

The reporting of slurs

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This essay examines the semantics and pragmatics of a handful of potential slurring terms identifying many of their uses in extant texts in order to assess slurring and non-slurring instances. Also examined are benchmarks for politeness that feed into so-called ‘political correctness’ and attitudes to what language expressions and behaviour are socially acceptable. People who find completely unacceptable those language expressions which are often employed as slurs or insults will regard reports of slurs as themselves slurring. The evidence, however, shows that, divorced from context, language expressions themselves do not slur, though they may be used in order to disparage, besmirch, insult, etc. – i.e. slur. It is a speaker/writer’s perlocutionary intention to slur which is truly reprehensible. Reports of slurs in themselves therefore do not slur unless the reporter subscribes to the intention to slur; a reporter who does not subscribe to the slur needs to somehow make clear their attitude.

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1. Defining terms

If someone tells me that they have a stone in their shoe, that is a direct report. Reporting using direct speech as in *Galileo ha detto del mondo ‘Eppur si muove’* is best described as a direct quote; however *Galileo said of the earth ‘And yet it moves’* is not a direct quotation, but a report in English of what Galileo said in Italian; and, with respect to its meaning, I cannot class it as a ‘direct’ report in contrast to the ‘indirect’ *Galileo said of the earth that, nonetheless, it moves* though others will disagree. Quotation marks are a feature of punctuation in written language; in spoken language there is no difference between *Alice said that life is difficult to understand* and *Alice said that life is ‘difficult to understand’*: both are reports of what Alice said, and neither is more indirect than the other (cf. Recanati 2001, Saka 2011).

For this essay, a report is X’s re-presentation to Y of what Z said. It is often the case that Z is identical with X at some earlier time. Occasionally Y and X are the same person, but that is of little interest in this essay. X’s report is never exactly identical with Z’s utterance; even if the same words are captured, the context is different, the voice will be different, the speaker’s intention may be different, the medium may be different. Often X will choose to render the

report more coherent by rearranging what was said, and/or more vivid by embellishing the original to attract and/or maintain audience attention. When X's report ρ is compared with Z's utterance v , the accuracy of ρ depends on whether or not Z's message in v can be reconstructed from it. In other words, the content of ρ is dependent on the content of v . An accurate report ρ re-presents the illocutionary point of the source utterance v . A speaker has an illocutionary intention to create a perlocutionary effect by means of a reflexive intention to have the hearer (= addressees and ratified participants (Goffman 1981: 131)) recognize this intention via an understanding of the locution and illocutionary point of the utterance.¹ A speaker's reflexive intention towards the hearer is the intention to have the hearer recognize that when uttering v in context κ , the speaker intends v to have a certain effect on the hearer partly caused by the hearer recognizing that the speaker has the intention to communicate with him or her by means of v .

Because there is necessarily a degree of indirectness in all reporting of utterances, **it is only significant to label a report 'indirect' if the reporter X pragmatically enriches source Z's illocutionary point as sanctioned by the locution, its entailments, implicatures, and implicatures** (for exemplification see Allan 2016). There is a constraint that material introduced in an indirect report as a pragmatic enrichment must be strictly relevant to the matter being spoken of by the reporter. An accurate and felicitous report ρ of utterance v must capture the illocutionary point in v such that Z's message in v can be correctly reconstructed from X's report ρ .

I turn next to slurs. A slur is an expression of disparagement that discredits, slights, smears, stains, besmirches or sullies what it is applied to (cf. the *Oxford English Dictionary*). A slur is not, as it is often taken to be, the lexical form (or forms) in a language expression ε , but instead the perlocutionary effect of ε as a constituent of v (such that $\varepsilon \subseteq v$); the said perlocutionary effect can only be determined from κ , the context of utterance – i.e. ε 's co-text and the situations of its utterance and of its reception (cf. Austin 1962, Bach & Harnish 1979, Allan 1994a). Justification for this view is argued at length from empirical evidence in Allan (under review) which cites a similar conclusion from Asim 2007, Kennedy 2003, McWhorter 2010, inter alios; and it will be confirmed here.

The judgment of Anderson & Lepore 2013: 43 that 'slurs are prohibited words; and, as such, their uses are offensive to whomever these prohibitions matter' does not explain where such prohibitions might come from. Allan 2015 discusses an idealized benchmark for

¹ The way in which this is accomplished is described in Allan 1986, 1994a, b, 2006, Bach & Harnish 1979.

(im)politeness in Anglo communities dubbed ‘the middle class politeness criterion’. Although the defined on the ‘middle class’ as a default (much as the freezing point of water is defined as 0° Celsius) the criterion applies to all ranks of society; for discussion of this conundrum see Allan 2015. (Im)politeness is never a depersonalized, decontextualized absolute but always a perception or judgment of appropriate behaviour on a given occasion; it is what one expects oneself and others to do in a particular social interaction. This ties (im)politeness to frames and scripts and to the notion of habitus (Bourdieu 1991, Eelen 2001, Mills 2003, Terkourafi 2001, Watts 2003). In its adherence to a set of social norms, the Anglo concept of (im)politeness is broadly similar to Japanese *wakimae* defined by Ide 1992: 299 as ‘sets of social norms of appropriate behavior people have to observe in order to be polite in the society [in which] they live. One is polite only if he or she behaves in congruence with the expected norms in a certain situation, in a certain culture and society.’ (Im)politeness as a means of managing (aspects of) social interaction is apparent in all communities and Allan claims that the middle class politeness criterion is a frame or cultural script, i.e. a benchmark for behaviour, for which there is a counterpart in all communities. The constituents will differ in particulars for different communities but they will always identify social constraints on the use of language that are designed to maintain harmonious social relations within the community.

In order to be polite to a casual acquaintance one tends to use euphemism (*loo, bathroom*) or orthophemism (*toilet, lavatory*) rather than the dispreferred dysphemism (*shithouse, etc.*). Orthophemisms (straight talking) and euphemisms (sweet talking) are words or phrases used as an alternative to a dispreferred (undesirable, inappropriate) expression because they avoid possible loss of face by the speaker and also the hearer or some third party. An orthophemism is typically more formal and more direct (or literal) than the corresponding more colloquial and figurative euphemism. Slurs are by definition dysphemistic, thus reporting a perceived slur such as *nigger* will often use a euphemism such as, in this case, *the N-word*. Here, the typical corresponding orthophemism is *African-American*. This kind of reporting is sometimes described as ‘being politically correct’ i.e. being unwilling to risk giving offense, especially to a group vulnerable because its members are perceived to have been mocked, disparaged, or insulted for long periods of time (see Allan & Burridge 2006 chapter 4). It might, less emotively, be described by Richard Watts’ term *politic behaviour*: ‘Politic behaviour is that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the on-going social interaction’ (Watts 2003: 20).

It is because the slur is taken to lie in the form of expression ϵ that the reporting of slurs is so often understood to be of itself a slur. What I shall tease out in this essay is that racist terms like *nigger* or *yid* and insults such as *whore*, *slut*, *bitch*, and *cunt* have an affective meaning that arises from their frequent dysphemistic use in slurs, insults, and obscenities (see §2); consequently they evoke strong emotions that lead to the belief that these expressions in themselves constitute slurs and insults; this is the ‘politically correct’ view but also the view of certain people who have been personally traumatized by the use of such terms (e.g. Hall 2014). Any reader who thinks that the occurrence of *nigger*, *yid*, *whore*, *slut*, *bitch* and *cunt* in this essay justifies the belief that I am slurring or insulting anyone is badly mistaken; I am not.

2. Inquiry into the semantics and pragmatics of ϵ

This inquiry is restricted to only relevant meanings of the six potential slurs *nigger*, *yid*, *whore*, *slut*, *bitch*, and *cunt*. When these potential slur words are in fact used as slurs, the shared trait is a widely accepted (if, for other members of society, unacceptable) dysphemistic attitude towards whomever or whatever is slurred. This is predictable because it merely fulfils the definition of a slur. Each of these six terms is presented as capturing some supposed dominant characteristic of the referent; in the following sections I spell out these supposed characteristics.

One recurrent characteristic of each of the six potential slur words is that, with the possible exception of *whore*, at least when used as slurs, all are colloquial. Colloquial language uses informal and intimate styles (cf. Joos 1961); it includes, but is not identical with, slang (see Allan & Burridge 2006).

2.1 *Nigger*

Etymologically *nigger* derives from Latin *niger* “black, dark, unlucky” which extended in late Latin to “black person”. Until the late 18th century *nig(g)er* was synonymous with *Negro* (see exx in the *OED*); thereafter and until the second half of the 20th century the term *nigger* was essentially a colloquial synonym for *Negro*. From earliest times until after mid-20th century the belief was prevalent – even by enlightened people such as Charles Darwin (see Darwin 1871: 121) – that non-Europeans were inferior, which encouraged disparagement of them. Dysphemism favours colloquial terms: *faeces* is not an expletive, instead we say *shit*; we tell someone to *piss off* not to **urinate off*. Consequently, *nigger* is preferred to *Negro* as

a slur. *Nigger* denotes anyone of black African descent, and is sometimes extended to other peoples of dark complexion, too.²

In this essay I limit discussion to the use of *nigger* in the United States of America. As a racial slur, *nigger* is applied to African-Americans.³ Since January 2009, America has had a black President nonetheless black males are twice as likely to be imprisoned as Latinos and almost six times more likely than whites. White attitudes to African-Americans can be judged from the fact that both President Obama and his wife Michelle have, as black adults, been assumed by whites to be lackeys, see Westfall 2014. African-Americans are more likely than other racial groups to suffer police harassment (see, e.g. *Report of The Sentencing Project to the United Nations Human Rights Committee Regarding Racial Disparities in the United States Criminal Justice System*, August 2013 and <http://sentencingproject.org>). A couple of recent examples: on August 9, 2014 a white Ferguson MO police officer shot six times and killed an unarmed 18-year-old African-American male; riots ensued because of the apparent excessive force used. On November 22, 2014 in Cleveland OH a white police officer shot and killed a 12-year-old African-American boy playing with a toy pellet gun; the person who warned the police said twice that he thought the gun was fake, although this was not passed on to the officer who attended (see <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/04/justice/cleveland-police-officer-timothy-loehmann>). What such examples demonstrate is that some part of the white community has such fear of African-Americans that they are led to significantly violent overreaction that demonstrates no respect at all for the life of the African-American. This is not new, as is demonstrated by the history of racism, lynchings and less extreme mistreatments catalogued in, e.g., Kennedy 2003, Asim 2007, and many other places. Among the negative stereotypes of African-Americans identified by Reddick 1944, Asim 2007, and Croom 2013 are that they are mentally, socially, educationally inferior; childlike, subservient, open to bad treatment, lazy, irresponsible; delinquent, menacing, inclined to crime and violence; noisy, uninhibited, sexually depraved and licentious. If a subset of these negative stereotypical characteristics is attributed to the referent of *nigger* then the word is used as a slur. In consequence, the word itself evokes and provokes the underlying, almost entitled bigotry that still pervades the racial attitudes of far too many Americans, both actively and

² The relation of *nigger*, *nigra*, *nigga* to *Negro* might be compared with the similar colloquial–formal correspondences *bubby–baby*, *bust–burst*, *crick–creek*, *critter–creature*, *cuss–curse*, *gal–girl*, *hoss–horse*, *sassy–saucy*, *tit–teat*.

³ *Nigger* has been used by whites in referring to other peoples of dark complexion such as Australian Aborigines and (Asian) Indians.

passively' (Hall 2014). But, as I have said, *nigger* itself is innocent; the negative connotations arise from the way it is used in slurs and insults. As demonstrated at length in Allan (under review) and as stated earlier by Kennedy 2003, Asim 2007, Coates 2013, 2014, McWhorter 2002, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, inter alios, it is the context in which *nigger* is used that marks it as a slur – or not. If it is the speaker/writer's perlocutionary intention and effect to use *nigger* in order to disparage the referent in uttering *v*, then it is a slur. In §3.1 I will briefly discuss unintentional offense.

Within many minorities and oppressed groups a term of abuse used by outsiders is often reclaimed to wear as a badge of honour to mark identification with and camaraderie within the in-group (what Australians call 'mateship', see Rendle-Short 2009). To this end many African-Americans have adopted the term *nigger*, often respelled *nigga* (which remains homophonous), to use to or about their fellows (Allan & Burrige 1991, 2006, Asim 2007, Croom 2013, Folb 1980, Kennedy 2000, 2003, McWhorter 2002, 2010, Rahman 2012, inter alios). The speaker identifies as a person who has attracted or might attract the slur *nigger*: in other words s/he trades on the hurtful, contemptuous connotation and subverts it (cf. Hornsby 2001: 134).⁴ Examples can be found all over, e.g. in many films by Spike Lee and Quentin Tarantino. Three examples from 'Pulp Fiction' (1994) are:

- (1) JULES: I wouldn't go so far as to call the brother fat. He's got a weight problem. What's the nigger gonna do, he's Samoan. (Tarantino 1999: 18)
- (2) ENGLISH DAVE [*a young black man from Baldwin Park*]: Vincent Vega, our man in Amsterdam. Jules Winnfield, our man in Inglewood. Git your asses on in here. (*Vincent and Jules, wearing shorts and T-shirts, step inside.*) Goddam, nigger, what's up with them clothes?
JULES: You don't even want to know. (Tarantino 1999: 35–36)
- (3) VINCENT: Alright, it was a miracle. Can we go now? (*Opens the door and leaves.*)
JULES (*to the dazed Marvin*): Let's go nigger. [1:49:55] Come on. Shit. (*They hussle out the door.*)

In (1) Jules, who is black, is addressing a white guy while speaking of a shared acquaintance, Antwan, whom he had earlier described as 'Half-black, half-Samoan'. Here Jules counts him as one of an in-group of black 'brothers'. Secondly, Jules thinks well enough of Antwan to be

⁴ Alessandro Capone has suggested to me (p.c) that there are two words *nigger*₁ a slur and *nigger*₂ not a slur (and presumably the same for all other words that are potential slurs). This is a classic example of polysemy and so although one cannot say *Ordell is a nigger*₁ and so is *Beaumont* [*a nigger*₂] because it violates the Q-principle of both Horn 1984, Levinson 2000 it is perfectly possible for one African-American to say to another *That honkey called me a nigger*₁, *nigger*₂.

kindly euphemistic about his size. So when he says ‘What’s the nigger gonna do, he’s Samoan’ he is using *nigger* as a colloquial descriptive that is in no way a slur. In (2) Jules himself is addressed as ‘nigger’ by a fellow African-American (the epithet ‘English’ is unexplained); incidentally, Inglewood is a dominantly black neighbourhood. In (3), which is not in the published script, Jules addressing Marvin as ‘nigger’ is in the spirit of camaraderie, though this may be bolstered by the fact that Marvin is lower in the pecking order than Jules and also at that moment stupefied by the murder of three people he had befriended to spy on.

Quotes (1) – (3) illustrate what has many times been demonstrated: that *nigger* is not necessarily used as a slur. The same will be seen to be true of the other five potential slurring terms. Lest it be thought that ‘Pulp Fiction’ has no such slurs, there are racist slurs against Asian and Jewish shopkeepers at Tarantino 1999: 10 and *nigger* is also used in that vein in (4), which is not in the published script. White hillbilly Maynard’s shop was invaded by two men fighting: Butch (white) has pinned Marsellus (black) to the floor of the pawnshop and is pointing Marsellus’ own .45 handgun in his face.

- (4) MAYNARD [*pointing his shotgun*]: Toss the weapon. (*After a brief delay Butch throws the gun to his left.*) Take your foot off the nigger [1:33:2]. Put your hands behind your head. Approach the counter, right now. (*Maynard slugs Butch with the butt of his shotgun.*)

This occurs after Butch, who is white, has deliberately run Marsellus over and the latter has been shooting at him. Butch has sought shelter in the pawnshop and was followed in by Marsellus. A vicious fight ensued in which Butch floors Marsellus. Needless to say, Maynard is enraged by this violent invasion of his premises, so we cannot expect him to be courteous to either of them. He refers to the groggy Marsellus as ‘nigger’ and he slugs Butch with his shotgun. Under these circumstances the racial slur is not out of place from a dramatic point of view; whatever term was used to refer to Marsellus was going to be insulting and there are not a lot of choices that would pass the censor.

2.2 *Yid*

Everything I have to say about *yid* arises directly or indirectly from the work of Emma Poulton (see Poulton & Durell 2014). The Urban dictionary lists as the meaning of *yid*:

[A] Person of Yiddish descent

[B] Jewish person

[C] Tottenham Hotspur Football Club supporter (originated due to the large yiddish community in that area of London) (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=yid>)

The sequence echoes the extension from [A] to [B] and then [C]. Because of its relevance to the present essay, I follow Poulton to concentrate on its use in respect of Spurs supporters.

The situation with *yid* exactly parallels that of *nigger*. There is a perception that London's Tottenham Hotspur Football Club (Spurs) has a large number of Jewish fans (in fact it constitutes only around 10%) but members of rival clubs have come to refer to them and their team as 'Yids'. In consequence many Spurs supporters, whether Jewish or not, have adopted the term as a symbol of in-group camaraderie.

- (5) The use of 'Yid' is controversial, with many conceiving of it as a 'race hate' word (Baddiel 2013, Baddiel 2011, Chakraborti & Garland 2009, Herbert 2012). Yet, for a significant proportion of Tottenham fans, this taboo word is regularly and widely used with pride and as a term of endearment to express their support for the team. Tottenham Hotspur Football Club 2014 surveyed their season ticket holders to gauge opinion on their use of 'Yid' following on-going public debate since the launch of *The Y-Word* film [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIvJC1_hKt8], which has even involved comment from [British] PM David Cameron (Baddiel 2013, Herbert 2012, Pollard 2013, Poulton 2013). Seventy-four per cent of non-Jewish respondents and 73% of Jewish respondents were in favour of fans being allowed to use the word (total number of respondents: 11389). (Poulton & Durell 2014: 2)

So, although *yid* is used as a slur by certain supporters of opposing football teams, a majority of Spurs supporters, both Jews and non-Jews, are happy to use and/or accept use of the term as a mark of team support – notwithstanding the unfounded view expressed by Herbert 2012:

The notion that Tottenham fans, less than 5% of whom are likely to be Jewish, can reclaim a word of genocide, slaughter and humiliation is an insult to anyone's intelligence.

2.3 *Whore and slut*

The meanings of *whore* are (cf. *OED*):

[A] A female prostitute.

[B] A sexually promiscuous woman.

[C] Any unprincipled person, male or – though less likely because of the dominance of senses [A] and [B] – female.

Among the euphemisms for *whore* are *working girl* and *escort*; and in the following quote 'girlfriend or mistress':

- (6) I would let him know what I needed and for what and he would give me the money. In his mind, I guess that made me a girlfriend or mistress instead of a whore. (Jan 10, 2009 <http://lettersfromworkinggirls.blogspot.com.au>)

There is also the derivation *ho* which is often just a misogynistic term for “woman” but this dysphemism is founded in the derogatory idea that every woman is sexually promiscuous. There is an underlying premise that the sexual promiscuity of a woman is immoral behaviour that is denigrated to a far greater extent than it is in a man. This notion accounts for the sequencing of the three senses of *whore*. A woman whose profession is to sell sex to anyone (and selling sex is immoral behaviour) > any woman who has many sexual partners > anyone indulging in amoral behaviour.

It is not entirely irrational that a sexually promiscuous woman is despised far more than a sexually promiscuous man. Because women and not men bear children, and consequently menstruate, lactate, and are primary carers of children, women are physically and socially disadvantaged compared with men. In consequence men have traditionally asserted social dominance and even ownership rights over women that has led to peculiar taboos over women’s procreative organs (and often over their entire bodies) which purportedly aim to protect a genealogical investment. There is reason behind this (irrespective of one’s moral evaluation of it): until the advent of *in vitro* fertilization, a woman invariably knew that the child she has borne is genetically her own; whereas a man can only be certain his wife’s child is genetically his if he is certain she has not had sexual intercourse with another man. In the interests of self-protection, women have generally accepted and even encouraged the taboos on their bodies as measures towards ensuring their personal safety and economic security. These taboos have been confirmed by the dominant religions in many cultures. Against this background, any question about a woman’s sexual behaviour has been seen as an offence against a desirable social, religious, and even rational norm.

Hence, to call a woman a whore is one of the worst ways to insult her, and one of the commonest. Nevertheless, the term *whore* is used as an orthophemism equivalent to *prostitute* by a South Australian female sex worker who tweets under the handle Jane Whatshername and blogs at <http://becauseimawhore.com/> on matters relevant to a sex worker. Some examples:

- (7) I’m not superhuman, I wasn’t born with a whore gene. I find it insulting when someone thinks there is something inherently different about me. I would rather not work as a plumber cleaning shitty sewage pipes, but I COULD do it. Obviously. (becauseimawhore.com, 28 January 2012)

A renewed feeling of whore power! After 2 years of struggling on part time minimum wage, all I had done was outlay \$50 in advertising plus a spare sim card and i was able to make 2 grand in just over 24 hours with very little planning. (becauseimawhore.com, 20 July 2012)

Being the talkative and opinionated whore i am, i didnt last as a voyeur for long.
(becauseimawhore.com, 13 June 2014)

There is no slurring in the quotes in (7), but (8) is a wife reporting a slur from her husband:

- (8) [W]hen he called me a slut, cunt, worthless bitch, I slapped him at some point, then he followed me to the porch, where I'd gone to cry, to tell me how I spread my legs for anyone who walks by[. ...] This is not the first time he's called me a slut/whore/cunt/bitch/etc. (<http://forums.thenest.com/discussion/12002898/husband-called-me-a-c-t-b-ch-sl-t>, September 2103)

Although I recall seeing saw a selfie of three teenage girls who referred to themselves as orthophemistically as 'hos', I am unable to trace it or any similar examples; so I assume that *ho* is typically dysphemistic. Ann Hart Coulter is a vociferous right-wing commentator. In a celebrated entry for *ho* in <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=ho> by 'Vermont Ferret' in 2005:

- (9) Anyone who dehumanizes themselves by selling their soul to others. The term can be applied to either a man or a woman or--as in the case of <Anne Coulter>--both.

Anne Coulter: You two ladies look awfully interesting. Are you Indians?

Woman #1: Yes, I'm a Navajo.

Woman #2: I'm an Arapahoe.

Anne Coulter: What a coincidence! I'm a right-wing ho!

On April 4, 2007, in his radio talk show, Don Imus characterized the Rutgers University women's basketball team players as 'rough girls', commenting on their tattoos. His producer Bernard McGuirk responded by referring to them as 'hardcore hos' and Imus then described the girls as 'nappy-headed hos' because many of them were African-American. African-American Civil Rights activist Al Sharpton castigated these remarks as racism and Imus apologized, saying there had been 'some idiot comment meant to be amusing' and that 'nappy-headed hos' is a term that rap artists use to refer to black women. In response Ann Coulter wrote:

- (10) If Imus had called me a "towheaded ho" or Al Sharpton a "nappy-headed ho," it would be what's known as "funny." (And if he called Anna Nicole Smith [stripper and would-be actress with whom Imus had reportedly fathered a child] a "flaxen-headed ho," it would be "absolutely accurate.") But he attacked the looks and morals of utterly innocent women, who had done nothing to inject themselves into public debate. (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1815807/posts>, April 11, 2007)

Coulter is using *ho* dysphemistically throughout, even in respect of herself. There is vitriol against Imus, Sharpton, and Smith.

Today the primary meaning of *slut* is:

[A] A woman who is wearing skimpy or sexually provocative clothing and/or who is sexually promiscuous.

[B] Any sexually promiscuous person.

The *OED* sense of being slatternly is not obsolete, but it is rare, and I will leave it out of discussion.

An example of *slut* used as a slur has already been seen in (8). There's a song by P!nk called 'Slut like you' in which a guy says he's looking for a quick fuck and she responds 'me too' because 'I'm a slut like you' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjU0xAZbZkA>). This is playing with an apparent dysphemism, converting it into something closer to an orthophemism. There is a similar example of this in (11), which moves from dysphemism towards orthophemism in reclaiming the lemma *slut*; and in (12) *slut(ty)* is reclaimed on a similar basis to that for racist reclamations (see also Neal 2012).

(11) [S]omeone is slutty if they are dressing for attention from other people, or if they're sleeping with someone to make the person like them. Sluttiness seems to connote a lack of agency on behalf of the slut. It is both conferred and enjoyed by others but not the slut.

But, like, what if it just means revealing clothing, or sexual promiscuity, but not in any pejorative sense? What if it just communicates a specific concept, but without that concept taking on any negative overtones? Could we maybe say 'slutty' with absolutely no derision in our voices but only the desire to convey an accurate impression? (<http://heylabodega.tumblr.com/post/18662027833/sluts>)

(12) So we are proud to reclaim the word "slut" as a term of approval, even endearment. To us, a slut is a person of any gender who celebrates sexuality according to the radical proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you. Sluts may choose to have solo sex or to get cozy with the Fifth Fleet. They may be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, radical activists or peaceful suburbanites. (Easton & Hardy 2009: 4)

As with other terms I have been discussing, whether or not *slut* is a slur depends on the context of use.

2.4 Bitch

The online *Macquarie Dictionary* (<https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au>) offers the following meanings for the noun *bitch*.

[A] a female dog.

[B] any female canine.

[C] *Colloquial* a disagreeable or malicious woman.

[D] *Colloquial (taboo)* any woman.

[E] *Colloquial* a contemptible person, male or female.

[F] *Colloquial* something giving rise to difficulties and dissatisfaction: *life's a bitch; the bitch of a thing won't work.*

Once again the sequence indicates extensions of meaning. It needs to be explained why senses [C] – [F] are dysphemistic. Despite [D], I will claim that not all instances of *bitch* applied to a woman are dysphemistic, though such non-dysphemistic reference is rare.

Primarily, a bitch is a female dog. What makes a bitch different from other female mammals is that a bitch in oestrus has the reputation for being unconstrainedly willing to mate, often with several partners; many dog-owners believe that the bitch needs to be protected from male dogs at this time and rather than have all this (perhaps apocryphal) trouble, they have the bitch spayed. In other words, when in heat, a bitch is a nuisance and therefore a cause of complaint to people. The extended uses of *bitch* are grounded in the literal sense. To condemn a woman as a *bitch* potentially likens her to a bitch in heat, a sexually promiscuous woman. Linking the sexual insult with an animal-name insult is doubly-dysphemistic. A good example is rapper 2Pac's 'Wonda why they call u bitch' (Tupac Amaru Shakur, words at <http://genius.com/2pac-wonda-why-they-call-u-bitch-lyrics>) where the woman addressed is called 'ho' and accused of prostituting herself, finally dying of HIV AIDS. Incidentally, although *son-of-a-bitch* is comparable with Spanish *hijo de puta* and similar expressions in many other languages, the use of *bitch* simply to mean 'prostitute' is rare to non-existent in English.

The sexual undertone is normally secondary when *bitch* is used as a slur. It is common for insults to liken humans to animals that are conventionally ascribed certain behaviours, cf. *cat, fox, vixen, sow, pig, cow, bitch, cur, dog, mongrel, swine, louse, dove, hawk, coot, galah, chicken, turkey, mouse, rabbit, bull, ox, goat, ape, monkey, ass, donkey, mule, rat, snake*, etc. Among American children *bitch* is the favourite insult from girl to girl and used proportionately more often than by boys (who also target girls with it, of course); cf. Jay 1992: 60–67. Human bitches are shrewish, malicious, contemptible; as in Alanis Morissette's use of *bitch* in 'I'm a bitch, I'm a lover, I'm a child, I'm a mother / I'm a sinner, I'm a saint, ... / I'm your hell, I'm your dream' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAjNVKtQHAY>). Further on from the quote in (8) is (13):

(13) He lunged for the door and I put a hand out and said "If you lay one finger on me, I will scream and call the police." This is when he proceeded to call me a f*cking cunt, bitch, and a piece of shit (he'd

called me worthless earlier in the week, again not for the first time). (<http://forums.thenest.com/discussion/12002898/husband-called-me-a-c-t-b-ch-sl-t>)

(13) belittles the wife as contemptible rather than attacking her sexual mores as was reported in (8).

Like many other insults, *bitch* has been reclaimed with women addressing each other as *bitch* much as (male) African-Americans address one another as *nigger/nigga*.

(14) On top of all this confusion, I'll add that some women have "reclaimed" the word [bitch], and call themselves bitches in a positive light. I'd say there are two streams of this – one is explicitly feminist, used by women who want to celebrate being loud and assertive, refusing to be oppressed, etc. The other stream is women who have just heard the word a lot, so they'll jokingly refer to themselves and their friends as "bitches" without any political statement intended.
(<http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=2086109>)

In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, when game-keeper Mellors is making love to Lady Chatterley says (15), he once uses *bitch* in a sense of camaraderie:

(15) Tha'rt real, tha art! Tha'rt real, even a bit of a bitch. Here tha shits an' here tha' pisses: an' I lay my on 'em both an' like thee for it. I like thee for it. Tha's got a proper, woman's arse, proud of itself. It's none ashamed of itself, this isna'. (Lawrence 1960 : 232)

This is thin ice for a man addressing a woman and maybe it is just Lawrence being unrealistic.

2.5 *Cunt*

The meaning of *cunt* (cf. *OED*) is:

[A] Female genitals.

[B] A woman as a source of sexual gratification.

[C] Term of abuse for a despised, unpleasant, or annoying person or thing.

It is generally accepted that *cunt* is the most tabooed word in English. Interestingly, the same is not true of its cognates in other languages: French *con* and Spanish *coño* have the same origin – Latin *cunnus* "cunt, promiscuous woman" – but their extended uses are much less dysphemistic. For instance, French *Vieux con* (literally, "old cunt") is more likely to be jocular than insulting – compare British *old bugger*. (On Spanish *coño* see Allan & Burridge 2006: 52). *Cunt* turns up in medieval place names, see Briggs 2009. For instance, there was Gropecuntelane in London, also in Oxford (where it became Grove Passage), York (where it

became Grape Lane), and Northampton.⁵ There was a Cunte Street in Bristol. What in the 18th century was still sometimes called the River Cunnit by Wiltshire locals has become the Kennet; adjacent to it was the Roman settlement Cunetio. A cunt was a water channel and *cundy*, *cundit*, *kundit*, *cundut* are all early variants of *conduit* (*OED*). *Cunny* “cunt”, used for the body-part from the 14th century, derives from Latin *cunnius* and is retained in modern *cunnilingus*. Latin *cunnius* is very possibly a euphemism derived from *cuneus* “wedge, wedge-shaped” the dominant visual appearance of the human female pubic triangle: ‘The great cleft is called [...] the cunnius, because it looks like the impress of a wedge (cuneus)’ (Graaf 1672 quoted in Blackledge 2003: 87). Early topographical names for clefts and gullies such as Kuntecliue (Lower Cunliffe), Cuntewellwang, Cuntebecsic, Shaucuntewelle (Shinglewell) are noted in Briggs 2009 and the *OED*. The suffix *cunt* was found in people’s names, e.g. Godwin Clawecuncte (1066), Simon Sitbithecunte (1167), John Fillecunt (1246), Robert Clavecunte (1302) and Bele Wydecunthe (1328) (cf. McDonald 1988: 36 and the *OED*). Such names sound worse today than they would have in the Middle Ages because *cunt* could be used orthophemistically then. Thus it was used in *Lanfranc’s Science of Chirurgie* c. 1400 where *vagina* would be required today: ‘In wymmen þe necke of þe bladdre is schort, & is maad fast to the cunte’ (*OED*). Between the 13th and the late 19th century, this body-part term was homophonous in some dialects with the adjective *quaint* (various spellings) as in Geoffrey Chaucer’s: ‘And prively he [Nicholas] caughte hire [Alison] by the queynte’ (Chaucer 1396; line 3276 of *The Canterbury Tales*). It seems likely that the action of a man stealthily grabbing a woman’s genitals would have provoked exactly the same frisson in the 14th century as it would today – whatever word is used to describe the body-part in question.

The use of *cunt* as a slur has been exemplified already in (8) and (13). An odd-job man whose invoice I was disputing wrote me ‘You allways were a tight arse and a cunt into the Bargain’ (*sic*, August 20, 2004). The report of *Police v Butler* [2003] NSWLC 2 before Heilpern J, June 14, 2002 quotes a defendant in an offensive behaviour case saying to police officers ‘Get fucked you cunts, I’m just trying to help my mates’.

As with the other terms I have been discussing, *cunt* is used orthophemistically (as well as dysphemistically) in academic essays such as this one. Also in the magistrate’s explanation of his decision in the offensive language prosecution cited above. Heilpern J said:

(16) Channel 9 has recently broadcast a show (*Sex in the City*) that includes the words “fuck off” and “fucking” as well as “cunt”. (*Police v Butler* 2003)

⁵ It is tempting to surmise that these must be ‘redlight’ venues, but that is not the case.

And *cunt* may be used as an expression of bantering camaraderie – as can *silly*, *ass*, *idiot*, *bastard*, and *fucker*, cf. (17) or showing camaraderie and empathy in (18) – which is in the Leith dialect of Edinburgh (Scotland).

(17) DAVEEEE; crazy hockey cunt. Love him (Bugeja 2008)

wookey is a gem love that cunt (ibid.)

[laughs] you're a gross cunt [laughs] (Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English J 2)

(18) — Granty ... ye didnae hear? ... Coke looked straight at Lenny.

— Naw. Wha ...

— Deid. Potted heid.

— Yir jokin! Eh? Gies a fuckin brek ya cunt ...

— Gen up. Last night, likes.

— Whit the fuck happened ...

— Ticker. Boom. Coke snapped his fingers. — Dodgy hert, apparently. Nae cunt kent about it.

Perr Granty wis workin wi Pete Gilleghan, oan the side likesay. It wis aboot five, n Granty wis

helpin Pete tidy up, ready to shoot the craw n that likes, whin he jist hauds his chist n cowps ower.

Gilly gits an ambulance, n they take the perr cunt tae the hospital, but he dies a couple of ooirs later.

Perr Granty. Good cunt n aw. You play cairds wi the guy, eh?

— Eh ... aye ... one ay the nicest cunts ye could hope tae meet. That's gutted us, that hus.

(Welsh 2013: 129)

3. The reporting of slurs

There is an extensive literature on the reporting of slurs since there is a legitimate question of whether or not reporting a slur does in itself constitute a slur. Anderson & Lepore 2013, Lepore 2010, for example, assume that the linguistic expression ϵ constitutes a slur, which inevitably leads to the conclusion that the report necessarily constitutes a slur. Given my definition of slurring, such a conclusion is false. Capone 2016 correctly says that in reporting a slur, the reporter must take care to indicate whether or not s/he subscribes to the slur lest a hearer/reader make an unwanted inference.

In this essay I have, necessarily, already been reporting slurs in addition to non-slurring utilizations of the words *nigger*, *yid*, *whore*, *slut*, *bitch* and *cunt*. I hope I have made it clear that in employing these terms in the essay I am not myself slurring anyone; nor is it my intention to offend anyone, even though I recognize that certain readers may find the very appearance of one or more of these terms offensive. In this section of the essay I examine typical reports of these six potentially slurring words.

3.1 Reports of potentially racist terms

Randall Kennedy caused huge controversy when he published *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (Kennedy 2003). A typical review is headed ‘A black author hurls that word as a challenge’ – using the substitute ‘that word’ – although it bravely prints out *nigger* 23 times in a 1500 word article (Kirkpatrick 2001). The usual politically correct euphemism is *the N-word* as in Donegan 2002, Asim 2007, McWhorter 2010. An audio recording of LBJ uttering ‘niggers’ is titled ‘President Lyndon Johnson using the “N” word’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1rIDmDWSms>). Variations on this are *n****** (McWhorter 2014) or *n—r* (Shaw 2014). A comparable example of euphemising is an ABC11 report of cheerleaders from Millbrook High School (Winchester VA) ‘loudly chanting the N-word, while taking a picture’ in which they are plainly creating an N with their hands (<http://abc11.com/news/millbrook-high-cheerleaders-accused-of-chanting-racial-slur-/371837>). It is claimed that the teenaged girls chanted ‘Nigger Nation’. Judging from the partially pixelated photos, at least 6 of the 8 cheerleaders in them are African-American. One of the girls is reported as saying ‘We said it but we didn’t, like, chant it out loud. We weren’t trying to mean it in a racism way’ (<http://lady-armageddon.tumblr.com/post/101340057829/my-school-embarrasses-me-one-of-the-girls-are>). Since Nigger Nation (see <http://niggernation.info>) takes a positive stance on black appropriation of the term *nigger* as a marker of camaraderie, this rings true: it was a risky assertion of who the girls felt they are – compare the adoption of *yid* by Spurs fans both Jewish and non-Jewish. In the ABC11 report there is the image of an Instagram that reads ‘Yasss n nation, keep the legacy going!’ in which ‘igger’ is whited out. There were no blanks in the original, so the report is euphemising in order to be politically correct. The same is true of a screen shot of a purported letter of complaint to the TV station advising of the sensational event. It includes a reference to the chant ‘N Nation’ from which, again, ‘igger’ is whited out. This is typical of a reporter ensuring that the form of the potentially offensive word does not appear spelled out explicitly in the report, even though there is absolutely no doubt about what that word is. The irony in the Millbrook High School report is that we can be almost certain no racial slur was intended by the cheerleader girls but, to be politically correct, the reporters use euphemism where none should have been needed.

As might be expected, reporting the use of the term *yid* is exactly comparable with the reporting of *nigger*. The title of Baddiel 2011 is “‘Alarming” levels of antisemitism in football must be tackled’ and Ivor Baddiel describes the chanting of *Yiddo* by and at Tottenham fans as ‘racism’. But article does not euphemise ‘Yid(s)’. Herbert 2012 writes of

racism and claims that “‘Y’ word chanting ... simply legitimises antisemitic abuse by other fans’. I believe Herbert misuses the term *legitimise*, what he should have said is it *is the cause for* expressions of antisemitism. Brothers David and Ivor Baddiel both refer to the ‘Y-word’ but also both regularly spell out and speak out ‘Yid’ in full. They created a short film ‘Let’s kick racism out of football’ (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIvJC1_hKt8) which is often referred to as ‘the Y-word’ film because that expression is uttered many times in it, e.g.

(19) It’s against the law to call someone a Y-word in street. It’s against the law to call someone a Y-word in the supermarket. It’s against the law to call someone a Y-word at a football match.

That may be true, but a typical fan among those quoted by Poulton & Durell 2014 responded:

Have to say as a four-by-two [Jew] myself I don’t have a problem with the yid chant. Its evolution came from other teams chanting antisemitic stuff against Jewish and non-Jewish spurs fans. Using it has weakened that and in my family of spurs fans we use it as a term of affection ie Papa yid, baby yid, brother yid etc. So i have no problem with it and no intention of stopping using it. (ibid. p. 14)

The Tottenham Hotspur Football Club itself reported (14 April 2011)

Historically the ‘Y word’ chant has been adopted by Spurs fans as a ‘call to arms’ in order to own the term and thereby deflect anti-Semitic abuse. A small number of both Jewish and non-Jewish Spurs fans use the Y word in what they consider to be an inoffensive manner. The defining principle has always been whether or not the term is being used in a manner and in a tone which is deliberately intended to cause offence. (<http://www.tottenhamhotspur.com/news/the-launch-of-the-yword-film-thfc-comment-140411>)

This report euphemises to be politically correct, but nonetheless takes a very level-headed positive stance.

Do any of these reports cast an antisemitic slur? The Baddiel brothers, Herbert (op.cit.) and their supporters argue that any use of the term *yid* is a slur; yet, although they mention the term, we must conclude that their purpose is NOT to slur. As I have maintained throughout this essay, there is a distinction between the mention of a potentially slurring word and its use with the perlocutionary intention of making a slur. In castigating Spurs fans for adopting *yid* as an in-group marker of camaraderie, critics like the Baddiels fail to understand the true nature of slurring as an intention to be offensive. The Baddiels and their supporters are being hypersensitive to the perlocutionary effect of the slur on them without due recognition that this does not correlate with the perlocutionary intention of many Spurs fans.

There is a problem that offense may be caused unintentionally and we need to accept that an unintended offense can be almost as hurtful as intended offense. There is no solution to this dilemma and the best way to handle it must be for a general rule that whereas intentional offense should be castigated as obnoxious, unintended offense should be forgiven, and it also needs to be recognized that there may be reasonable grounds for it to persist.

Fans of rival teams are expected to verbally abuse each other and slurs of various kinds are to be expected. As discussed in Allan & Burrige 1991, 2006, since about the 1960s racist slurs are judged particularly noxious. If the Baddiels are right to denounce such behaviour they are wrong to fulminate against Spurs fans who have subverted the slur.

3.2 Reports of terms that are potential insults to women and men

Quotes (8) and (13) are from an online letter headed ‘husband called me a c**t, b**ch, sl*t’ (<http://forums.thenest.com/discussion/12002898/husband-called-me-a-c-t-b-ch-sl-t>) in which, being politically correct, the offensive slur words are euphemised by not being spelled out in full. This headline obviously reports a slur but equally obviously it does not itself slur the woman to whom they were originally addressed. The euphemistic forms of these potentially offensive words are presumably used in line with the so-called ‘middle class politeness criterion’ (Allan 2015, Allan & Burrige 1991, 2006) in order not to affront the reader. Nonetheless within the body of the letter these terms are spelled out: ‘This is not the first time he’s called me a slut/whore/cunt/bitch/etc. [... H]e proceeded to call me a f*cking cunt, bitch, and a piece of shit’. (Why ‘f*cking’ is used in place of explicit *fucking* is unfathomable.) Here is a woman complaining about her husband slurring her. Her purpose in reporting these embarrassing events instead of keeping silent is presumably that she is seeking advice, sympathy, or seeking relief through trouble-sharing. There can be no cogent argument that she is slurring herself. One might take the view that, in making report, she is slurring her husband by revealing his offensive behaviour towards her, but note that in such a case she is performing a slur and not reporting a slur, and so it lies outside the concern of this essay.

(20) is a report mentioning a slur by Barbara Bush, wife of Republican 41st US President George H. Bush, on 1984 Democrat Vice Presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro, though the topic of the article is the Bush pooch (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millie_%28dog%29).

(20) To borrow words Barbara Bush once used to describe Geraldine Ferraro, Millie Kerr Bush is something that rhymes with rich. (*Time Australia*, March 6, 1989: 62)

The original report of the slur reads, in part:

(21) But if some people were surprised to hear white-haired, gentle-looking Barbara Bush calling Mrs. Ferraro a “four million dollar – I can’t say it, but it rhymes with rich,” some others were not so shocked. (Joyce 1984)

In a questionnaire I ran back in 1989, 99% of respondents understood this to mean that Barbara Bush called her husband’s political opponent a bitch, thus slurring Ferraro. Indeed, the *Time Australia* reporter clearly understood her to mean “bitch”, otherwise it would make no sense to apply Bush’s words to a female dog. However, Bush used a euphemistic dysphemism, because it would have reflected badly on her had she explicitly spelled out the slur. The question is, do the reports in (20) and (21) themselves slur the late Geraldine Ferraro? They don’t. The act of slurring is clearly attributed to Barbara Bush and the reports reflect ill on her character rather than that of Ferraro. In fact Joyce 1984 writes: ‘Mrs. Bush later apologized for the remark’. Such an apology does not indicate that Barbara Bush revised her opinion of Geraldine Ferraro, only that she later regretted making the insult public, thereby staining her own character.

In §2.5 I referred to disparate reports of *cunt* used as a slur (a) by husband to wife (Z to X) in (8) and (13); (b) by a defendant in an offensive behaviour case calling police officers ‘cunts’; and (c) I reported an odd-job man (Z) calling me (X) a ‘cunt’. In none of these cases is it truly feasible to claim that the reporter is slurring the original target. (a) and (c) are reports by the slur’s target (X) and for (a) all the evidence from the wife’s letter indicates she does not accept her husband’s slur on her and is deeply upset by it; for (c) I can vouch that I did not and do not subscribe to the odd-job man’s description of me (and in fact took out a legal injunction against him – though not for that slur alone). Report (b) is a quote from the report of court proceedings (*Police v Butler* [2003] NSWLC 2) and I don’t believe any reasonable person would argue that the court subscribes to the defendant’s slur on the police.

3.3 Headline: ‘North Korea hurls racist “monkey” slur at Obama’

U.S. political website The Hill ran the headline ‘North Korea hurls racist “monkey” slur at Obama’ (Mali 2014) and several other news services in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the U.S. also fulminated about a ‘racial slur’ in reference to what a North Korean spokesman said, namely (22):

(22) Obama always goes reckless in words and deeds like a monkey in a tropical forest. (Kim 2014)

The context is North Korean anger at Obama’s support for the film ‘The Interview’ in which there is a fictional assassination of North Korean President Kim Jong Un. (22) is undoubtedly a slur that insults Obama by likening him to an animal but that doesn’t, ipso facto, constitute

a ‘racial’ slur; for instance, no one would accuse Barbara Bush of casting a RACIAL slur on Geraldine Ferraro when she likened her to a bitch. (One could more accurately call such remarks ‘speciesist’ (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speciesism>). It follows that the press reports that describe (22) as a ‘racial slur’ are pragmatically enriching what is said in (22) by interpreting the North Korean slur as racial. Presumably the grounds for doing so are that Obama is described as ‘like a monkey in a tropical forest’ because he is African-American. While this certainly could be a correct explanation for the choice of insult by the North Korean spokesman, one cannot be certain:

(23) It wasn’t the first time North Korea has used crude insults against Obama and other top U.S. and South Korean officials. Earlier this year, the North called U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry a wolf with a “hideous” lantern jaw and South Korean President Park Geun-hye a prostitute. In May, the North’s news agency published a dispatch saying Obama has the “shape of a monkey.” (Kim 2014)

It is quite possible that the North Korean source for (22) may have been likening Obama to a particular animal in the same way that Kerry was likened to a particular kind of animal and President Park, being a woman, was likened to a prostitute – all of which are unquestionably crass insults, but there is no indisputable evidence for racialism. I conclude that reports describing (22) as a ‘racial slur’ actually succeed in casting a racial slur on Obama, even though they purport to denigrate it.

4. Conclusion

With the possible exception of the report discussed in §3.3, I conclude that in none of the reports of slurs considered in this essay does it follow that the reporter re-slurs the target. Given the adage that *there’s no smoke without fire* one might say that the reporting of slurs does to some extent contaminate the target of the slur by bringing to mind the possibility that the slur applies. The strength of such contamination, however, will depend upon the hearer/reader’s prior beliefs about the nature of the slur (ϵ), its target, and the character of the slurrer (Z).

Considerations of politeness and political correctness on the one hand and/or having suffered personal attack with a particular slurring term on the other may lead a person to take umbrage at the very existence of expressions like *nigger*, *yid*, *slut*, *bitch* and *cunt* such that any mention of them is offensive. Intentional uses of ϵ that are non-slurs (e.g. when the expression is used to express camaraderie) should not be condemned although the speaker/writer is open to criticism by an audience member deeply offended by any use of ϵ .

Where it is not the speaker/writer's perlocutionary intention to be offensive but nevertheless the audience is insulted – i.e. when the perlocutionary effect of ϵ in v is an accidental slur – the offense should be forgiven.

I hold to the view that the use of ϵ in v should only be condemned when Z is recognized to have the perlocutionary intention to slur. Although a slur eventuates as a perlocutionary effect, and dysphemistic effects are properly castigated, what is more abhorrent is the intention to achieve such an effect. The speaker/writer's intention can only be surmised from κ , the context of utterance – ϵ 's co-text and the situation of v 's utterance including what is known about the speaker/writer and the perlocutionary effect of this and similar uses of ϵ . Judging the perlocutionary effect of ϵ in v as a slur is also a matter of surmise, although it is normally identifiable by the target as the sense of insult. So, both perlocutionary intention and, to a lesser degree, perlocutionary effect are open to controversy resulting from differing interpretations of the same set of data. Therefore the reporter (X) of Z 's slur should, if there is any likelihood of being understood to subscribe to the slur, make it clear whether or not this is part of the intention of the report. Reports of slurs do not, in themselves, constitute slurs.

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