Slurs as Illocutionary Force Indicators

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Abstract

Slurs are derogatory words and they are used to derogate certain groups. Theories of slurs must explain why they are derogatory words, as well as other features like independence and descriptive ineffability. This paper proposes an illocutionary force indicator theory of slurs: they are derogatory terms because their use is to perform the illocutionary act of *derogation*, which is a declarative illocutionary act to enforce norms against the target. For instance, calling a Chinese person "chink" is an act of derogation to enforce racist norms that license exclusion of the Chinese, deny their rights to dignity, etc. The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, it offers a more comprehensive explanation of the features of slurs than earlier speech act approaches. Second, it provides a theory that is immune to the problems faced by existing theories, such as wrong predictions of truth-conditions, explaining unacceptability to non-bigots, and explaining slurs against the dominant groups.

Keywords Slurs · Speech acts · Illocutionary force · Force indicators · Derogation

1 Introduction

At first glance, slurs are derogatory expressions against certain groups. For example, the slur "chink" is a word used to derogate the Chinese.[1] Let us call this feature the "*derogatory power of slurs*" (also called the "derogatory force"). Moreover, slurs' derogatory power gives rise to more puzzling features. Take *non-derogatory utterances* of slurs for instance. It is possible for Chinese friends to call each other "chink" as an endearment. If "chink" is a derogatory word, how can it be used in this non-derogatory way? Another example is the *descriptive ineffability* of slurs. It seems that the derogatory power of "chink" cannot be paraphrased in purely descriptive terms. Why cannot

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[1] Warning: this paper contains examples of offensive language. I apologize in advance for any potential offense this could cause.

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"chink" be satisfactorily paraphrased as "slanty-eyed Chinese" or "devious Chinese"? We need theories of slurs to explain puzzling features like these.

In this paper, I will develop an *illocutionary force indicator theory of slurs*. Slurs are derogatory words because they are illocutionary force indicators of derogation. They are analogous to illocutionary force indicators like "I promise," the job of which is to make the illocutionary force of promising explicit. Likewise, the slur "chink" is a derogatory word for the Chinese because it makes the illocutionary force of derogation explicit. Derogation is a declarative illocutionary act, e.g., to derogate the Chinese is to enforce a norm against them. For instance, calling a Chinese person "chink" is to enforce an anti-Chinese norm that denies their rights and licenses the exclusion of them. In addition, slurs are propositional indicators that contribute to the propositional contents of utterances. "Chink" makes the same contribution to the truth-conditional content as its neutral counterpart, "Chinese."

The first contribution of this paper is to provide a systematic explanation of the features of slurs from the perspective of speech act theory. Earlier speech act theories of slurs focus only on a few features such as derogatory power and non-derogatory utterances, while other features like descriptive ineffability and perspective dependence are left unexplained (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2018). By contrast, my force indicator theory offers a more comprehensive account of the features of slurs. Take descriptive ineffability for instance. The derogatory power of "chink" cannot be paraphrased because the illocutionary force of derogation cannot be paraphrased into propositional contents.

The second contribution is to provide a new theory to avoid the problems faced by existing theories. I will raise several arguments against three major alternatives, i.e., combinatorial externalism (Hom 2008, 2010, 2012), expressivism (Jeshion 2013, 240), and discourse role assignment theory (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2018). I will also illustrate the immunity of my theory from these objections. For instance, combinatorial externalism makes wrong predictions about the truth-condition of "Zhang is a chink" because it builds stereotypes directly into the truth-condition. This problem does not apply to my theory because it excludes stereotypes from the truth-conditional contribution of "chink." More-over, the discourse role assignment theory, as an earlier speech act theory of slurs, does not allow in-group utterances of the N-word between black people to be derogatory or offensive (when there is no power imbalance between them). My theory avoids this problem by adopting a different felicity condition of slurring speech acts.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I will present the force indicator theory in greater detail, together with an analysis of the illocutionary act of derogation. In section 3, the force indicator theory will be used to explain more features of slurs, beyond those that have been discussed by earlier speech act theories. Section 4 will raise arguments against combinatorial externalism, expressivism, and discourse role assignment theory respectively. I will also show how my theory is immune to these arguments. Section 5 will conclude this paper.

2 The Illocutionary Force Indicator Theory of Slurs

I will develop the force indicator theory of slurs in §2.1. A theory of derogation will be presented in §2.2 to complement the force indicator theory.

2.1 Slurs Are Illocutionary Force Indicators of Derogation

It is helpful to clarify the term "slurs," which is notoriously ambiguous. First, I will use "slurs" in a narrower sense. This paper focuses on "slurs" as derogatory expressions such as ethnic epithets, not "slurs" as derogatory speech, e.g., what is described by "John's comments slurred me." Second, I will distinguish between *slurs* and *utterances of slurs* (or slurring utterances). A slur is the *type* of a linguistic expression, whereas *utterances of slurs* are particular tokens of the same type. Third, my use of "utterances of slurs" will include both utterances of *a single slur* (e.g. "chink!") and utterances of *a sentence* that contain a slur (e.g., "Zhang is a chink.").

Some speech act theory concepts need to be introduced before developing the force indicator theory. An illocutionary act has (at least) two major components, an *illocutionary force*, and a *content* (Searle and Vanderveken 1985, 1). For instance, promising that John will come has the same content as confessing that John will come, but they differ in illocutionary forces. Illocutionary force indicators explicitly show the illocutionary force of an utterance, in other words, how the content of an utterance should be taken (Searle 1969, 30; Searle and Vanderveken 1985, 2).[2] Propositional indicators, on the other hand, contribute to the content of an utterance. Consider an utterance of the performative sentence "I promise that I will give you my money." The propositional indicator "that I will give you my money" provides the content of this utterance, whereas the force indicator "I promise" shows that this should be taken as a promise, not as a confession.

Given these backgrounds of speech act theories, it is ready to formulate my *illocutionary force indicator theory of slurs*. The illocutionary force indicator theory takes slurs to play two roles; slurs are both illocutionary force indicators and propositional indicators.[3]

The Illocutionary Force Indicator Theory of Slurs

A slur (e.g., "chink") is both 1) an illocutionary force indicator of acts of derogation against its target (e.g., the Chinese), as well as 2) a propositional indicator that makes the same truth-conditional contribution as its neutral counterpart (e.g., "Chinese").

First, slurs are derogatory words because they are illocutionary force indicators (or illocutionary force indicating device) of the illocutionary acts of derogation against their target.[4] Whenever a slur is used literally in an utterance, it makes the illocutionary force of derogation explicit. When conditions are satisfied, this utterance counts as an illocutionary act of derogation. Utterances of slurs are derogatory when they are

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[2] The use to make the illocutionary force explicit is a property of the *type* of a force indicator and consequently the *type* of a sentence that contains the force indicator. The *type* of a force indicator is shared by the *tokens* or *utterances* of it. The *tokens* or *utterances* have the corresponding illocutionary force, made explicit by the force indicator, when they are successful illocutionary acts.

[3] This is *not* to say that slurs consist of two syntactic parts, a force indicator and a propositional indicator.

[4] Slurs are not the only force indicators of derogation. For instance, the force might be indicated by a negative tone or a gesture.

successful acts of derogation.[5] Consider the example of utterance 1). If a racist speaker utters 1) in a literal way, he is derogating the Chinese people, in addition to his assertion that Zhang is Chinese.

1)   Zhang is a chink.
2)   Zhang is a Chinese

Second, slurs are also propositional indicators. Slurs make the same contribution to the proposition as their neutral counterparts. A neutral counterpart of a slur shares its referent without being a derogatory word, e.g., "Chinese" is the neutral counterpart of "chink." For instance, sentence 1) expresses the same proposition as sentence 2), "Zhang is a Chinese," because "chink" makes the same truth-conditional contribution as "Chinese." Sentence 1) and 2) share the same truth-condition. If Zhang were Italian, both 1) and 2) would be false. It might be argued that the truth-condition of 1) differs from 2). I will address this view in § 4.1.

I will clarify two things about illocutionary force. First, I believe in the possibility of multiple direct illocutionary acts within a single utterance. When the racist utters 1) literally, he is not derogating the Chinese indirectly through asserting Zhang is a Chinese. Both the assertion and the derogation are direct illocutionary acts. Second, force indicators help to determine illocutionary force by providing the default interpretations of utterances. For instance, the force indicator "chink" guides the hearer to form the initial (but defeasible) hypothesis that the utterance is an act of derogating the Chinese, before other factors (e.g., irony, sarcasm) are taken into considerations.

2.2 Derogation as Declarative Illocutionary Acts

The force indicator theory gives rise to questions about derogation. If slurs are the illocutionary force indicators of derogation, what is derogation? If derogation is an illocutionary act, what kind of illocutionary force does it have?

To complement the force indicator theory of slurs, I will develop a corresponding theory of derogation as declarative illocutionary acts to enforce discriminatory norms. I believe that derogation is a declarative illocutionary act, that is, an act to bring about certain states of affairs by saying something (e.g., resigning and approving). To derogate someone is not just to describe the world (as in assertive illocutionary acts) or to express one's emotion (as in expressive illocutionary acts). The illocutionary point of derogation is to enforce a norm against the target. Those norms deprive the target of certain rights or assign a low value to them. For example, to derogate the Chinese by calling them "chink" is not merely to describe negative features of them or to express one's contempt for them; it to enforce a racist norm in which the Chinese are inferior. Such an anti-Chinese racist norm sanctions violence against the Chinese and denies their rights to dignity, etc.

To understand the declarative nature of derogation, consider an example of the function of slurs in the Rwanda Genocide (Tirrell 2012). Slurs such as "inyenzi" (cockroaches) and "inzoka" (snakes) were applied to Tutsi people to justify atrocities

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[5] For the difference between the derogatory power of *slurs* and the derogatory power of *utterances of slurs*, see (anonymized).

against them. To call someone an "inzoka" is not merely a matter of expressing emotions toward Tutsi people. As a crucial step to adulthood, it is an honor for Rwanda boys to be trusted to kill snakes. Therefore, to call someone "inzoka" is to apply the snake-killing norm to him, allowing him to be treated like snakes. Tirrell has described this practice:

> "For many uneducated peasants, if the official authorities state that Tutsi are snakes, it can't be wrong. If the local official of the commune orders people to kill snakes, it makes sense. When you kill a snake, you smash its head, then you cut it up in different places to make sure it's really dead. These very same forms of torture were inflicted on many Tutsi." (Tirrell 2012, 205)

For the sake of precision, I shall adopt the framework of Searle and Vanderveken (1985) to analyze the illocutionary act of derogation. First, the *illocutionary point* of derogation is declarative, just like approving, resigning, and naming; the characteristic aim of derogation is to enforce a norm against a target. For instance, in derogating the Chinese, the speaker can enforce a racist norm, which discriminates against the Chinese. Second, derogation encompasses a range of *strengths of illocutionary points*. It is possible to derogate a group strongly or weakly. An act of derogation is stronger when it enforces a norm that is even more discriminatory against the target. Third, derogation has a special *content condition*. Unlike promises or assertions, the content of derogation is not a proposition. It takes persons or groups of people as its content. For instance, derogating the Chinese takes the Chinese as its content. Fourth, derogation has an *essential condition* (which is a component of the success condition), i.e., the speaker must intend to enforce a norm against the target, unless the speaker speaks with the institutional authority of the office he or she occupies. For example, a speaker cannot successfully derogate the Chinese unless he wants to enforce racist norms that discriminate against the Chinese.[6] Fifth, derogation has a *sincerity condition*. To sincerely derogate a target group, the speaker must have negative attitudes (e.g., contempt, disrespect, etc.) toward them. Otherwise, derogation can be successful without being sincere.

Two quick caveats on the success condition of derogation. First, I believe that the success of derogation does not include the *uptakes* of audiences. For instance, calling a Chinese person "chink" can be a successful act of derogation, even if he does not understand the English word "chink" or he does not take the speaker to be ill-intentioned. Second, the essential condition of successful derogation is met when the speaker invokes *the authority* of his office, regardless of the intention of the speaker. Suppose a careless government official calls the Chinese "chinks" in an official press conference. He is derogating the Chinese even if he does not intend to enforce anti-Chinese norms. Notice that this clause of invoking authority is not ad hoc; it applies to other speech acts such as promising. This is because the requirement on intentions, in general, can be overridden by conventions. Imagine the U.S. President, under immense public pressure, utters "I promise to support the Black Lives Matter movement" at the State of the Union. Even if he does not intend to be obligated to support the movement,

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[6] This essential condition should not be taken as the sincerity condition.

his utterance still counts as a promise because of the conventions of invoking presidential authority.

Moreover, notice two things about the relation between slurs and derogation. First, slurs are not necessary for derogation. Derogation can be done without slurs, e.g., through indirect speech acts such as asserting that "I would not befriend the Chinese" or warning that "The Chinese are taking our jobs!". Second, using slurs is insufficient for derogation. An utterance of a slur does not always count as an illocutionary act of derogation. This is because illocutionary acts can misfire or be unsuccessful when their success conditions (including essential conditions) are not met.

I will also give short replies to two common objections against the view that derogation is an illocutionary act. These objections threaten any theory that explains slurs in terms of the illocutionary act of derogation. First, it may be argued that derogation is not an illocutionary act because of the lack of a corresponding performative verb. For instance, no one can derogate the Chinese by saying "I hereby derogate the Chinese." My reply is to deny that every illocutionary act corresponds to a performative verb. As Searle and Vanderveken (1985, 179) has observed, many illocutionary acts (e.g., boasting, insinuating, hinting, etc.) have no performative verbs. Second, one may argue that derogation is not a distinct class of illocutionary act because it can happen in other illocutionary acts, e.g., derogatory promises like "I promise to find you a chink." My reply is to treat this counterexample as a complex illocutionary act that combines derogation and promise (Searle and Vanderveken 1985).

3 Explaining the Features of Slurs

Slurs exhibit many puzzling features and an adequate theory of slurs must be capable of explaining them. Earlier speech act theories often focus on explaining a few features, without addressing other features like *descriptive ineffability* and *perspective dependence* (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2018).[7] One of the contributions of this paper is to develop a speech act approach of slurs with greater explanatory power. This section will introduce all major features of slurs and apply my theory to explain them.

Derogatory Power The first commonly discussed feature of slurs is their *derogatory power* (or *derogatory force*) (Croom 2011, 345; Jeshion 2013, 232; Richard 2008, 12; Hom 2008, 426; Hom 2010, 164). That is, theories of slurs have to explain why slurs are derogatory expressions. For instance, why is "chink" a derogatory word, whereas its neutral counterpart "Chinese" is not? According to the force indicator theory, slurs are derogatory words because they are illocutionary force indicator of derogation. An utterance of slurs is derogatory when it is a successful illocutionary act of derogation.[8]

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[7] For the details of Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt's theory, see section 4.3.
[8] It may be argued that this is not truly explanatory, because introducing "illocutionary force of derogation" is merely relabeling what is often called the "derogatory force of slurs." However, this objection is based on a terminological confusion. The term "derogatory force" of slurs should not be conflated with "illocutionary force of derogation."

Truth-Conditional Contribution Second, slurs at least appear to make the same *truth-conditional contribution* as their neutral counterparts (Hom 2010, 169). For instance, "chink" seems to have the same truth-conditional content as "Chinese." The force indicator theory explains this by allowing slurs to be propositional indicators that make the same truth-conditional contributions as their neutral counterparts.

Independence Slurs are said to exhibit *independence* (Whiting 2013, 364; Hornsby 2001, 129). What makes them derogatory words can be separated from the truth-conditional contents. For instance, "Chinese" has the same referent as "chink" but is not derogatory like "chink." This is not a problem for the force indicator theory which permits "Chinese" to be a propositional indicator without being a force indicator of derogation.

Descriptive Ineffability Slurs are said to have *descriptive ineffability*.[9] It seems impossible for slurs to be satisfactorily paraphrased in purely descriptive terms (Hom 2010, 166; Potts 2007, 176; Whiting 2013, 365; Schlenker 2007, 239). No (descriptive) paraphrase of "chink" can perfectly capture its meaning. For the force indicator theory, this is a consequence of the distinction between force and content. Illocutionary force simply cannot be paraphrased into propositional contents. For instance, the illocutionary force of a promise cannot be translated into a proposition.

Perspective Dependence Slurs seem to be *perspective dependent* (or *agent-centered*).[10] They are said to indicate the derogatory attitudes of the speaker (Hom 2010, 169; Schlenker 2007, 239; Bolinger 2015, 1). As Potts (2007, 166) claims, "the perspective encoded in the expressive aspects of an utterance is always the speaker's." This is simply because slurs indicate the force of an illocutionary act *of* the speaker, not acts of others. This is analogous to the fact that uttering "I promise so and so" makes a promise on behalf of no one but the speaker.

However, there appear to be counterexamples to perspective dependence.[11] The force indicator theory takes these to be cases of hidden quotation marks. For example, "Universities that treat the Chinese as chinks are racist" does not express the attitude of the speaker because it is a disguised form of "Universities that treat the Chinese as 'chinks' are racist."

Non-displaceability Perhaps the most crucial feature is *non-displaceability* (Hom 2010, 168; Croom 2011, 345; Schlenker 2007, 238; Potts 2007, 166; Bolinger 2015, 1). Slurs are derogatory even when embedded within the scope of connectives like negations and conditionals, e.g., "if chinks celebrate Lunar New Year, they eat dumplings." Green (2000, 447) argues that certain parentheticals (e.g., "as I suppose") are illocutionary

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[9] Descriptive ineffability is about paraphrasing slurs; it does not mean that the *acts* performed by using slurs cannot be described by propositions. Suppose a speaker derogates a person by using the slur "chink." It is possible to give this act a description, i.e., "He derogates the person by calling him a 'chink'."

[10] It might be argued that certain force indicators are not *perspective dependent*. For instance, uttering sentences like "John promised Bob to give him five dollars" reports the promising-attitude of John, not the attitude of the speaker. However, this does not constitute a counterexample to my claim. This is because the verb "promised", unlike the performative formula "I promise", does not function as a force indicator here.

[11] Cases like these motivate Torrengo (2020) to argue that slurs are semantically indeterminate.

force indicators and they can be embedded without losing illocutionary force (e.g., "If snow is white, as I suppose, then grass is green"). I believe that slurs behave like those parentheticals; they also keep their illocutionary force when embedded. Therefore, the sentence above is analogous to "If the Chinese, damn those people, celebrate Lunar New Year, they eat dumplings," despite the syntactical difference.[12]

Non-derogatory Utterance As a tool for derogation, slurs can be used in many ways other than derogation (Jeshion 2013, 233; Croom 2011, 349). Compare utterance 3) and 4) of the same sentence. In utterance 4), the white supremacist speaker uses a derogatory word to say something derogatory. By contrast, the radical Chinese activists, in utterance 3), deliberately abuse the derogatory word to protest racism. Although a derogatory word is used, what they say is not derogatory. Perhaps they are sending a rebellious gesture that they are not afraid of the oppression imposed on them. However, a puzzle remains to be solved: how is it even possible to use a derogatory word in a non-derogatory way? If "chink" is a derogatory word, why is 3) not as derogatory as 4)?

3)   Chinks are coming! (chanted by radical Chinese activists in a rally against racism)
4)   Chinks are coming! (uttered by a white supremacist in a speech against Chinese immigrant)

For the force indicator theory, non-derogatory utterances is simply a case of misfiring (unsuccessful) of illocutionary acts. Uses of slurs are derogatory utterances when they are successful illocutionary acts of derogation. However, the Chinese activists' utterance 3) fails to be an act of derogation, despite its force indicator "chink." As I have shown in § 2.2, derogation requires satisfying the essential condition that the speaker must intend to enforce a norm against the target (unless the speaker invokes institutional authority). Otherwise, the utterance would misfire. Unlike the white supremacist, the Chinese activists do not actually want to enforce anti-Chinese racist norms. Consequently, their utterance 3) fails to be an illocutionary act of derogation against the Chinese, and hence fails to be derogatory. Through this failed act, the Chinese activists indirectly protest racism and show their pride.

There are cases where derogation succeeds without the required intentions, when the speaker invokes the authority of a certain office.[13] For example, Italian forward Antonio Cassano caused a controversy for using a homophobic slur in a press

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[12] It also follows from the force indicator theory that slurs are synonymous with composite expressions of pure force indicators and pure propositional indicator (e.g., "damn Chinese" and "fucking Chinese), despite the synatical differences. An evidence for their synonymity is the fact that they share the key features of slurs. Both "chink" and "damn Chinese" have the *derogatory power* against the Chinese, and they make the same truth-conditional contribution to the sentences (e.g., "Zhang is a chink" is true iff "Zhang is a damn Chinese). Similar to the *non-displaceability* of "chink," "damn Chinese" remains derogatory in complex sentences like "if the damn Chinese celebrate Lunar New Year, they eat dumplings." "Damn Chinese" also exhibits *descriptive ineffability*, i.e., no descriptive term can paraphrase the derogatory power provided by "damn". The same can be said for other features such as *perspective dependence*, *Kaplanian inference puzzle*, etc. The synonymity between "chink" and "damn Chinese" is an advantage of the force indicator theory, because it is consistent with my theory. By contrast, Hom's combinatorial externalism would struggle with the synonymity because it builds Chinese stereotypes directly into the truth-conditional content of "chink."

[13] Thanks go to the anonymous reviewer for raising this possibility.

conference of the EURO 2012 football game (Christenson 2012). He made a comment that can be translated as "I hope there are no queers in the national team. But if there are queers, that's their problem…". Later, his apology denied that he intended to offend anyone and reject their freedom of sexuality. Nevertheless, Cassano's denial of homophobic intentions did not seem sufficient to excuse him for many critics of him. The force indicator theory can explain our intuition that Cassano did say something derogatory even if he had no bad intentions. This is because he used the slur in an official setting with the national team's authority vested in him. Consequently, his utterance satisfies the essential condition that the speaker intends to enforce a norm unless he speaks with authority.

Kaplanian Inference Puzzle Slurs give rise to a *Kaplanian inference puzzle* (Hom 2010, 167; Sennet and Copp 2015, 1087; Kaplan unpublished). A person who accepts the premise of inference 5) is not committed to accepting its conclusion.[14] Inference 5) seems "invalid," whereas inference 6) seems "valid" (in a sense other than validity as truth-preservation). What kind of "invalidity" is it?[15]

5)   The Chinese celebrate Lunar New Year
        Therefore, chinks celebrate Lunar New Year.
6)   Chinks celebrate Lunar New Year.
        Therefore, the Chinese celebrate Lunar New Year.

This kind of "invalidity" can be explained by an illocutionary approach; it is not a logical relation between propositional contents, but a logical relation between illocutionary forces. Borrowing the framework from Searle and Vanderveken (1985), there is a lack of illocutionary entailment between the premises and the conclusion of 5). Inference 5) seems invalid because its conclusion contains the force indicator of derogation which its premise lacks. Its invalidity is analogous to the problematic inference from "I apologize for P" to "I apologize for P and I promise that Q." The validity of inference 6) is explained by the illocutionary entailment in a similar way.

Self-Defeating Sentences In addition to non-derogatory utterances, the illocutionary force indicator theory helps to explain what I call "the puzzle of *self-defeating sentences*," i.e., how slurs make certain sentences self-defeating. Consider the following sentences. There is something wrong with them; these sentences seem to be self-defeating or self-inconsistent. Whatever the literal uses of these sentences are, these uses cannot be fulfilled satisfactorily.[16] What kind of inconsistency is involved here? There are no inconsistent propositional contents. These sentences are not inconsistent in

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[14] However, this is not to deny that a person accepting the *truth* of the premise is committed to the accept the *truth* of the conclusion in inference 5).

[15] Whether this is really a phenomenon of validity might be controversial. Even if this should be distinguished from validity as truth-preservation, it is still an interesting relation that worth explaining. Perhaps we can study it under the label "schmadity."

[16] This is not to say that they cannot be used at all. Self-defeating sentences can be used, but not in a satisfactory, literal way. When they are used, the hearers tend to resolve its inconsistency by hearing them as sarcastic or non-literal. When a speaker utters "Praise the chinks"; he is usually interpreted to be either insincere in praising or insincere in derogation.

the same way as asserting that P& ∼ P. In particular, sentence 7) and 8) do not even express full propositions, not to mention inconsistent propositional contents.

7) Praise the chinks!
8) Glory to the chinks!
9) I apologize for my discrimination against the chinks.
10) I confess that I have a prejudice about the chinks.

I shall adopt Searle and Vanderveken's (1985, 261) analysis of "illocutionary incompatibility" to explain this. Two illocutionary acts are incompatible when it is impossible to successfully perform both. Take 7) "Praise chinks" for instance. It is self-defeating because it contains illocutionary force indicators for both praise and derogation. However, praising and derogating the same group are two incompatible illocutionary acts. To praise a group is to raise their normative status, whereas derogation involves assigning inferior normative status. Because of the impossibility of both raising and lowering the normative status, derogation and praising are two incompatible illocutionary acts. This is why sentence 7) appears self-defeating; its two illocutionary force indicators indicate forces of incompatible illocutionary acts. A similar analysis can be given to sentence 8), 9), and 10).

4 Advantages over Other Theories

In this section, I will raise objections against Hom's combinatorial externalism (§4.1), Jeshion's expressivism (§4.2), and Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt's discourse role assignment theory (§4.3). The other contribution of this paper is to show my theory's advantage in avoiding these objections.

4.1 Hom's Combinatorial Externalism

A major alternative to the force indicator theory is Hom's *Combinatorial Externalism*, which disagrees with the force indicator theory over the truth-conditional content of slurs. Hom's theory builds stereotypes and negative properties directly into the truth-conditional content of slurs (Hom 2008, 2010, 2012). According to Hom (2012, 394), "chink" means "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." Utterances like 1) "Zhang is a chink" is derogatory because they attribute such negative stereotypes to people.

I will argue that Hom's combinatorial externalism makes wrong predictions about the truth-conditions. For Hom, because slurs carry stereotypes that their neutral counterparts lack, they make different truth-conditional contributions (Hom and May 2013, 293). For example, it seems that sentences like 1) cannot be true, because slurs misrepresent their targets. In particular, Hom and May would take 1) to be false and 11) to be true. This is because "chink," unlike "Chinese," means "ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards…, because of being slanty-eyed, and devious…, all because of being Chinese" (Hom 2012, 394). Because of the moral fact that no one

should be discriminated against for being Chinese, no one is a chink. The reference of "Chink" is an empty set, just like "unicorn" and "Santa Clause." Since "chinks" do not exist, sentence 1) is false and 11) is true,

1)   Zhang is a chink.
2)   Zhang is a Chinese
11)   Zhang is not a chink.
12)   Zhang is not a Chinese

I will argue against this treatment of the truth-values of 1) and 11), with cases where truth values have significant normative consequences. I insist that 1) is true and 11) is false. Suppose testimonies on Zhang's ethnicity are requested in a trial. A foul-mouthed racist, who calls the Chinese "chink" by habit, decides to lie about the fact that Zhang is Chinese. He asserts that 11) "Zhang is not a chink" to the judge. Could he escape the accusation of perjury with the excuse that 11) is actually true? No. This should be clearly treated as perjury because his assertion of 11) is a false statement about Zhang's ethnicity. On the other hand, if the racist decided to reveal Zhang's ethnicity by asserting 1), this would be a derogatory but true statement. It would be absurd for the court to rule that 1) is a false testimony because no one is a chink.

This problem does not apply to my force indicator theory. As § 2.1 shows, the propositional indicator "chink" makes the same contribution to the truth-condition as "Chinese"; both words refer to the Chinese people. Suppose Zhang is a Chinese person. It follows from my theory that both 1) and 2) are true, whereas both 11) and 12) are false. By excluding the stereotypes from the truth-conditional content of slurs, my theory avoids the problem above.

4.2 Jeshion's Expressivism

Another alternative to my theory is Jeshion's expressivism of slurs. According to Jeshion (2013, 240), the semantics of a slur includes three components. First, a slur has a truth-conditional component. For example, "chink" refers to the same group as its neutral counterpart "Chinese." Second, a slur has an expressivist component, i.e., the use to express contempt for a group because of their group membership. This is why "chink" is used to express contempt for the Chinese. Slurs' use to express emotions is semantically analogous with expressivist terms such as "wow" and "ouch." Thirdly, a slur contains an identifying component. For instance, calling someone "faggot" marks homosexuality as the defining feature of the target's identity.

I will argue that expressivism can hardly explain why non-bigots find utterances of slurs unacceptable. It has been observed that for non-bigots, utterances of slurs are unacceptable. This is also called the "uselessness of slurs" by Hornsby (2001, 130). Imagine a racist speaker commenting on Zhang's ethnicity by uttering 1) "Zhang is a chink." Non-bigots would be reluctant to say "Yes. That's right" to the utterance, despite the truth that Zhang is Chinese. Accepting such an utterance seems to make the hearers accomplices of racism, even if they agree with the racist speaker that Zhang is Chinese.[17]

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[17] This intuition has prompted people like Hom (Hom and May 2013) and Richard (2008) to deny that utterances like "Zhang is a chink" can be true.

Expressivism struggles to explain the unacceptability of utterances of slurs because it explains the derogatory power in terms of expressing emotions, rather than performing illocutionary acts. For expressivism, non-bigots find "Zhang is a chink" unacceptable because it expresses the speaker's contempt for the Chinese. Therefore, "Zhang is a chink" is unacceptable in the same way as saying that "Zhang is Chinese" while expressing contempt by frowning. However, it does not make the hearer an accomplice of racism by accepting the utterance with "Yes, That's right." There is nothing wrong with agreeing both that Zhang is Chinese, and that the speaker is a bigot with contempt for the Chinese. If a bigot speaker harbors contempt for the Chinese, this should be his problem rather than a problem for the non-bigot hearer. Therefore, the unacceptability of utterances of slurs must have sources other than merely an expression of emotions.

Here is a possible reply from expressivism. Jeshion (2013, 242) claims that contempt is a normatively guided attitude. Its appropriateness is subject to evaluations. It follows that in using slurs, the speaker implicitly represents the target as worthy of his contempt (without overtly asserting so). Even if the non-bigot hearer can accept that the speaker is a bigot, the hearer cannot accept the implicit message that the target is worthy of contempt. This is why non-bigots find "Zhang is a chink" unacceptable.

Unfortunately, appealing to implicit misrepresentation does not suffice to save expressivism. Utterances of slurs wear their derogatory power on their sleeves. Non-bigots find utterances of slurs unacceptable precisely because these utterances target their victims explicitly and overtly. Moreover, implicitly conveying that the target is worthy of contempt is still too weak to explain the unacceptability of utterances of slurs. Imagine an analogous case: a bigot member of a hiring committee tries to deny the opportunity to Zhang. The bigot speaker implicitly conveys his contempt for Chinese candidates (via conversational implicature) by telling others that "Zhang is Chinese." It is not wrong for a non-bigot hearer to say "Yes. That's right," even if he does not accept the implicit contempt. Such an agreement would not make one an accomplice of racism.

My force indicator theory has no problem at accommodating the unacceptability of utterances of slurs. A non-bigot would find "Zhang is a chink" unacceptable because this is an explicit act of derogating the Chinese (in addition to the assertion that Zhang is Chinese). Agreeing with such an utterance amounts to accepting the anti-Chinese discriminatory norms. Unlike merely expressing emotions, such acts are harmful because the norms they enforce produce normative effects such as licensing violence against the target or denying their dignity.

4.3 Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt's Discourse Role Assignment Theory

A speech act approach to slurs that is similar to my theory comes from Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018). I shall call their account "the discourse role assignment theory." According to this theory, utterances of slurs are oppressive speech acts that create a power imbalance in conversations; they give the speaker the dominant discourse role and assign the target subordinate discourse roles. Discourse roles are short term social roles that exist only for the purpose of conversations; they specify what can and cannot be said, as well as rules of interpretation. One of the features that the discourse role assignment theory aims at explaining is *variability of offensiveness* (or derogatory

power); a slur (or an utterance of it) is more offensive (or derogatory) when the power imbalance between the roles it creates is perceived to be more unjust.[18] Moreover, this theory explains *non-offensive* (or non-derogatory) utterances with the felicity condition of slurring speech acts, i.e., the speaker must fit the dominant role of the oppressor. For example, a gay speaker's use of "fag" is non-offensive (or non-derogatory), because he does not fit the role of a homophobic oppressor.[19]

I will raise two objections against this theory. First, it can hardly explain the offensiveness of slurs against the dominant groups, e.g., "pigs" and "gringos." Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt's theory entails that these slurs are not offensive. This is because there are no unjust subordinate roles for the dominant groups like police officers and white Americans. However, I take it to be a mistake to treat slurs against dominant groups as non-offensive. There is no evidence of the difference in offensiveness between slurs against dominant groups and other slurs. Slurs like "pigs" are labeled as "derogatory" in dictionaries, just like slurs against subordinate groups.[20] They are also used to abuse and insult their targets. If "pigs" and "gringos" were as non-offensive as "police officers" and "white Americans," how could they have such uses? Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt need to offer further arguments for their counter-intuitive claim.

My force indicator theory has no problem to accommodate the offensiveness of slurs against the dominant groups. This is because it takes utterances of slurs to be speech acts of enforcing a norm, rather than assigning existing unjust roles. It is impossible to assign a role that does not exist yet, but it is possible to enforce a new norm that has never been fulfilled in a society (e.g., promoting racial equality in a racist society). Consequently, a slur can be used to enforce a norm against the dominant group, even if there are no existing unjust roles for them. For example, to call the police "pigs" is to advocate for an anti-police norm, although the society has no existing unjust roles to subjugate police officers.

Second, this theory struggles to explain offensive (or derogatory) utterances of slurs between members of the same oppressed group. Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt take the felicity condition of offensive slurring acts to be that the speaker fits the role of the oppressor. However, the utterances of slurs between members of the same oppressed group can still be offensive. In their example, it is offensive for a black boss, who is not a racial oppressor, to call his black employee the N-word. To explain this, Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt allow an exception: slurring acts between the members of the same oppressed group can be offensive so long as there is a power imbalance (e.g., between the boss and the employee). However, I believe that even with this exception, the felicity condition remains too strong. These in-group slurring acts can be offensive without power imbalance at all. For instance, Randall Kennedy (2003, xv) records how his Big Mama, a black woman who has internalized racism, complains that "n**gers can't get along, not even in church." It is very unlikely that this average black female speaker has power over other black people. Nonetheless, her utterance of the N-word is offensive. Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt's theory needs to make sense of this possibility.

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[18] For the sake of argument, I shall assume the identity between the *offensiveness* and the *derogatory power* of slurs.

[19] Since Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt remain silent on other features like descriptive ineffability and perspective dependence, I will refrain from raising objections from these features, for the sake of fairness.

[20] "pig, n.1". OED Online. June 2020. Oxford University Press. https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/143654? (accessed June 10, 2020).

Again, my theory avoids the problem by adopting a different view on the felicity condition (or success condition). Successful acts of slurring (or derogation) do not require the speaker to fit any role. Instead, their felicity condition requires that the speaker intends to enforce a norm against the target (unless the speaker invokes institutional authority). This is how an utterance of the N-word can be offensive between black speakers with no power imbalance. It is felicitous or successful because the black female speaker, who has internalized racism, intends to enforce a racist norm against black people.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed a force indicator theory of slurs; slurs are illocutionary force indicators that make the illocutionary force of derogation explicit. To derogate a group by calling them slurs is to enforce a norm against them. In addition, they are also propositional indicators that contribute the same to the truth-conditional contents as their neutral counterparts.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, it goes beyond earlier speech act theories like Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt's to offer a more comprehensive explanation of features of slurs, including derogatory power, truth-conditional contribution, descriptive ineffability, perspective dependence, etc. Second, it develops a theory that is immune to problems faced by other theories, i.e., wrong predictions of truth-conditions, explaining unacceptability to non-bigots, and the offensiveness of slurs against the dominant groups and in-group uses of slurs with no power imbalance. My theory avoids these problems by taking utterances of slurs to be illocutionary acts to enforce norms, instead of appealing to stereotypes, emotions, and discourse roles.

These considerations, I hope, justify rethinking slurs from a new illocutionary approach. The job of slurs is not to communicate derogatory contents or to change discourses, but to enforce norms against their targets.

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