

Provided for non-commercial research and education use.  
Not for reproduction, distribution or commercial use.



This article appeared in a journal published by Elsevier. The attached copy is furnished to the author for internal non-commercial research and education use, including for instruction at the authors institution and sharing with colleagues.

Other uses, including reproduction and distribution, or selling or licensing copies, or posting to personal, institutional or third party websites are prohibited.

In most cases authors are permitted to post their version of the article (e.g. in Word or Tex form) to their personal website or institutional repository. Authors requiring further information regarding Elsevier's archiving and manuscript policies are encouraged to visit:

<http://www.elsevier.com/authorsrights>



# Slurs and appropriation: An echoic account

Claudia Bianchi\*



Faculty of Philosophy, Vita-Salute San Raffaele University, via Olgettina 58, 20132 Milano, Italy

Received 3 September 2013; received in revised form 22 February 2014; accepted 25 February 2014

## Abstract

Slurs are derogatory terms targeting individuals and groups of individuals on the basis of race, nationality, religion, gender or sexual orientation. The aim of my paper is to propose an account of appropriated uses of slurs – i.e. uses by targeted groups of their own slurs for non-derogatory purposes, as in the appropriation of ‘nigger’ by the African-American community, or the appropriation of ‘queer’ by the homosexual community. In my proposal appropriated uses are conceived as *echoic*, in Relevance Theory terms: in-groups echo derogatory uses in ways and contexts that make manifest the dissociation from the offensive contents. I will show that the echoic strategy has interesting advantages over alternative theories, and especially over Anderson and Lepore’s deflationary strategy.

© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Slurs; Hate speech; Appropriation; Echo; Relevance Theory; Irony

## 1. Introduction

Some linguistic expressions possess a strong emotional load, sometimes with an extremely negative value, to the point that they become, in Jennifer Hornsby’s words, ‘absolutely useless’ (Hornsby, 2001: 130). Slurs, in particular, have recently become an object of study for linguists, philosophers of language and legal scholars,<sup>1</sup> also as a part of what Jacob Mey calls ‘emancipatory’ or ‘anticipatory’ pragmatics.<sup>2</sup> Slurs are derogatory terms – such as ‘nigger’ and ‘faggot’ – targeting individuals and groups of individuals on the basis of race, nationality, religion, gender or sexual orientation. According to most scholars, slurs generally have a neutral counterpart, i.e. a non-derogatory correlate:<sup>3</sup> ‘Boche’ and ‘German’, ‘nigger’ and ‘African-American’ or ‘black’, ‘faggot’ and ‘homosexual’.<sup>4</sup>

Treatments of slurs are classified in many ways. In this paper I will classify treatments in three types: *semantic*, *pragmatic* (borrowing Hom’s labels) and *deflationary*.<sup>5</sup> According to the semantic perspective, the derogatory content of a slur is part of its literal meaning, while according to the pragmatic perspective, the derogatory content of a slur is merely conveyed in context and is part of how the slur is used. I contrast both perspectives to Anderson and Lepore’s deflationary

\* Tel.: +39 0226435870.

E-mail address: [claudia.bianchi@univr.it](mailto:claudia.bianchi@univr.it).

<sup>1</sup> The *locus classicus* is the analysis of ‘Boche’ in Dummett (1973): 454; see also Kaplan (1999), Hornsby (2001), Hom (2008), Potts (2008), Richard (2008), Williamson (2009), Predelli (2010), Croom (2011, 2013), Anderson and Lepore (2013a).

<sup>2</sup> Mey (1985, 1994, 2001, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> In what follows I will accept this claim without discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Actually, the neutral counterpart of ‘faggot’ is ‘male homosexual’; I will use ‘homosexual’ for short.

<sup>5</sup> The labels *semantic* and *pragmatic* (Hom, 2008: 416) are controversial: see *infra*, footnote 7. I won’t offer specific arguments in favor of this classification, for nothing particularly relevant for my thesis impinges on that.

proposal, according to which slurs are prohibited words not in virtue of any content they express or communicate, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper I won't argue in favor of any particular perspective: my aim is to propose an account of *appropriated* or *reclaimed* uses of slurs. Appropriated uses are uses by targeted groups of their own slurs for non-derogatory purposes, in order to demarcate the group, and show a sense of intimacy and solidarity – as in the appropriation of 'nigger' by the African-American community, or the appropriation of 'gay' and 'queer' by the homosexual community. In my proposal, appropriated uses are conceived as *echoic uses*, in Relevance Theory terms: in-groups echo derogatory uses in ways and contexts that make manifest the dissociation from the offensive contents. My echoic account suggests a solution compatible with the semantic and the pragmatic perspectives, that is with strategies of treatment of slurs *in terms of content* (expressed or conveyed). In so doing I will reply to one of the main objections of Anderson and Lepore against content based accounts, without postulating a change of meaning in appropriated uses. According to Anderson and Lepore, both semantic and pragmatic accounts are bound to claim that the offensive potential of a slur affects its content (expressed or *conventionally* conveyed) in *any* context. The derogation being part of the content (narrow or wide) in both accounts, they must explain by virtue of what reasons not every occurrence of a slur is offensive, as happens in appropriated uses. The objection, if well founded, would represent a knock-down argument for any content based view: if slurs express or convey any conventional linguistic properties responsible for their derogatory potential, there would be no way to explain non offensive uses.

I will show that the echoic account has interesting advantages over alternative accounts, and especially over the deflationary strategy: my proposal will account for the fact that

- I. appropriated uses are generally open only to in-groups;
- II. in-groups may use slurs against their own group;
- III. appropriated uses can be extended also to out-groups – but only to selected speakers in highly regulated situations.

## 2. Strategies of treatment of slurs

As I have said, there are several alternative taxonomies of treatments of slurs. For the purposes of this paper, I will classify treatments in three types: semantic, pragmatic and deflationary.

- (a) From a semantic perspective the derogatory content of a slur is part of its literal meaning; therefore it is expressed in every context of utterance. In a simplified version, the meaning of 'faggot' may be expressed as 'homosexual and despicable because of it' (Hom, 2008: 416).

According to the semantic perspective, the sentence

- (1) Tom is a faggot

(having as a neutral counterpart

- (2) Tom is a homosexual)

says something we may paraphrase with

- (3) Tom is a homosexual and despicable because of it.

- (b) According to the pragmatic perspective, the derogatory content of a slur is merely conveyed in context.<sup>7</sup> The most interesting proposals are those made in terms of tone, presuppositions and conventional implicatures. According to the strategy in terms of Fregean tone, 'faggot' and 'homosexual' are synonymous, and differ only in coloring or connotation. According to the strategy in terms of presuppositions, the offensive content of (1) isn't expressed or said but merely presupposed. According to the strategy in terms of conventional implicatures, finally, the offensive content

<sup>6</sup> Anderson and Lepore (2013b: 350) label their view *Prohibitionism*.

<sup>7</sup> I adopt here Hom's label 'pragmatic' to indicate the strategies claiming that the derogatory content of slurs "is fundamentally part of how they are used, and results from features of the individual contexts surrounding their utterance" (Hom, 2008: 416). More particularly, I dub 'pragmatic' the strategies in terms of conventional implicatures and presuppositions, although their (semantic or pragmatic) status is far from settled. Notice that both Chris Potts and Elisabeth Camp characterize their views as semantic (Potts, 2007, 2008; Camp, 2013). Nothing relevant to my proposal has a bearing on the particular semantics/pragmatics distinction adopted.

of slurs must be assimilated to conventional implicatures. The derogatory content of 'faggot' doesn't affect the truth-conditions of (1): (1) and (2) have the same truth-conditions.

- (c) The deflationary perspective opposes both strategies in terms of content – expressed (a) or conveyed in context (b).<sup>8</sup> According to Anderson and Lepore, slurs are prohibited words not in virtue of any content they express or communicate, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition: “*once relevant individuals declare a word a slur, it becomes one*” (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a: 39) – relevant individuals usually being targeted members, groups, or institutions. There is no difference in content (expressed or implicitly conveyed) between 'faggot' and 'homosexual': (1) and (2) have the same meaning. Anderson and Lepore take a *silentist* stance: “we insist upon *silentism* as policy. A use, mention, or interaction with a slur, *ceteris paribus* (. . .), constitutes an infraction (. . .). We cringe when confronted by slurs *because* they usually admit of no tolerable uses” (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a: 39). Therefore they suggest removing slurs from use until their offensive potential fades away,<sup>9</sup> and avoid any use or mention in any context, including so-called pedagogical contexts.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Appropriation

As I said in the introduction, targeted members or groups may appropriate their own slurs for non-derogatory purposes, in order to demarcate the group, and show a sense of intimacy and solidarity. A distinction may be useful here. In-groups use their own slurs for non-derogatory purposes in at least two kinds of contexts:

- A. Friendship contexts – where the non-derogatory use has no conscious political or cultural intent;<sup>11</sup>  
 B. Appropriation contexts – where civil rights groups reclaim the use of the slur as a tool of deliberate political and social fight<sup>12</sup> or artists (writers, poets, comedians, song lyricists) attempt appropriation as a way of subverting entrenched socio-cultural norms.<sup>13</sup>

In what follows, I will often use the term *community uses* to refer to non-derogatory uses in in-group contexts, without distinguishing between A. and B.

Community uses are one of the main arguments of the deflationary strategy against content based perspectives. According to Anderson and Lepore, both semantic and pragmatic accounts are bound to claim that the offensive potential of a slur affects its content (narrow or wide) in *any* context. The derogation being part of the content (expressed or *conventionally* conveyed) in both accounts, they must explain by virtue of what reasons not every occurrence of a slur is offensive, as happens in appropriated uses.<sup>14</sup> The objection, if well founded, would represent a knock-down argument for any content based view: if slurs express or convey any conventional linguistic properties responsible for their derogatory potential, there would be no way to explain non offensive uses.

Actually (a) and (b) may reply to Anderson and Lepore's objection by postulating a *change* of content or meaning in appropriated uses. It is the solution suggested by Richard (2008: 16: “in appropriation there [is] a change in meaning”),

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Anderson and Lepore (2013b): 350: “Recent literature in the philosophy of language and linguistics divides the explanatory landscape into two broad camps: content-based and non-content-based, with the consensus being that (uses of) slurs express negative attitudes toward their targets. Content-based theorists adopt different strategies for implementing this view, but all agree that slurs (or their uses) communicate offensive content. In this essay, we will challenge the consensus and defend a non-content-based view”.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson and Lepore (2013a): 40: “It is impossible to reform a slur until it has been removed from common use. . . Do sufficiently long campaigns against the uses of certain slurs eventually ameliorate them? Targets with investments in seeing a word removed from circulation, those for whom the slur conjures painful memories or histories of discrimination, are more affronted by confrontations with some slurs than others are. In contrast, as fewer individuals acknowledge offense, it comes to pass, contingent on authority, station, or relevance, that offensive intensity is lost or diminished – the campaign to prohibit the word thereby effectively ends”. Anderson and Lepore don't explain how the offensive potential of slurs eventually fades away, and, by way of example, propose only the practice of appropriation.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Anderson and Lepore (2013a: 37; 2013b: 353). Hom (2008): 429 labels NDNA (non-derogatory, non-appropriated) uses like ‘Institutions that treat Chinese people as chinks are racist’: “The epithet in NDNA contexts carries its racist content while falling short of derogating its target because that is the very point of its use”.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Goffman (1967: 86) on this point: “individuals who are on familiar terms with one another and need stand on little ceremony [with one another can exchange jokes and mock insults] apparently as a means of poking fun at social circles where the ritual [insult] is seriously employed” (quoted in Croom, 2011: 349–350). On banter and mock impoliteness see also Leech (1983) and Culpeper (1996).

<sup>12</sup> ‘Queer’ and ‘black’ are clear examples of B.: see Kennedy and Randall (2003) and Jeshion ms. Cf. Anonymous (1990): “QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him”.

<sup>13</sup> See Rahman (2011) and Croom (2013: 191–194; 2014: 236–237) for examples of the appropriation of ‘nigger’ (and its variant ‘nigga’) by African-American comedians and in the hip-hop culture. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out to me the role of artists in appropriation.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson and Lepore (2013a): 36: “After all, if its offense is part of its meaning, how can its non-slurring uses exist? We believe this worry about non-slurring uses of slurs extends to any account that pins the offensive potential of a slur on content”.

Hom (2008: 428: “The appropriation of an epithet is a phenomenon whereby the targeted group takes control of the epithet, and alters its meaning for use within the group”) and Potts (2007: 10: “when lesbian and gay activists use the word ‘queer’, its meaning (. . .) differs dramatically from when it is used on conservative talk radio”).<sup>15</sup> In other words, the slur ‘faggot’ would be ambiguous between a derogatory meaning (in out-groups uses) and a non-derogatory meaning (in in-groups uses), but, as Anderson and Lepore rightly point out, “Ambiguity fails to explain why non-members cannot utilize a second sense. If it were *just* a matter of distinct meanings, why can’t any speaker opt to use a slur non-offensively?” (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a: 42).<sup>16</sup>

The aim of my paper, then, is to provide a reply to one of the main problems of both semantic and pragmatic accounts, by suggesting a solution compatible with content based views, with no appeal to the unconvincing ambiguity thesis. Also, the deflationary perspective itself offers no adequate account of appropriated uses, confining itself to a sort of re-description of the phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> As a matter of fact, Anderson and Lepore merely note that slurs have non-derogatory uses by in-groups, as belonging to a target group provides a kind of suspension or exception to the embargo: “Our own explanation is that in cases of appropriation, a target group member can opt to use a slur without violating its prohibition because *his* membership provides a defeasible escape clause: most prohibitions invariably include such clauses” (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a: 42). This *exception thesis* sounds dangerously ad hoc to me, and doesn’t recognize the role played by targeted communities, civil rights groups and artists in the cultural and political struggle involved in appropriation.

On this very point – namely the role of counter-institutions in appropriation contexts (contexts B.), where uses of slurs are reclaimed as tools of conscious political or social struggle – Hom, Hornsby and Croom offer far more stimulating remarks. According to Hom (2008): 428, uses of slurs in contexts B. allow in-groups to:

- i. take back from racists and homophobes a powerful instrument of discrimination;
- ii. soothe or neutralize the offensive effect of the slur;
- iii. demarcate the group, showing a sense of intimacy and solidarity;
- iv. bear in mind that they are objects of discrimination.

Hornsby underlines two more aspects that are crucial for what follows: in appropriation, in-groups

- v. show a critical stance against ‘normal’ (i.e. derogatory) uses of a slur;
- vi. do not merely replace or erase offensive uses, but *subvert* them: “they trade on the fact of the word’s having had its former hateful or contemptuous element. Where words are appropriated for a new use, old non-descriptive meanings are not brushed away: they are subverted” (Hornsby, 2001: 134).

More recently, Croom emphasizes the function of ‘normative reversal’ of community uses: “the non-derogatory in-group use of slurs is especially prevalent in communities highly influenced by ‘counterculture’ norms (i.e., norms adopted in opposition to, and for the purpose of subverting, other entrenched sociocultural norms that a group contests), such as those associated with hip-hop culture” (Croom, 2013: 191).

The notions of *appropriation*, *reversal* and *subversion* suggested to me a strategy of treatment of community uses which represents a persuasive alternative to the ambiguity thesis (content based perspectives) and to the exception thesis (deflationary perspective). In my proposal appropriated uses are conceived as *echoic uses* (in Relevance Theory terms): in-groups echo derogatory uses in ways and contexts that make manifest the dissociation from the offensive contents. My echoic account suggests a solution compatible with content based perspectives without postulating any change of meaning in appropriated uses. Before presenting my own account in §§ 5 and 6, some details on echoic uses in a Relevance Theory perspective are in order.

<sup>15</sup> Hom explains appropriated uses in terms of change of meaning, but in a combinatorial externalism perspective: in appropriated uses in-groups disconnect the external, causal link between the meaning of a slur and its racist or homophobic institution, and create a new causal link between the meaning of the slur and civil rights associations.

<sup>16</sup> For similar reasons they reject an explanation in terms of conversational implicatures: see Anderson and Lepore (2013a): 42.

<sup>17</sup> This is a general comment extending to the deflationary perspective as a whole: it seems to explain too little. In particular Anderson and Lepore don’t fully specify why institutions or individuals declare an embargo on some expressions (for a tentative reply, see Anderson and Lepore (2013b): 354–355), and it is difficult to imagine motivations making no reference to what these expressions mean or conventionally implicate. Also, slurs can exist even when there is no prohibition on their use (e.g. ‘nigger’ in the old South): thanks to an anonymous reviewer for underlining this major problem of Anderson and Lepore’s perspective.



#### 4. Echoic uses

Relevance Theory distinguishes between descriptive and attributive (or interpretive) uses of language. A descriptive use of an utterance or thought represents a state of affairs in the world, while an *attributive use* meta-represents a state of affairs – i.e. it represents the (actual or possible) utterance or thought of another individual concerning a state of affairs. A standard example of an attributive use is free indirect speech and thought. Consider the following utterances (Wilson, 2006a: 1730):

- (4) a. The Dean spoke up.                      b. The university was in crisis;  
 (5) a. The students were thoughtful.      b. If they didn't act now, it might be too late.

In free indirect speech the speaker isn't asserting (4)b or (5)b (she isn't asserting that the university was in crisis or that if the students didn't act immediately, it might be too late) and doesn't take any responsibility for the truth of that utterance or thought: she is meta-representing an utterance or thought with a similar content, tacitly attributed to an individual ((4)), a group ((5)) or people in general (see *infra*).

*Echoic uses* are a subset of attributive or interpretive uses, where the speaker not only reports an attributed utterance or thought, but also informs the hearer of her attitude to that utterance or thought. The speaker may express a variety of different reactions, as Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber illustrate in the following example (Wilson and Sperber, 2012: 129–130). Imagine that Jack proudly announces that he has finished the paper he has been working on for the past months. Sue may react in various ways:

- (6) (happily): You've finished your paper! Let's celebrate!  
 (7) (cautiously): You've finished your paper. Really completely finished?  
 (8) (dismissively): You've finished your paper. How often have I heard you say that?

In (6) Sue expresses an attitude of surprise and pleasure, and general acceptance of the echoed content ('You've finished your paper'); in (7) she expresses an attitude of perplexity, and desire for confirmation of the echoed content; in (8) she expresses an attitude of skepticism and disbelief, and rejection of the echoed content. Sue's reaction is explicit in (6)–(8), but could be *tacit*, and indicated only by gestures, tone of voice or facial expressions.

*Ironical uses* are a particular subset of echoic uses where the speaker expresses a dissociative attitude to an attributed utterance or thought that she suggests is false, inadequate or irrelevant. Again, there is wide variety of dissociative attitudes, ranging from puzzlement to criticism, from mockery to rejection, with no clear-cut distinctions.<sup>18</sup>

More precisely, irony aims to express a critical or dissociative attitude to two kinds of content:

- an (actual or possible) utterance or thought attributed to another individual;<sup>19</sup>
- a representation with a conceptual content (cultural, moral and social expectations or norms).<sup>20</sup>

Let's consider the two following utterances:

- (9) The party was fun (said after a boring party);  
 (10) As I reached the bank at closing time, the bank clerk helpfully shut the door in my face.

According to Relevance Theory, (9) and (10) are *echoic allusions* to utterances or thoughts attributed to another individual. In (9) the speaker is not asserting that the party was fun, but expressing her reaction to an utterance or thought she

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to remember that Grice, too, claims that irony is related to a dissociative or contemptuous attitude: "irony is intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation. I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt" (Grice, 1978/1989: 54). Contrary to Relevance Theory, Grice doesn't develop his analysis of irony along this intuition.

<sup>19</sup> Notice that the experiments in Jorgensen et al. (1984) have shown that irony is easier to understand when there is an explicit prior utterance that the speaker is echoing.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Wilson and Sperber 2012: 142: "Norms, in the sense of socially shared ideas about how things should be, are always available to be ironically echoed when they are not satisfied. People should be polite, smart, handsome, actions should achieve their goal, the weather should be good, the prices should be low, and so on. So, when these norms are not satisfied, utterances such as 'She is so polite!', 'That was smart!', 'What a handsome man!', 'Well done!', 'Nice weather!' 'This is cheap!' and so on are readily understood as ironical because they echo a norm-based expectation that should have been met".

attributes to someone else (or to herself at another time), a group or people in general – and which she suggests is false or inappropriate. The speaker expresses a dissociative, critical or mocking attitude: she is suggesting that the expectation that the party would be fun – entertained by someone else, or herself at another time – was ridiculously false. In (10) only the word ‘helpfully’ is used in an echoic and dissociative way: the speaker commits herself to the assertion that as she reached the bank at closing time, the clerk shut the door in her face, but not to the claim that the clerk’s behavior was helpful. The word ‘helpfully’ here echoes not an utterance or a thought, but a representation with a conceptual content, a social expectation or norm (the expectations we entertain about offices, clerks and cooperative behaviors).

It is important to underline that in attributive uses (hence in echoic and ironical uses) the speaker isn’t using, but only *mentioning*, the attributed utterance or thought, or part of it, or some of its constituents. As a consequence, attributive uses are constrained by considerations of faithfulness rather than truthfulness: “the thought that is the object of the ironical attitude need not be identical to the proposition expressed by the ironical utterance but may merely resemble it in content” (Wilson, 2006a: 1736).<sup>21</sup>

In the next section I will extend Wilson and Sperber’s analysis of echoic and ironical uses to appropriated uses of slurs.

## 5. Community uses: a proposal

My proposal is to extend the Relevance Theoretic echoic account to community uses of slurs: in appropriation, in-groups echo derogatory uses in ways and contexts that make it manifest their dissociation from the offensive contents expressed or conveyed by slurs. In many contexts the effect is ironical (as Relevance Theory interprets it): the speaker attributes utterances or thoughts to other individuals, or people in general, in order to express a critical or mocking attitude.

Let’s consider an example of friendship context – where in-groups use a slur non-offensively in order to express a sense of intimacy and solidarity, with no conscious political or social intent (contexts A.). Imagine two gay friends, Al and Bob, talking about a new colleague, Tom; Al utters

(11) I’m sure Tom is a faggot.

With a non-derogatory use of the slur ‘faggot’, Al isn’t echoing an attributed utterance or thought, but a representation with a conceptual content – a cultural, moral or social norm stating that homosexuals deserve derision or contempt. Moreover, Al is informing Bob of his own reaction to this homophobic norm: the attitude expressed is dissociative (mockery, criticism or rejection). Al is suggesting that the utterance/thought/idea that homosexuals deserve derision or contempt is ludicrously false, inappropriate or shameful.

Let me underline once more two points. First of all, my proposal isn’t committed to postulating, in the context of utterance, the *actual* presence of an utterance or thought to be echoed by the speaker. With an utterance of (11), Al is echoing a social norm we may assume is represented in our mind; as Wilson, 2006a: 1735 claims, “Cultural norms are widely represented in human minds, and are always available for ironical echoing”. Second, the echoic proposal isn’t committed to attributing the *same* dissociative attitude to all in-groups: the reactions may range from playful puzzlement to powerful condemnation, from joyful mockery to harsh rejection, and so on.

My echoic account faces some objections: in what follows I will try to address the most serious ones.

1) Many community uses seem not to be attributive uses at all, but qualify as descriptive uses. By uttering (11), Al isn’t mentioning an utterance or thought attributed to another individual, but representing a state of affairs – the one expressed by the neutral counterpart

(12) I’m sure Tom is a homosexual.

However, I said earlier (§ 4) that it is possible to use a single word in an echoic and dissociative way, as in the case of ‘helpfully’ in (10): in that example the speaker was committing herself to the assertion that as she reached the bank at closing time, the clerk shut the door in her face, but not to the claim that the clerk’s behavior was helpful. Likewise, by uttering (11) Al is committing himself to the assertion in (12), but not to the offensive content expressed or conveyed by the slur ‘faggot’.

<sup>21</sup> As is well known, there are alternative accounts of irony. The most promising regards irony as a type of pretense: the speaker ‘makes as if’ to perform a certain speech act, expecting her addressee to recognize the mocking or critical attitude behind it. While many scholars find many empirical or theoretical similarities between the echoic and the pretense accounts, Wilson and Sperber claim that they are distinguishable on both theoretical and empirical grounds, and argue convincingly for the superiority of the echoic account (see Wilson, 2006a and Wilson and Sperber, 2012, chap. 6). For reasons of space, in this paper I will attempt neither a comparison between the two accounts, nor one between the echoic view and the traditional, Gricean, account of irony.

2) Someone may further object that in (11) the speaker isn't echoing a word or a concept, as in (10), but only a *constituent* of the concept (the derogatory component). Actually Relevance Theory successfully accounts for examples where speakers echo only a component of the expressed concept. Consider the following exchange:

(13) (Jane) Look at that sweet little doggie.

(14) (Mary) That 'sweet little doggie' is the terror of the neighborhood.

(14) is used descriptively: Mary is asserting that the referent of 'that sweet little doggie' is the terror of the neighborhood, and commits herself to the truth of that assertion. Only the description 'that sweet little doggie' is used in an echoic way, with a critical attitude: the dissociation produces the ironical effect. Wilson suggests considering the description, and the concept it expresses, as if occurring within quotation marks. Mary could choose to make explicit her echo to and her dissociation from a description attributed to someone else (Jane) by uttering:

(15) That 'sweet little doggie', as you – absurdly – call it, is the terror of the neighborhood.<sup>22</sup>

In a similar vein, in (11) both the echo to a representation with a conceptual content and the dissociative attitude are tacit, to be gathered only from context, facial expression, tone of voice or other paralinguistic clues. At other times, AI could make explicit the echo to a social norm, by uttering:

(16) I'm sure Tom is a 'faggot', as people say.

AI may also make clear his dissociative attitude, by uttering

(17) I'm sure Tom is a 'faggot', as the damn homophobes say:

in (17) AI is making explicit his reaction to the homophobic social norm – suggesting that it is unfair and contemptible.

Interestingly enough, Hornsby herself makes reference to cases where a word is both used and mentioned, as in:

(18) That film was wicked.<sup>23</sup>

In a conversation with a teenager, a grown-up may utter (18) descriptively: the speaker asserts that the film is a good one, and commits herself to the truth of the assertion. Only the slang term 'wicked' is used in an echoic way, not necessarily with a dissociative attitude: the adult speaker could be trying to look younger, or cool. If the attitude is dissociative (the speaker could express it with her tone of voice or facial expressions), the use will be not only echoic, but also ironical. Again, we may make explicit both the echo to teenage slang, by uttering:

(19) That film was 'wicked', as teenagers say,

and the dissociative attitude, by uttering:

(20) That film was 'wicked', using a ghastly teenage expression.

3) Another potential objection is that my account seems compatible only with semantic strategies, and apparently not with pragmatic ones. Again, we may find a reply in the Relevance Theory analysis of echoic uses. Wilson (2007), § 4 envisages the possibility of echoing conversational implicatures, as in the following exchange:

(21 a) (Peter) I think I'll have another gin.

(21 b) (Mary, warningly) I wouldn't, if I were you.

(21 c) (Peter, sarcastic) Oh, right, I agree, I'm getting drunk.

Peter isn't asserting (21 c): he is echoing an utterance attributed to Mary. Mary, though, didn't explicitly assert, but only implicitly conveyed, the echoed utterance.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Wilson (2006b), § 3: "Understanding Mary's utterance in (14) would involve turning a regular (descriptively-used) concept into an attributive concept by the addition of something like quotation marks, and recognizing that Mary was quoting and dissociating herself from a description attributed to someone else (here, Jane)".

<sup>23</sup> Hornsby (2001, p. 130n): "I acknowledge that words may be simultaneously used and mentioned".



I claim that Wilson's remarks concerning conversational implicatures may be easily extended to conventional implicatures. Imagine a conversation between Peter and Mary about a new colleague:

(22 a) (Peter) How do you like the new lecturer?

(22 b) (Mary) Good looking, but far from stupid.

(22 c) (Peter, with an ironical tone of voice) Oh, right, I agree, good looking people are usually stupid.

Peter isn't asserting (22 c): he is echoing an utterance attributed to Mary. Mary, though, didn't explicitly assert, but only conventionally implicated, the echoed utterance.

The same goes for presuppositions. Consider the following exchange:

(23 a) (Peter) It was my mother who solved all our money problems.

(23 b) (Mary, with an ironical tone of voice) It is well known that all our money problems are solved!

Mary isn't asserting (23 b): she is echoing an utterance attributed to Peter. Peter, though, didn't explicitly assert, but only presupposed, the echoed utterance.

If my arguments are conclusive, an echoic treatment of community uses of slurs seems compatible with the pragmatic perspective, which states that the derogatory content of a slur doesn't contribute to the truth-conditions of the sentence containing it, but is merely conveyed in context – as a presupposition, a conventional or a conversational implicature. By uttering (11), Al is committing himself to the truth of the assertion in (12), and merely echoing the offense conveyed by the slur 'faggot' (with a presupposition, a conventional or a conversational implicature), expressing at the same time an attitude of dissociation or disdain.

4) One last point: current uses of 'queer' or 'gay' have apparently lost any hint of echo or irony. The reason is that for these two words – but not for 'faggot' in (11) nor for 'nigger' – the appropriation process is already over: the non-derogatory uses of 'queer' or 'gay' are currently open to out-groups too (as in the expressions 'Queer Studies' or 'Queer Theory'). At the end of the appropriation process – that is *diachronically* – we may say that the meaning of 'queer' and 'gay' has changed (semantic perspective) or that the words no longer convey offensive presuppositions or implicatures (pragmatic perspective).<sup>24</sup>

## 6. Advantages of the echoic theory of community uses

In the previous section, I have shown that my echoic account is compatible with the semantic and the pragmatic perspectives, that is with strategies of treatment of slurs in terms of content (expressed or conveyed). In so doing I have replied to one of the main objections of Anderson and Lepore against semantic and pragmatic accounts, without postulating a change of meaning in appropriated uses.<sup>25</sup> As a matter of fact, content based accounts seem to be bound to claim that the slur 'faggot' is ambiguous between a derogatory meaning (in out-groups uses) and a non-derogatory meaning (in in-groups uses), but they fail to explain why out-groups cannot pick the non-offensive meaning.

In this section, I will argue that my echoic account actually fares better than alternative theories (especially than the deflationary perspective) on a number of criteria.

- I. First of all, the echoic account explains why appropriated uses are in principle open only to in-groups. As a matter of fact, an ironical use requires a context where the dissociation from the echoed offensive content is clearly identifiable: *ceteris paribus*, in-group membership is *per se* strong evidence that the exchange takes place in such a context. As Croom points out, "the more features that the interlocutors share in common, such as common speech patterns, race, sex, socioeconomic class, etc., – and thus the more points in which the interlocutors can be regarded as fellow in-group members – the less likely it would be that derogation would occur between them" (Croom, 2013: 193).<sup>26</sup> The

<sup>24</sup> Jeshion ms, § 4, presents a similar distinction between the *outcome* of the appropriation of a slur and the *process* by which a slur comes to be appropriated; see also her notion of 'Pride Appropriation'. On this point, cf. Predelli (2013, chap. 6).

<sup>25</sup> As I have mentioned, there is a change of meaning only diachronically, at the end of the appropriation process.

<sup>26</sup> Among the features indicating the likeness of the slur being used in a non-derogatory way, Croom focus on in-group membership and sameness of communicative medium and style: "Several markers that aid in the interpretation of slurs as being used non-derogatorily rather than derogatorily include sameness of target features (e.g., members of the same racial in-group using the relevant racial slur between each other, members of the same sexual in-group using the relevant sexist slur between each other, etc.) as well as sameness of communicative medium and style (e.g., members both communicate in the same language and speech style, such as AAVE, etc.)" (Croom, 2013: 200).

crucial point is that out-groups lack *unmistakable* public means of making their dissociative attitude manifest. Even when their addressees know their non-racist or non-homophobic opinions, bystanders and eavesdroppers (especially if they are members of the target group) may mistake an echoic (ironic) use for a derogatory one. This also explains why even in-groups usually refrain from community uses when in public – when their membership to the group target is not immediately evident: even two gay friends usually avoid uttering in public sentences like (11).

- II. Second, my proposal explains the fact that in-groups may sometimes use offensive terms to derogate their own group (on occasion gays may use 'faggot' in a derogatory way to express or convey contempt) – a phenomenon mentioned, but not accounted for by Anderson and Lepore, and difficult to reconcile with a deflationary strategy. When slurring her own group, an in-group member must make manifest her (even temporary) endorsement of the derogatory content (expressed or implicitly conveyed) of the slur. In my opinion these cases may be conceived in two different ways: a. as descriptive (non-echoic) uses, equivalent to the usual offensive uses by out-groups; b. as echoic uses, with an attitude of endorsement (non-dissociative).<sup>27</sup> The tricky point is that it could be difficult for in-groups to make explicit their endorsing attitude – mirroring the difficulties underlined for out-groups in I. Such an attitude must be made explicit with a particular – say, contemptuous – facial expression, gesture, tone of voice, or other paralinguistic clues.
- III. Third, my proposal accounts for the fact that appropriated uses may eventually extend to out-groups. Anderson and Lepore envision this very extension, but for mysterious reasons: why should an embargo admit escape clauses, and why should it open to out-groups? The hope that an embargo may, in time, soften the offensive potential of slurs seems even more mysterious to me: silentists' drastic prohibitions cannot but emotionally charge expressions banned from the language.<sup>28</sup> In my view, on the contrary, highly controlled conditions and selected speakers create contexts making the out-groups' open and public dissociation from derogatory contents (expressed or conveyed) self-evident. Just think of the academic community, which was first to start using the term 'queer' in ways authorized by the homosexual community, or white kids using 'nigga' toward each other – where their respect for the hip-hop culture is made manifest by a way of dressing, walking and talking.<sup>29</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of my paper was to offer an account of appropriated uses of slurs compatible with content based strategies. In my proposal appropriated uses are conceived as echoic, in Relevance Theory terms: in-groups echo derogatory uses in ways and contexts that make manifest the dissociation from the offensive content. In so doing I have provided a reply to one of the main objections of the deflationary strategy against semantic and pragmatic perspectives, without postulating counter-intuitive changes of meaning in appropriated uses. I have shown that the echoic proposal has interesting advantages over alternative accounts, and replied to potential objections. I have mainly argued against the silentist policy endorsed by Anderson and Lepore, for it gives an inadequate and incomplete account of community uses. As I conceive it, the aim of appropriated uses does not amount (synchronically) to *deleting* the slurs' explicit meaning (semantic perspective) or their implicit meaning (pragmatic perspective), nor to getting around the prohibition surrounding them (deflationary perspective): appropriation is the practice of reclaiming from racists, homophobes and misogynists powerful tools of discrimination by subverting their meaning. Community uses do not erase hateful and contemptuous meanings, but keep evoking them in contexts where the speakers' dissociation from derogatory contents is manifest; only in time the appropriated uses stabilize. Of course, this practice is in principle available only to in-groups, but when it is sufficiently widespread it may extend also to selected out-groups, and affect – diachronically – the slur meaning (expressed or conventionally conveyed). Such virtuous process is attested by the evolution of 'queer' and 'gay', two words that have once again become 'useful'.<sup>30</sup>

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Marco Santambrogio, Giuliano Torrenzo and Sandro Zucchi, and especially Stefano Predelli and Nicola Spotorno for extensive discussion. Thanks also to Adam Croom for providing very useful bibliographical suggestions, and to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

<sup>27</sup> My preference goes to b.: I find it implausible that in-groups slur their own group without echoing the racist or homophobic norms they in some way *pretend* to endorse.

<sup>28</sup> The empirical results presented in Galinsky et al. (2013) suggest that self-labeling with a slur can weaken the slur's derogatory force: "We propose that self-labeling with a derogatory group label may ironically weaken its stigmatizing force and even revalue it, transforming the very words designed to demean into expressions of self-respect. In essence, self-labeling with a stigmatizing group label may facilitate reappropriation, the process of taking possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce a stigmatized group's lesser status" (Galinsky et al., 2013: 1).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Croom (2013: 191). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this example of out-group non derogatory use.

<sup>30</sup> Simultaneously echoing and subverting Hornsby's expression.

## References

- Anderson, Luvel, Lepore, Ernest, 2013a. *Slurring words*. *Nous* 47 (1), 25–48.
- Anderson, Luvel, Lepore, Ernest, 2013b. *What did you call me? Slurs as prohibited words*. *Analytic Philosophy* 54 (3), 350–363.
- Anonymous, 1990. *Queers Read This* <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this> (accessed 07.02.14).
- Camp, Elisabeth, 2013. *Slurring perspectives*. *Analytic Philosophy* 54 (3), 330–349.
- Croom, Adam, 2011. *Slurs*. *Language Sciences* 33, 343–358.
- Croom, Adam, 2013. *How to do things with slurs: studies in the way of derogatory words*. *Language & Communication* 33, 177–204.
- Croom, Adam, 2014. *The semantics of slurs: a refutation of pure expressivism*. *Language Sciences* 41, 227–242.
- Culpeper, Jonathan, 1996. *Towards an anatomy of impoliteness*. *Journal of Pragmatics* 25, 349–367.
- Dummett, Michael, 1973. *Frege's Philosophy of Language*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Galinsky, Adam, Wang, C., Whitson, J., Anicich, E., Hugenberg, K., Bodenhausen, G., 2013. *The reappropriation of stigmatizing labels: the reciprocal relationship between power and self-labeling*. *Psychological Science* 1–10, published online 16 August 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0956797613482943>.
- Goffman, Erving, 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. Doubleday Anchor, New York.
- Grice, Herbert Paul, 1978. *Further notes on logic and conversation*. In: Cole, P. (Ed.), *Syntax and Semantics 9: Pragmatics*. Academic Press, New York. Now in Grice 1989, 41–57, pp. 113–127. Now in Grice 1989, 41–57.
- Grice, Herbert Paul, 1989. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Hom, Christopher, 2008. *The semantics of racial epithets*. *Journal of Philosophy* 105, 416–440.
- Hornsby, Jennifer, 2001. *Meaning and uselessness: how to think about derogatory words*. In: French, P., Wettstein, H. (Eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXV. pp. 128–141.
- Jeshion Robin ms. *Dehumanizing slurs*.
- Jorgensen, Julia, Miller, George, Sperber, Dan, 1984. *Test of the mention theory of irony*. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 113, 112–120.
- Kaplan, David, 1999. *The Meaning of ouch and oops: explorations in the theory of meaning as use*, UCLA.
- Kennedy, Randall, 2003. *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. Vintage, New York.
- Leech, G., 1983. *Principles of Pragmatics*. Longman, London.
- Mey Jacob, L., 1985. *Whose Language? A Study in Linguistic Pragmatics*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam & Philadelphia.
- Mey Jacob, L., 1994. *How to do good things with words: a social pragmatics for survival*. *Pragmatics* 4 (2), 239–263.
- Mey Jacob, L., 2001. *Pragmatics: An Introduction*, second ed. [1993] Blackwell Publishers, Oxford & Malden, Mass.
- Mey Jacob, L., 2012. *Anticipatory pragmatics*. *Journal of Pragmatics* 44 (5), 705–708.
- Potts, Christopher, 2007. *The centrality of expressive indexes. Reply to commentaries*. *Theoretical Linguistics* 33 (2), 255–268.
- Potts, Christopher, 2008. *The pragmatics of conventional implicature and expressive content*. In: Maienborn, C., Portner, P. (Eds.), *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin.
- Predelli, Stefano, 2010. *From the expressive to the derogatory: on the semantic role for non-truth-conditional meaning*. In: Sawyer, S.A. (Ed.), *New Waves in Philosophy of Language*. Palgrave-MacMillan, New York, pp. 164–185.
- Predelli, Stefano, 2013. *Meaning Without Truth*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Rahman, Jacquelyn, 2011. *The N word: its history and use in the African American community*. *Journal of English Linguistics* XX (X), 1–35.
- Richard, Mark, 2008. *When Truth Gives Out*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Williamson, Timothy, 2009. *Reference, inference and the semantics of pejoratives*. In: Almog, J., Leonardi, P. (Eds.), *The Philosophy of David Kaplan*. Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 137–158.
- Wilson, Deidre, 2006a. *The pragmatics of verbal irony: echo or pretence?* *Lingua* 116, 1722–1743.
- Wilson, Deidre, 2006b. *Attributive uses of concepts*. *ISSUES IN PRAGMATICS (PLIN M301) 2006-07* <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/psychlangsci/research/linguistics/lexicalpragmatics/Lectures/Lectures/lex8> (accessed 10.05.13).
- Wilson, Deidre, 2007. *Where does irony come from?*, *PRAGMATIC THEORY (PLIN2002) 2007-08*, ms.
- Wilson, Deidre, Sperber, Dan, 2012. *Meaning and Relevance*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

**Claudia Bianchi** (Ph.D. at the CREA – École Polytechnique, Paris) teaches *Philosophy of Language and Cognition and Communication* (graduate course) at the University San Raffaele, Milan. Her latest authored work is *Pragmatica cognitiva. I meccanismi della comunicazione* (Laterza, Roma-Bari 2009), and her most recent edited book is *The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction* (Stanford, CSLI, 2004). She is a member of the Scientific Board of the Center for Experimental and Applied Epistemology (CRESA), and of the Editorial Board of the journal *Epistemologia*. Her main research interest lies in the field of Pragmatics and Cognitive Pragmatics.