Slurs, Synonymy, and Taboo

Y. Sandy Berkovski

To cite this article: Y. Sandy Berkovski (2022): Slurs, Synonymy, and Taboo, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, DOI: 10.1080/00048402.2021.2016875

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2021.2016875

Published online: 06 Jan 2022.
ABSTRACT
The ‘prohibitionist’ idea that slurs have the same linguistic properties as their neutral counterparts hasn’t received much support in the literature. Here I offer a modified version of prohibitionism, according to which the taboo on using slurs is part of their conventional meaning. I conclude with explanations of the behaviour of slurs in embedded constructions.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 23 March 2021; Revised 9 October 2021

KEYWORDS slurs; semantics; taboo; convention

1. Introduction

My purpose here is to revise and develop further the ‘prohibitionist’ account of slurs defended by Anderson and Lepore [2013a, 2013b] and Lepore and Stone [2018]. On this view, the sentences ‘A is a kike’ and ‘A is a Jew’ are synonymous: they have the same truth-conditions and the same linguistic, conventional meaning. The only difference between them is rather like a difference between ‘B is a horse’ and ‘B is a steed.’ It is explained by miscellaneous experiences that the speakers and the audiences may have with these utterances. The same is true for slurs. For a non-bigoted audience, calling Spinoza a ‘kike’ evokes persecutions of the Jews down the ages. For the bigots, it evokes pernicious properties that they ascribe to the Jews. ‘Kike’ is on a par with ‘Hebrew’ and ‘Israelite’: each term is different in ‘tone’, each evokes different pages of history and a different atmosphere. Still, it would be linguistically correct to apply any of these terms to Spinoza.

I begin, in section 2, by arguing that prohibitionism is on a firmer ground than its critics have thought. In section 3, I argue that prohibitionism’s original account of the semantic content of slurs, while correct in the main, is still deficient, and that prohibitions on their use are linguistic conventions. In section 4, I appeal to the Biblical idea of purity and the empirical research on disgust to explain why the prohibitions on the use of different slurs differ in severity and to argue that our reactions to the use of slurs in embedded contexts are driven by our ideas of contamination and contagion.

2. Two Cheers for Prohibitionism

I first explain why the ‘no co-extension’ objection designed to undermine prohibitionism is inconclusive. Then I sketch the ‘redundancy argument’ that strengthens the prohibitionist’s hand.
**No co-extension objection.** According to some critics, prohibitionism should be disqualified from the start. Since, according to prohibitionism, slurs and neutral counterparts are synonymous, *a fortiori* they are co-extensional. But, those critics charge, this is false.\(^1\) Having the extension of a neutral term fixed, the extension of the relevant slur may both contract and expand. Thus, the following utterances are felicitous:

1. a. *A* is a Jew, but he is not a kike. (Contracting use)
   
   b. *B* is straight, of course, but he is still a faggot! (Expanding use)

According to the critics, utterances like (1) show that the extensions \([\text{KIKE}]\) and \([\text{JEW}]\), and \([\text{FAGGOT}]\) and \([\text{HOMOSEXUAL}]\), don’t match. Therefore, until and unless expansion and contraction are accounted for, prohibitionism has nothing going for it. This reasoning isn’t compelling, however.

First, the contracting use. Consider this:

2. Matt is a Jew, but he is not a kike (although most other Jews are kikes).

The critics take an utterance like (2) as a key piece of evidence for the claim that, according to \(A\), the extension \([\text{KIKE}]\) is a proper subset of \([\text{JEW}]\). Well, suppose that we ask the putative bigot \(A\) why he uttered (2). I think that possible answers would be ‘Matt is my friend’ or ‘Matt is fantastic.’ Suppose that we offer to paraphrase (2) as either of these:

3. a. Matt is a kike, but he is my friend.
   
   b. Matt is a kike, but he is fantastic.

I suspect that some of our imagined bigots are quite willing to paraphrase the original statement along the lines of (3). A general reason for this might be the features of the in-group use among the bigots (I return to this point shortly). For them, ‘kike’ is simply a regular way of referring to Jews, and to their ear the utterance (2) should sound anomalous from the start. In this case, since no evidence of contracting use can be drawn from (3a) or (3b) alone, no evidence comes from (2) either.

Suppose, however, that \(A\) absolutely refuses to call Matt a ‘kike’ (‘Matt saved my life, how dare you!’), he says). Well, this is what it is—the refusal to call Matt a ‘kike’. (2) was a misleading rendering of what \(A\) meant to say. Instead, it is this:

4. Matt is a Jew, but he is not a ‘kike’ (although most other Jews are properly called ‘kikes’).

The speaker refuses to assert ‘Matt is a kike’, although he doesn’t necessarily reject the truth of that statement.\(^2\) Some evidence of this may be drawn from the paraphrases of (2) that are incongruous, at least to my ear:

---

\(^1\) See Croom [2013, 2015], Hom and May [2013], and Neufeld [2019]. Generally, it is directed not only at prohibitionism, but against all so-called ‘identity theories’ that treat slurs and their neutral correlates as co-extensional. See Hom and May [2013: 303] and Diaz-Legaspe [2020: 1409] for this terminology.

\(^2\) This links to the broader issues in metalinguistic negation [Horn 1989: 370ff.].
(5) a. That’s a mistake: Matt is a Jew, not a kike.
   b. It is false that Matt is a kike. He is a Jew, though.

It seems improbable that the dispute between the speaker and the interlocutor would depend on the truth of the original statement. More reasonable is to interpret it as being about the choice of words. A parallel argument is available with idioms:

(6) a. (A:) — The grandpa kicked the bucket.
   b. (B:) — The grandpa didn’t ‘kick the bucket’; he just died.

Critics of prohibitionism would have B claim that to die is one thing, while to kick the bucket is another. That’s unlikely. More plausibly, B merely complains about A’s way of speaking. The same is true for diminutives and slang:

(7) a. (A:) — Mill’s daddy was pals with Bentham.
   b. (B:) — Mill’s father wasn’t his ‘daddy’, nor was he ‘pals’ with anyone!

It doesn’t follow that, according to B, [[MILL’S FATHER]] is distinct from [[MILL’S DADDY]], or that [[PALS WITH BENTHAM]] is not the same as [[BENTHAM’S FRIENDS]].

By the same token, the speaker in (2) complains about the style of describing Matt, not its factual accuracy. Just as the grandpa, strictly speaking, ‘kicked the bucket’, and Mill’s father is his ‘daddy’, so is Matt a ‘kike’. None of them, however, should appropriately be described so. I conclude that the evidence for contracting use is not compelling.

Turning to expanding use, compare this:

(8) a. A: My brother Luke is a true kike! Not because he is Jewish—he isn’t!—but because he’s so greedy!3
   b. B: My brother Mark is a true pig! Not because he isn’t human—he is!—but because he’s so filthy!

The critics take (8a) to confirm that, according to A, [[KIKE]] contains at least one non-Jewish individual. But how different is it from (8b)? This utterance, too, may be taken to show that, according to B, [[PIG]] contains at least one human. But that’s not how we normally think of (8b). We think that B came up with a metaphor, never meaning to challenge the distinction between (animal) pigs and humans.4

Well, can’t the critic insist (with Croom [2015: 34]), that ‘pig’ designates a family resemblance concept consisting of a constellation of attributes, so that calling x a ‘pig’ is apt whenever x’s possession of one of those attributes is salient? On some occasions the salient attribute is, say, ‘having a pink stocky body and a flat snout’, on other occasions it is ‘a member of the Sus scrofa species’—and sometimes it is ‘being filthy’. Hence, when x’s filthiness is salient, it is correct to call x a ‘pig’. The same is true for ‘kike’. Bigots associate its application with a number of attributes, such as ‘Jewish’, ‘avaricious’, ‘clever’, ‘hook-nosed’, etc. On most occasions the

3 (8a) is adapted from Croom [2015: 32]. The present author has witnessed just this sort of use on a couple of occasions.

4 Metaphorical employment of slurs: Jeshion [2013: 253] and Cousens [2020: 2].
attribute ‘Jewish’ is the most salient one, but not always. A remarkably greedy non-Jew may felicitously be called a ‘kike’.

But that response sits nicely with the metaphorical account. As Goodman [1968: 68] said, metaphor is a ‘matter of teaching an old word new tricks’. Metaphorical statements aim at a novel classification of things. Previously, x was classified as F and not-G. We now reclassify it overtly as G, whilst continuing to classify it as F. Coupled with an assumption that the classes of F-s and G-s don’t overlap, metaphorical predication results in a conflict of expectations and a sense of surprise. The conflict is resolved, and surprise alleviated, by rethinking the classification of x. Thus, if ‘kike’ was coined to refer exclusively to Jews, then applying it to a particular non-Jewish x is to classify x in terms of a salient property, like greed, commonly ascribed by bigots to Jews. The utterance and the utterer represent x, first and foremost, as a greedy person. Aided by a network of features associated with Jews in the bigoted conception of them, we are encouraged to see x as exemplifying some of these features as salient on the occasion. Similarly, applying ‘pig’ to a human x is to think of x in terms of filthiness commonly ascribed to animal pigs. It is to see him primarily as a filthy person.

Therefore, my modest point here is that an utterance like (8a) is accounted for by metaphorical use. If the critic insists that, for example, a non-Jewish person may felicitously be called a ‘kike’, the reply in short is that the same may be said of the metaphor in (8b). Therefore, unless the critic demonstrates the essential difference between (8a) and (8b), or unless we are prepared to ignore the metaphorical employment of terms, no proof of expanding use is forthcoming.

Redundancy argument. Since several other accounts assume the co-extension of slurs and neutral counterparts, the preceding discussion doesn’t give us a reason to favour prohibitionism over any of them. The argument that I’ll now sketch supplies us with such a reason.

Nearly all theorists writing about slurs share a specific broad assumption about their meaning. It was stated clearly in Christopher Hom’s writings, where the derogatory content of racial epithets was said to be ‘independent of the attitudes of any of its particular speakers’ [2008: 426] and to result from the ‘actual predication’ of a slur [2012: 397]. Theorists disagree on the precise nature of derogation and on the linguistic mechanism that attaches it to slurs. But they agree that a derogatory ‘content’, ‘force’, or ‘attitude’ is attached to slurs. Hence, they must also hold that, at least under average circumstances and in simple subject-predicate constructions, this derogation is regularly communicated by the bigoted speaker. The redundancy argument that I will now sketch targets this objectivist assumption. The reasoning will be tailored to the precise details of the views examined.

(I) Let ‘implicaturism’ be the view that slurs conventionally implicate a particular content. It is defended by Williamson [2009] and Whiting [2013]. Williamson gives these examples:

(9) a. Lessing was a German.
   b. Lessing was a Boche.

Both utterances have the same truth-conditional content. But only the latter, Williamson argues, conventionally implicates that Germans are cruel. According to Whiting,
no truth-conditional content is conventionally implicated. Rather, (9b) is ‘expressive’ of a non-cognitive attitude. I take it that, on this view, the utterance is supposed to communicate the speaker’s bigoted attitude toward the Germans.

Now, suppose that a speaker uses a slur for the first time in a conversation. Say that, in the course of a sterile academic debate, you burst out with (9b). Quite plausibly, we infer that you’ve just communicated some Germanophobic content. Morally repugnant as it may be, this leads to no violations of conversational maxims.

Suppose, by contrast, that you use a slur repeatedly in the conversation, matter-of-factly, and your interlocutors follow the suit. Then we have a problem. Consider this accretion of redundant content:

(10) a. \((A:)\) — Lessing was a Boche.
    b. \((B:)\) — And Holbach was probably a Boche.
    c. \((A:)\) — Not sure. But Wieland was definitely a Boche.

It was informative for the speakers to convey a derogatory content with their first utterances. But if the same implicature attaches to every use of slur, then conveying the same content all over again would violate the maxim of quantity. If \(A\) has already implicated his belief or attitude about the Germans in (10a), why voice it again?

Observe that other conventional implicatures yield no such infelicity. The reason is that they are tied to the at-issue content:

(11) a. \((A:)\) — Even Ken knows that it’s unethical. (CI: Ken is the least likely person to know that it’s unethical.)
    b. \((B:)\) — Well, even Ann knows that it’s unethical!
    c. \((C:)\) — Even Jo knows that it’s unethical!

There are no redundancies here, since a new content is implicated with each utterance. In general, we expect to have fragments of speech with this characteristic:

**High-frequency usage.** A slur is felicitously used in multiple utterances by the same speaker, in the same conversation.

There are fictional, but fairly realistic, examples of exactly such speech. In Tarantino’s film *Inglourious Basterds*, Aldo Raine utters these sentences within a span of a few minutes:

(12) a. Send that Kraut sarge over.
    b. Besides you, we know there’s another kraut patrol fuckin’ here somewhere.
    c. I need to know about Germans hiding in trees.
    d. Got us a German here who wants to die for country.

Raine’s initial use of a slur may suggest to us something about his beliefs and character. But nothing seems implicated specifically with the second use (I come to the last two utterances in a moment).

**(II)** This kind of reasoning is similarly effective against the account from Nunberg [2018: 267–9], where the use of slurs is associated with a generalised conversational

---

6 ‘Even’: Horn [2004: 3]. The reader is invited to test other implicatures, in Potts [2015: 188].
implicature—namely, the ‘ventriloquistic implicature’. A slur user manifestly flouts the ordinary way of referring to the targeted group and instead, just as manifestly, adopts the bigoted way of referring to that group. Since slurs are always marked alternatives to the conversational default, ventriloquistic implicatures should be regularly generated by slurs: the user is able to regularly implicate his ‘affiliation’ with the bigoted group and his endorsement of its ‘point of view’.

It may be argued that the repetition of the derogatory content is occasioned by the need to project solidarity with fellow bigots and to re-affirm bigoted commitments. But, again, the recurrent use of slurs in (12) persists even when all of the purposes mentioned above, like solidarity, have long been accomplished. Very early in that conversation, it will be clear to the participants who, within their group, believes or feels what about the Germans. Then the subsequent use of ‘kraut’ should violate the maxim of quantity. In reality it is, of course, perfectly felicitous. Indeed, Aldo Raine doesn’t even seem to communicate any ventriloquistic implicature. His only innocuous goal seems to be a repeated identification of individuals and groups with the same lexical item.

(12) illustrates a further problem with ventriloquistic implicature. When Raine abruptly switches to the neutral ‘German’, what are we to make of it? Well, if flouting the conversational default was significant, then switching back to it (by the same speaker in the same conversation) should be so, too. If, earlier, Raine communicated his affiliation with Germanophobes (and established his own conversational default), by using ‘German’ he renounced it. Yet, without special hints, and especially in the condition of high-frequency usage, we don’t really reason in this way. Raine is slipping in and out of the pejorative use without a second thought.

In general, we should have speech with this characteristic:

**Alternating usage.** A slur is routinely substituted for its neutral correlate, and *vice versa*, in multiple utterances in the same conversation.

Another good example of this speech is the fifth volume of Hume’s *History of England*, where the slur ‘popish’ is used a dozen times, while the neutral ‘Catholic’ about a hundred times. On Nunberg’s account, each alternation is an occasion for Hume to communicate his changing affiliations with anti-Catholic groups. That’s not a plausible reading of the text.

**(III)** Vulnerable to the redundancy argument, too, are the accounts that integrate derogation straight into the truth-conditional content. According to semantic externalism, to call A a ‘kraut’ is to say that A ought to be subject to discriminatory practices for having negative properties due to being German. On this view, a Germanophobe communicates a derogatory deontic content every time that he calls someone ‘kraut’.

In contrast to implicaturism, the mechanism of his communication is supposed to be a standard semantic one. The redundancy argument should apply as it did previously. In the course of a conversation about A, multiple uses of a slur directed at A will result in the same accretion of redundant content.

**(IV)** Similar considerations hold for the expressivist account from Jeshion [2018: 82–3, 100] where, for example, in the utterance ‘A is a kraut’ the slur is said to ‘semantically encode’ the expression of contempt toward *A qua* German. Note that it doesn’t matter whether the speakers ‘say’ something repeatedly, ‘implicate’ it, or ‘express’ it. To

---

6 Y. SANDY BERKOFSKI

---

7 Semantic externalism: Hom [2010: 180].
obey the maxim of quantity we shouldn’t make our utterances more ‘informative’ than necessary, and to implicate a proposition or to express an attitude is to communicate information, too. Repeatedly expressing attitudes through utterances is no less odd than is repeatedly conveying a truth-conditional content.

Elsewhere [manuscript], I deal with further objections to the redundancy argument, including the idea that the maxim of quantity is not always observed in conversations. Here, let me baldly assume that the argument is sound: slurs are not normally used to convey a derogatory content.

One beneficiary of the redundancy argument is prohibitionism, with its claim of the synonymy between slurs and their neutral counterparts. Prohibitionism can deal easily with the High-frequency and Alternating usages. Among Germanophobes, ‘kraut’ is often just a way of referring to Germans, as is ‘German’. On other occasions, Germanophobes may use ‘kraut’ just as successfully to convey various anti-German prejudices. With appropriate tweaks of the common ground, ‘German’ will be used to the same end. A slur, in other words, may effectively convey derogatory content, but only in some contexts of use. What these contexts are cannot be predicted and systematically explained. Derogation is effected by non-semantic tone. What the competent speaker intends to say when using a slur is indefinite, and varies according to the occasion. What the hearers understand is similarly indefinite, and depends on their particular experiences and interpretive capacities. For example, in the situation of a high-frequency usage of ‘kraut’, the hearer initially may associate a Germanophobic content with the speaker’s utterance. But he’s entitled to interpret the subsequent uses of the slur merely as attempts to identify individuals as German.

The synonymy of slurs and their neutral counterparts does not entail that their respective uses are equally frequent or equally appropriate. Indeed, slurs are not any ordinary synonyms of the neutral terms. There is an outright ban on their use. Nothing in this ban has to do with the semantic properties of the term. As we’ll now see, this diagnosis is misleading.

3. Prohibitionism Revised

Its simplicity and explanatory power notwithstanding, prohibitionism gets several things wrong. I will argue that (i) the ban on using slurs is within the scope of semantics, (ii) the analogy with stylistic tone is weak, (iii) unlike neutral terms that may also, on occasions, be used to convey derogatory content, slurs have a regular sociolinguistic function needing to be explained by an anthropologically realistic theory of taboo, (iv) the same anthropological theory of taboo may explain cases of embedded construction. I address the first two issues in this section. In section 4, I turn to the latter two.

To begin with the scope of semantics, what is it to know the meaning of an expression? Elsewhere, Lepore and Stone argue that it is to collaborate and coordinate with one another. It is to act in accordance with their ‘shared expectations’ and with ‘shared, public standards’ [Lepore and Stone 2015: 92, 94]. This is the locus of convention generally, and of linguistic convention in particular. But unlike other conventions, linguistic ones require a narrow conception of coordination and collaboration. In a properly linguistic exchange, interlocutors collaborate with each other in ‘simple, even rudimentary ways’ [ibid.: 220] only to produce and understand utterances in

accordance with established linguistic rules. The ‘basic intention’ of the speaker, the intention that has to be grasped in every linguistic exchange, is to be ‘committed’ to the grammar of his utterance (where ‘grammar’ includes various conventions of indirect use, presupposition, anaphora, and intonation). The notion of basic intention, and the associated competence of the speakers and hearers in fulfilling and understanding this intention, characterise the realm of semantics. Understanding more complex intentions of the speaker might be necessary for collaborating in other activities. Explaining how that further collaboration happens is the task of pragmatics and other disciplines.

Linguistic collaboration between speakers and hearers is tracked in the changes of the ‘conversational record’. This is a deliberately impoverished version of Stalnaker’s common ground [ibid.: 250]. It contains not just any kind of assumption that the interlocutors may acquire or abandon as the conversation proceeds, but rather the specific changes encoded by linguistic conventions. It tracks, that is, the commitments (call them ‘semantic commitments’) incurred by each speaker through making an utterance endowed with the conventional content [ibid.: 245, 248].

To return to slurs, the only linguistic convention attached to the term ‘kike’ is a referential relation to the property of Jewishness. It is the same convention attached to the terms ‘Jew’, ‘Hebrew’, or ‘Israelite’. So, all of the utterances in (13), provided that they are made with the same intonation (so as not to upset the information-structural balance), would effect the same change in the conversational record.

(13) a. Spinoza is a kike.
    b. Spinoza is a Jew.
    c. Spinoza is a Hebrew.
    d. Spinoza is an Israelite.

But isn’t it very unconventional to describe Spinoza as Jewish by using a slur? How many times in history was any Jew called a ‘kike’ merely in order to convey the information that he is Jewish? There is a sense in which ‘Hebrew’ and ‘Israelite’ are also somewhat ‘unconventional’, but this is the sense in which they are ‘quaint’. There is nothing quaint or creative about ‘kike’. Apart from the fact that there may be sound pragmatic reasons, on the occasion, to use the former terms, any surprise or annoyance at their use is fleeting at most. ‘Kike’ is quite different. Consider these:

(14) a. (A:) — Who was Spinoza?
    b. (B:) — He was a kike.
    c. (A:) — Sorry, what did you say??
    d. (B:) — Oh, I was just saying that Spinoza was Jewish.

If B sincerely believes that in (14b) he was merely informing the audience that Spinoza was Jewish, then he doesn’t know how to use ‘kike’ in the conversation. One simply does not use ‘kike’ for that purpose.9

The current objection is that it is a matter of a convention, not of tone, that ‘kike’ is a slur. Lepore and Stone may have a ready response. Granted, some uses of ‘kike’ are

9 That is, if you aren’t a bigot; how the bigots interpret the meaning of slurs is addressed at the end of this section.
against conventions. But these are social conventions. In (14), B is ignorant of those conventional prohibitions, not of the linguistic meaning.

I wish to object to this sharp division between linguistic and social conventions. The former are supposed to regulate the purely linguistic exchanges characterised by linguistic standards and the grasp of basic intentions. The latter are supposed to regulate the more amorphous social exchanges characterised by impossible-to-summarise social standards and unpredictable intentions. Often, I agree, we recognise the difference, and there the distinction is necessary. But not always: with slurs in particular, the boundary between the social and the linguistic can’t be drawn.

To see this, it is convenient to look at an imaginary scenario, before returning to the real world. Suppose that in English* there is an expression ‘darcvude’ whose dictionary entry reads thus:

(15) **darcvude** /ˈdaːkvud/ adj. magic. proh. extremely near-sighted.

Nothing unusual happens if one reads this entry in the dictionary. But when one utters a sentence with ‘darcvude’ in it, even a trivial one like ‘He is ‘darcvude’, the English* audience immediately begins experiencing extreme headaches to the point that they can’t carry on with the conversation. Often this results in fainting and sometimes in death. The same phenomenon is observed if ‘darcvude’ is used in writing. That is why the English* dictionary helpfully mentions that the word is magical. Only very few special people, on very special occasions (like dictionary research), may use ‘darcvude’ without any dramatic consequences. And that is also why, if an unauthorised person uses ‘darcvude’ in an ordinary conversation, he is arrested on the spot, prosecuted, and sent to prison.

As it happens, English* has this other word—‘myopic’. When an English* man says ‘He is myopic’, nobody faints, and everyone understands that the person referred to is extremely near-sighted. English* users are aware of these facts. Therefore, although ‘darcvude’ is part of the vernacular, nobody uses it (hence the ‘proh.’ note, for ‘prohibited’). To refer to nearsightedness, English* speakers use ‘myopic’ instead. Clearly, at some stage we should describe this behaviour as governed by a convention:

**Convention M.** English* speakers should never use ‘darcvude’ unless the occasion and the speaker satisfy various strict criteria.

Is M linguistic or social? To show that it’s the latter, the prohibitionist may pursue two lines of argument.

(I) **M** doesn’t govern the evolution of the conversational record. When an English* speaker S1 utters ‘X is darcvude’, all that he says is that X is near-sighted. That he can express this proposition by that utterance is determined by a semantic convention. Whatever violent reactions the audience may have, nothing changes this semantic fact. In Lepore and Stone’s terms, what gets onto the conversational record is the speaker’s semantic commitment to utter that sentence—that is, the commitment to contribute the propositional content of that sentence. If another speaker S2 utters ‘X is myopic’, the record changes in the same way, since the propositional contents of the two utterances are identical: S1 and S2 say the same thing. Hence, M is a social convention.

---

10 Thanks to this journal’s Editorial Assistant for the suggestion.
How faithful is this argument to the conception of the conversational record? The record must represent adequately what happens in the conversation. The use of ‘darcvude’ changes the course of the conversation in regular, predictable ways, and the change is explained by the violation of \( M \). Therefore, an adequate English* record can’t contain just the entry ‘\( S1 \) uttered “X is near-sighted”’. That won’t explain why the participants reacted as they did. Hence, the contributions by \( S1 \) and \( S2 \) are different. If the conversational record is to help us to make minimal sense of the regular course of a conversation where the former occurs, it must record the violation of \( M \).

The prohibitionist may dig in his heels. Semantic commitment is a ‘public commitment to the proposition’ uttered [Lepore and Stone 2015: 248]. How the conversation develops following the utterance is a question of pragmatics, not of semantics. This response is question-begging, however. Our task is to understand the scope of semantics. The prohibitionist’s key concept is the notion of semantic commitment tracked by the conversational record. This commitment ‘constrains’ the evolution of the conversation [ibid.: 248]. By this measure, the convention \( M \) should count as semantic.

Thus take a speaker \( S3 \) who mistakenly believes that ‘darcvude’ is a synonym of ‘myopic’. What is his semantic commitment when he utters ‘\( X \) is darcvude’? Well, it is first to contribute the propositional content that \( X \) is near-sighted. Is there a semantic commitment to violate \( M \) and to utter a prohibited word? You might think ‘No, since \( S3 \) is ignorant of \( M \) in the first place.’ Yet \( S3 \)’s utterance will have completely predictable effects on the conversation: as soon as the utterance is understood, the hearers faint. \( S3 \)’s ignorance is a poor excuse.11

Of course, pace Lepore and Stone, the notion of conversational record might be unsuitable for identifying the semantic meaning of utterances from the outset. For example, it might contain some non-linguistic information, in which case it should be conceived of as a version of the pragmatic common ground. Thus, I’m not arguing that \( M \) is semantic merely because it must be on the conversational record. Rather, I’m arguing that the prohibitionist who already uses the notion of conversational record to delimit the scope of semantics should regard \( M \) as semantic. What, then, is a general reason for regarding \( M \) as semantic? Nothing but the idea, defended lately, that the convention \( M \) is tightly aligned with the competence in the use of ‘darcvude’. If the shared expectations of the conversation participants constitute linguistic conventions, then \( M \) qualifies as such.

(II) To challenge this general reason directly, the prohibitionist might adopt the approach from Diaz-Legaspe, Liu, and Stainton [2020].12 Restricting ourselves to subject-predicate constructions, every utterance must carry a propositional content. This is the content encoded by the linguistic act. How, exactly, in what words, and under what circumstances to convey it is a question of ‘register’. Like tone, register is flexible, negotiable, and imprecise. Unlike tone, it is not construed as dependent on the hearer’s input. Each term in the competent speaker’s repertoire has a ‘lexical entry’ associated with it.13 Each entry lists semantic, syntactic, morphological, and phonological features that are intrinsic to the encoding of the information that the speaker conveys on the occasion. Register, where the prohibition belongs, is not

---

11 On ignorance, see also Lepore and Stone’s [2015: 253] discussion of malapropisms.
12 See also Pullum [2018: 170], Nunberg [2018: 265], and Sennet and Copp [2020: 145].
among any of those features. So, in English* it is *socially* unacceptable to use ‘darcvude’. A speaker who is merely unaware of the effects of ‘darcvude’ is socially awkward, but not linguistically incompetent.

This view is plausible with archaisms. A person interspersing his speech with ‘anon’ may be met with smiles or frowns, but conversations would proceed in roughly the same way had he used ‘soon’ instead. But ‘darcvude’ is different. For a competent English* speaker, the whole point of uttering ‘X is darcvude’ should be the dramatic effect of the utterance. The propositional content that X is myopic is incidental to the utterance. An English* man who says ‘X is darcvude’ just to inform the audience that X is myopic doesn’t know what he is doing. The notes ‘magic.’ and ‘proh.’ are central to the understanding of ‘darcvude’. A student of English* is not told that ‘darcvude’ is an outdated or rarely used word with which to describe visual impairment. He is told rather sternly that, although ‘darcvude’ may be used to describe myopia, there is a strict ban on its use.

To return from the English* fiction to the English real world, ‘kike’ is much closer to ‘darcvude’ than to ‘anon’. Since the prohibition on ‘kike’ a central fact of its linguistic use, this prohibition is part of its linguistic meaning. But at this point I wish to surrender some ground to the prohibitionist. Let’s acknowledge that taboos come in degrees. At one extreme, we find slurs like ‘nigger’ or ‘kike’, comparable in the severity of their prohibition to ‘darcvude’. Their use is certain to dramatically alter the course of the conversation. The participants aren’t expected to recover from a momentary discomfort and to carry on in the same way as they would, had the speaker used neutral correlates instead. They would censor the speaker and attack his bigotry. At the other extreme, we find boutique slurs such as ‘heathen’ and ‘papist’ unlikely to provoke strong reactions. Their use is quaint or inappropriate, rather than strictly prohibited.

In other words, a taboo’s strength is measured by the statistically estimated deviations from the course of the conversation that only involves neutral correlates. When the deviation is small, the prohibition is no longer part of the linguistic convention. Then it’s plausible to describe it as belonging in the register, and the difference between the slur and the neutral correlate as a difference in tone. This is also compatible with our present approach, in which conversational fluency is the locus of semantic meaning.14

You might complain that we are painting an unrealistically rosy picture of a linguistic community always on guard against offensive language and willing to censor taboo breakers on nearly every occasion. Yet this picture is of a piece with the relative rarity of the use of slurs. Offensive use generally is not rare or taboo. Hence, we predict that people wishing to be offensive are likely to use neutral correlates, so as not to expose themselves to the sanctions prompted by taboo violations. Statistical evidence to this effect is discussed elsewhere [Berkovski manuscript].

What of the bigots? As they reject the taboo, their in-group use of slurs is intensive. Still, while they don’t believe that they or anyone else should obey the taboo, they *do* recognise that the non-bigots believe that everyone should obey it. That is why bigots are able to converse with non-bigots smoothly: for example, they wouldn’t dream of using ‘kike’ at an official ceremony. This fact is central to the bigot’s use of slurs (of what non-bigots recognise as ‘slurs’), just as the plain fact of taboo is central to the non-bigot’s use. In other words, slurs have different entries in the bigot’s and

14 Meaning and fluency: Quine [1979: 141].
non-bigot’s respective lexicons. As register theorists would describe it, that difference is reflected in the slurs’ respective registers. I describe this as mastery of different semantic meanings. The latter claim may strike you as counter-intuitive. But, as we have seen, it is driven by theoretical considerations and can’t be settled by plain intuitions.

4. Taboo Demystified

I have argued that the taboo on the use of slurs is better regarded as part of their conventional meaning. But what is its nature? We often think of taboos as arbitrary, socially sanctioned stipulations. At best the stipulation was rationally justified at some early time. At a later stage, when we actually observe a taboo-driven behaviour, a bare prohibition is the only justification. Original intelligible reasons have been replaced with ‘unthinking ritual’, ‘routine’, inscrutable ‘sanctions’, and ‘proscriptions’.15

This is the view from Anderson and Lepore [2013a, 2013b] where, for the purpose of explaining the behaviour of slurs, the prohibition on the use of slurs is taken as a brute fact. Not that the prohibition is, in itself, inexplicable. Perhaps, Anderson and Lepore speculate, slurs were prohibited because the name for the targeted group was forced on it by others. To use that name is to usurp the authority of the members of the targeted group to choose the names as they please. Or perhaps a dominant group chose the name, and to use that name is a reminder of the dominance over the targeted group [2013b: 355, 2013a: 39]. These are rather dubious reasons. ‘Kraut’ is a slur, although Germans weren’t dominated by the British. On the other hand, names for the Jews in many languages, including English, would be chosen for them by the dominant and often hostile native populations. However, these names aren’t necessarily slurs.

At all events, these explanation sketches aren’t essential to prohibitionism’s success. That’s because, whatever the reasons for its adoption, at present the prohibition itself is supposed to explain the slurs’ behaviour.16 Why are slurs considered ‘offensive’? Because whoever violates a prohibition offends those who observe it. Why do slurs offend in embedded constructions? Because there is a blanket ban on every occurrence of a slur. Why is it offensive to use slurs even in direct quotations? Because whoever uses them so risks complicity in the violation of the prohibition [2013a: 38, 2013b: 354]. The prohibition on slurs currently governs our behaviour merely by fiat, with no relation to the earlier reasons of its adoption. Abhorrence of slurs is sufficiently explained by the bare fact of the taboo. There is no further explanation, for example, of why the use of slurs is banned in the community, while grave insults expressed in neutral terms are only frowned on or even permitted.

However, this component of prohibitionism, especially, looks weak. Suppose that there are rituals and regulations to be observed. But we don’t recoil from using slurs

---

15 See Jay [2009: 153], Burridge [2015: 271], and Pullum [2018: 187]. This corresponds to the classical anthropological view that taboos are ‘survivals’ from the earlier times [Tylor 1903: 16].

16 Thus, prohibitionism must be contrasted with the view in Diaz-Legaspe, Liu, and Stainton [2020: 167, 179] where a slur is said to be appropriate when the speaker ‘feels a strong negative attitude towards the target and wishes to demean it’, is willing to insult the target, or at least tolerates such insults. Since the possession of attitudes becomes part of semantic competence, this view looks like a version of semantic expressivism (similarities with Jeshion’s expressivism are acknowledged by Diaz-Legaspe, Liu, and Stainton).
merely because they are prohibited. Similarly, as just noted, to deal with embedded constructions the prohibitionist insists that the prohibition applies to every occurrence of a slur. This seems ad hoc. We learn (as part of our linguistic competence, I argued) that we shouldn’t call people ‘krauts’ and ‘kikes’, but do we also learn that we shouldn’t quote other people’s use of slurs? Evidence from other cases of taboo is inconclusive at best. For example, Anderson and Lepore draw an analogy with the taboo on YHWH currently enforced across the board by the Jewish law. Other names of God, however, are also taboo—but the law does permit their use in direct quotations from various sacred texts. What’s the evidence that slurs must behave like YHWH, and not like other names of God?

To get a better explanation, let’s take the idiom of ‘taboo’ more seriously than the prohibitionists have done. Let’s first put a full-blown anthropological spin on it, before adapting it to the case of slurs. Combined with some results in social psychology, this will further explain the use of slurs in embedded constructions. It is better, though, not to explore the classical concept of taboo in African and Polynesian societies. This concept was intended to capture extremely diverse phenomena, most of them not relevant to our problem. For example, among the Nuer ‘taboo’ is a prohibition whose violation is punished without any concrete human or divine intervention, but merely by the order of the world. In Polynesia, ‘taboo’ seems to be anything dangerous, but also somehow related to the notion of ritual. In general, it has been argued that an attempt to put all of these phenomena under the same roof should either fail outright or yield a triviality.

Instead, I propose to focus the discussion on the related ideas of ‘impurity’ and ‘holiness’ in the Hebrew Bible, specifically the passages in Leviticus 11–21. On one influential interpretation, the Leviticus laws of purity grow out of the earlier ‘taboo’-like prohibitions and associated rituals of neighbouring peoples. The story goes like this. In the Near Eastern cults, pagan gods were not the only entities endowed with supernal or infernal force. Demons and the substance of impurity, too, had that force. Impurity spread in space, like a gas whose agency could be manipulated by demons. Since demons and impurity threatened the potency and existence of the gods, rituals of purification were necessary for protecting them and their temples. A crucial innovation of Biblical theology was to restrict supernal agency to God. The only other source of agency was assigned to man. Only a man could still defile God’s temple, although not God himself. Impurity was reduced to a static condition of things like corpses and bodily excretions. It was still contagious, but the only medium of contagion was man.

Next to contagious impurity, Leviticus 18–20 recognises what may be called ‘inert impurity’. It is attributed to various behaviours in which pagans engage. The reasoning appears significantly different. Whereas the first group of impurities was characterised by an impure condition (tumah) and required a purification ritual, impurities in the second group created no such condition and needed no purification. People of Israel and the Land of Israel are required to be ‘holy’ [Lev. 19:2]. The term ‘holiness’ (qedushah) has the sense of ‘separation’ [Lev. 20: 22–6]. Certain kinds of activities

19 I follow Milgrom [1991: 256–61]. Sumerian and Akkadian terms have been suggested as synonyms of the Polynesian tabu and as antecedents of the parallel Biblical terms [van der Toorn 1985: 41–4].
are proscribed, in the first place, for no better reason than that they are performed in other lands and by other peoples. Some of those activities—namely, certain sexual practices—are declared to be ‘abomination’ and ‘depravity’. Other ones are not declared so, but their prohibition is intelligible on independent grounds, including ostensibly moral ones (for example, bribery and theft). Yet another group of activities receives no further justification. They are banned merely because other peoples engaged in them. Among these statutes are the prohibitions on tattoos, various hair-styles, and mixing different materials in the same garment.

There are, therefore, ‘defiling’ activities whose impurity is not contagious, that require no purification, and that are prohibited chiefly or exclusively in order to segregate a group from another group [Milgrom 2000: 1717–18]. The fundamental role of the statutes is to ensure the unity of the people achieved by separating them from other peoples.

The Leviticus idea of pollution maps neatly onto the ban on slurs. As before, we assume that there is a community of bigots frequently and deliberately using slurs (that is, what we call ‘slurs’) among themselves. Their linguistic usage sufficiently distinguishes them from non-bigots [Nunberg 2018]. Furthermore, bigots are guilty of a moral violation. That is why non-bigots wish, in turn, to segregate themselves from bigoted communities. Thus, one consequence for the user of ‘kike’ is this: he behaves like an anti-Semitic racist, and, in acting so, he breaks the boundary between the non-racist and the racist groups. This puts the use of slurs in a rather different light. Its fault is not the alleged derogation or offence: no one might have been offended, and in any case the scale of offence is too insignificant when compared to the ensuing condemnation. The fault is rather in becoming a bigot, then and there, since one of the bigot’s distinguishing and unique marks is precisely the use of slurs.

We can now also better understand the taboos’ spectrum of severity (section 3). When a group of bigots is characterised by gravely wrong moral beliefs, when those beliefs tempt many of non-bigots, it is urgent to secure the unity of the non-bigoted group and to prevent its members from changing sides. But when there is no cohesive bigoted group, or when anyway the unity of non-bigots is not under threat, slurs shade into slang and archaisms. Prohibitions are loosened, even if a term like ‘papist’ is still mildly inappropriate.

This doesn’t tell the whole story, though. We have contrasted contagious and inert pollution. And you may think that the talk of inert pollution is metaphorical at best. A person ‘stained’ by murder doesn’t literally stain you with murder, and ‘filthy’ sexual mores don’t make you filthy in any way. By the same token, we may think that someone who uses a slur in a straightforward predication does behave like a racist, but that someone who uses it to report another person’s utterance, or who mentions it in a direct quotation, is not really stained with racism and does not speak like a racist.

However, these distinctions hold only in theory. Although in theory non-contagious moral pollution is not supposed to be transferred by touch or by air, in practice people often treat it as contagious. This was confirmed in a series of remarkable psychological experiments.20 Subjects were offered a sweater worn by a murderer, and a sweater worn by an ordinary man. Both were washed afterwards. There was a very strong resistance to wearing the former sweater. But if the murderer’s sweater had subsequently been worn by a ‘good man’, resistance was much weaker. Moral pollution,

20 Review of empirical findings: Nemeroff and Rozin [2000].
supposedly entirely metaphorical and certainly not contagious, contaminates by contact and can also be purified ritually. In this instance, pollution originates in a bodily contact. What of the case where a particular token—say, a word token—is produced by a bad person, and then another token of the same type is used? Since there is no physical contact, we might expect that no pollution is transferred. Again, experiments show otherwise.\(^{21}\) The subjects reported their being ‘repulsed’ by clothes designed, although not physically touched, by immoral people. They were similarly averse to music written by immoral composers as opposed to moral ones.

We observe a similar phenomenon with slurs. For example, a user of racial slurs not only violates the boundary between racists and non-racists. He also places his audience under a threat of contamination—namely, the contamination of racism. We are ‘disgusted’ by slurs not as a manner of speech, but really and literally so. We have this visceral reaction not because we correctly identify the offence that slurs supposedly convey toward a particular individual or a group. Rather, it is because we recoil at the prospect of being contaminated by racism, and, through contamination, of becoming racists ourselves.\(^{22}\) An expression like ‘slurs carry the germs of racism’ may initially be understood as a flowery metaphor. But in practice we think of these ‘germs’ by analogy with physical contamination, and not just metaphorically.

Furthermore, because of the desired segregation between racists and non-racists, the polluted individuals cannot be freely accepted back into the community of non-racists. In any religious context where the notion of pollution is operative, there is a readily available, standard procedure of purification to enable the polluted individuals to return to the fold of the community. The overtly secular context of slurs’ use, and of morality generally, lacks any such ritual. Hence, in its stead, we have an \textit{ad hoc} mixture of effusive apologies, lengthy recantations, public condemnations, and obligatory resignations.

This kind of explanation may be deployed to address the occurrence of slurs in ordinary predication and in embedded constructions, like indirect quotation, negation, or conditionals. According to our revised version of prohibitionism, we need not think of taboos on slurs as ‘survivals’ introduced in the past for intelligible reasons, which at present persist merely as arbitrary stipulations. We should think of them, in the first place, as ways of segregating non-bigoted language users from various bigoted communities. The use of slurs is a distinguishing mark of bigots. The non-bigots are required to avoid slurs for this very reason, lest they become ‘polluted’ by bigotry. This talk of pollution may initially be taken as just a metaphor obscuring the real explanatory links. Surely words can’t literally be carriers of bigoted ideologies? Yet, as Nemeroff and Rozin’s [2000] experiments show, we tend to think of bad moral qualities as contagious that spread through different, poorly articulated, forms of contact with morally bad persons.

Now, what of direct quotations? In (16), the slur is not used but is mentioned:

\begin{equation}
(16) \quad B: A\ said\ ‘Spinoza\ was\ a\ kike.’
\end{equation}

This use, many people feel, is unacceptable. Why, exactly? The speaker A used a slur. But, in the sentence uttered by B, ‘kike’ is part of the name of the sentence uttered by A,

\(^{21}\) Intention contagion: Stavrova et al. [2016].

\(^{22}\) The expanding domain of disgust: Haidt [2012: 148–9].
like ‘don’ is part of ‘London’. So, strictly speaking, merely some noises and shapes constituting the word ‘kike’ occur in the sentence uttered by B. Since the slur does not occur in (16), a negative reaction would be unwarranted.

This puzzle may be solved by the law of ‘magical similarity’ also outlined by Nemeroff and Rozin [ibid.]. They report the experiments where the subjects were given two similar-looking bottles of liquid. To one of those bottles, the subjects themselves attached a label ‘contains sugar’, and to the other a label ‘contains poison’. Rather surprisingly, thereupon the subjects demonstrated a clear preference to drink from the former bottle. Moreover, the same result was obtained when the second label was ‘does not contain poison’. Conceivably, the same result would have been obtained had the latter label been ‘contains poison’. It is sufficient, in other words, that the spoken or written expressions perceptually resemble the expressions used by racists, for us to be disgusted by those former expressions. Clearly, a sentence in quotation marks would still perceptually resemble the original sentence. Finally, by the same logic, we can make sense of the scandals surrounding the use of a plainly innocuous word like ‘niggardly’. The sensitivity demonstrated by some individuals toward this word is irrational, yet intelligible—if our attitudes toward slurs are dominated by magical thinking.23

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**References**


23 I am grateful to two anonymous referees for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.