejorative terms work. On the one hand, we have shown that non-pejorative readings of embedded slurs depend on a metalinguistic interpretation of negation (Sect. 3); on the other hand, we have built a case with slurs for fictional entities illustrating that the pragmatic mechanisms postulated by Hom and May—the non-null-extensionality implicatures—cannot explain the perceived projection (Sect. 4). By showing that the strategies to support the truth-conditional account of slurs ultimately fail, we suggest that more promising accounts should be preferred.

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