Pejorative Tone
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1. Introduction

Our utterances say how things are, but they can also display who we are, show how we think, and hint at how we feel. No catalogue of mechanisms can account for all the insights that utterances can prompt; speakers exploit whatever means they can invent. Cognitive scientists often celebrate the creativity at play in these diverse effects, but this creativity has its dark side, too. Speakers are no less flexible with utterances that prompt ways of thinking others find reprehensible.

In this chapter, we consider slur terms as an illustration of the diversity and complexity of such interpretive effects. Our view is that such effects can reflect expansive, open-ended engagement with an utterance and its linguistic meaning, through a host of distinctive kinds of reasoning. This reasoning may include inferences about the speaker's psychology and her intentions—in light of the full social and historical context—but it may involve approaching the utterance through strategies for imaginative elaboration and emotional attunement, as required, for example, for metaphor, poetic diction, irony, sarcasm, and humor. In the face of their heterogeneity and open-endedness, these interpretive strategies are most perspicuously elucidated through critical attention to the psychological, social, historical and even artistic considerations at play in specific cases. Thus, in contrast to the common practice in philosophy and linguistics, we will not offer a general account of the interpretation of slur terms. We think there can be no such thing.

Readers may recognize the appeal to diverse kinds of imaginative engagement from our earlier work (Lepore and Stone 2015, 2016), and its explanations of the insights that utterances can prompt. This chapter brings a less optimistic take: Unfortunately, but inevitably, interpretive strategies can also provoke states hearers find objectionable. More precisely, we raise the possibility that uses of particular slur terms invite particular interpretive strategies—strategies that are not part of their meanings but that can sometimes be crucial for understanding part of what is objectionable about them.

One way to approach this suggestion is through Frege's discussion of tone. For Frege, 'dog' and 'cur' agree in meaning but each "puts us...in mind" of different associations. For example, anyone who uses 'cur' "speaks pejoratively, but this is not part of the thought expressed" (Frege 1897, 140; cf. also, Picardi 2007). Here, Frege offers a famous statement of the view that we will elaborate, that interpretive differences need *not* be due to differences in meaning. However, this view must be developed and amplified to give a satisfying account of the interpretation of slur terms. For, as Hom (2008) emphasizes, Frege's remarks on tone offer no explanation of the difference between pejoratives and their neutral counterparts; and, as Anderson and Lepore (2013b) argue, differences in tone cannot be the whole story.

Our view is that tone is best seen as a catchall description of interpretive effects that go beyond meaning in language: effects that are heterogeneous in origin, open-ended and often non-propositional. We make no claim that this is Frege's view of tone. Indeed, it probably is not, since one way of summarizing our view is that tone is not a coherent theoretical category: the alleged tone of different terms has different sources and different consequences. Nevertheless, if our view turns out to be correct, then we will acquire a set of reasons for maintaining a broadly Fregean position, and *not* thinking of tone—in particular, the various kinds of pejorative tone that slurs might exhibit—as a remnant or residue of meaning. This conception of tone underwrites our rejection of the common view that it is the linguistic meaning of slur terms that makes them objectionable.

We present this account of tone in a way that we believe complements the *Prohibitionist* view of slur terms proposed by Anderson and Lepore (2013a,b). Anderson and Lepore (2013a,b) argue that the *only* distinctive status in language that slurs as a class share is that it is prohibited to use them—if relevant authorities catalogue a word as a slur term, any utterance of the term is a violation, and potentially objectionable and offensive.[1] In §2, we introduce and amplify on Prohibitionism, to set the stage for our broader investigation into meaning and tone. In particular, we endorse Anderson and Lepore's arguments against the view that the offense of slur terms derives from objectionable contents.

Critics have found Prohibitionism unsatisfactory. Surely, the thinking goes, there are reasons why these prohibitions against slurs are in place: in some cases, at least, it seems that we ban a term as a slur because something is wrong with it—not the other way around. The worry can be fleshed out into a variety of apparent difficulties for Prohibitionism. For example, mere prohibition by itself fails to distinguish slur terms from other sorts of banned terms, e.g., from profanity (Camp 2013, p. 343). And even after narrowing the discussion to slurs, Prohibitionism still seems inadequate to account for the rhetorical power of slurring on its victims and witnesses (Camp 2013, p. 343). Indeed, slurs themselves seem to vary greatly in the force of the offense with which they are received. To say that slurs are prohibited—and no more—leaves all these matters unexplained.

The obvious alternative is that the meaning of slurs is somehow demeaning. According to such a view, the varied semantics of slurs is what prompts us to avoid them, what distinguishes their offense from that of mere profanity, and what locates uses of slurs on a scale of repugnance. However, we think this suggestion cannot be substantiated. Though linguistic meaning takes a wide variety of forms, none of them can accommodate the potential demeaning force or effect of slurs. Anderson and Lepore (2013a,b) have already

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[1] As Anderson and Lepore (2013a) observe, this may be the best definition of slur terms we can offer. Note that the prohibition has the status of a moral judgment, not a legislative edict. It requires a certain amount of consensus (thus, Anderson and Lepore note that Jesse Jackson's understanding of 'black' as a slur term didn't catch on), but once accepted it is taken to apply universally—and retroactively.

made this case, but here we take it further. We argue in §3 that *none* of the differences in Fregean *tone* that we find among synonyms can be captured through semantical means.

Meaning, however, is not the only property of slurs that we can appeal to in explaining their prohibition and offense. Prohibitionism does *not* rule out that slurs are associated with objectionable tones. In fact, critics have generally failed to appreciate the range of available options that remain open for distinguishing the interpretive effects that words bring about even when those words are identical in linguistic meaning. We continue in §4.1 by considering the diverse ways linguistic items might come to be associated with problematic tones, even on a Prohibitionist theory of slurs. The objectionable effects associated with negative tone both reinforce the challenge to semantic theories of slurs, and point to a deeper explanation of slurs' power to offend. Our discussion of tone would not be complete without a comparison to the most closely related philosophical proposals, and a defense of the distinction between meaning and interpretation that differentiates our approach—we make the case in §4.2, and offer some general concluding remarks in §5.

2. *Prohibitionism*

We begin with the obvious: many institutions do prohibit certain kinds of expressive behavior. Profanity, for example, is out in many contexts. Much of parental instruction involves seeing that the taboo against these words is respected. Adults are expected to know that the ban applies.

> Mary: Shit!
> Parent (ostentatiously glancing at Child for Mary's benefit): Careful!

Children are explicitly instructed, but in ways that respect the ban.

> Child: Aunt Mary said "Shit!"
> Parent: That's a bad word. You shouldn't say it either.

This prohibition is observed throughout American culture. Broadcast media censor utterances of profanity by overdubbing the audio track with a bleep sound. And the US broadcast regulator, the FCC, can and does impose legal penalties against "indecency" in broadcasts—a category of offense that, in addition to "wardrobe malfunctions", is generally understood to include objectionable language.

Slurs, especially the strongest ones, seem to have the same kind of prohibition against them. And the fact that such a prohibition applies, as we shall see, can help us appreciate the kinds of reactions speakers sometimes have to utterances of slur terms. For example, quotation generally allows a speaker to distance herself from a negative description on the way to neutralizing or rejecting it: 'That so-called "mangy cur" is actually Sandy's prize Chinese crested dog.' But, even when the speaker objects to a slur, an utterance that repeats it remains offensive. This is what Prohibitionism predicts. Observe that when a term is prohibited, it enjoins any utterance of a term, no matter what semantic or

grammatical role the term fulfills. Prototypically, the Biblical commandment "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain" (Exodus 20:7 KJV) is understood to rule out use and mention alike. The same goes for the taboo against profanity, as we see with the Parent–Child dialogue. Likewise, Lepore and Anderson (2013a,b) suggest, for the prohibition on slurs.

Let us elaborate on this point, since it encapsulates a key argument in favor of Prohibitionism (Lepore and Anderson 2013b). In many contexts, a quoted expression is semantically *inert*. Accordingly, there is no need to access or interpret its content. For example, the predicate 'is nine letters long'—as in '"semantics" is nine letters long'—is such a context. The proposition encoded with an instance of this predicate depends just on the form of the quoted expression presented. Meaning is irrelevant. In fact, the expression need not even *have* a meaning, as we see in the example '"cromulent" is nine letters long'. Nevertheless, even in these quoted contexts where meaning is inert, slurs, profanity and the like remain just objectionable as always. Try it for yourself, with your favorite bad word and a predicate like 'has an even number of letters'. This alone establishes that the offensiveness of slur terms does not derive from what the terms contribute semantically to utterances containing them—however this notion is encoded or conveyed.

Many philosophers deny that the prohibition against slur terms is as thoroughgoing as Lepore and Anderson suggest. For example, Hom (2008) and Camp (2013) acknowledge our discomfort with slurs, but they suggest that the taboo against slurs reflects the psychological difficulty and the linguistic challenge of resisting the repugnant meanings that slurs encode. Nevertheless, there are, they claim, situations and formulations where it is appropriate, and not offensive, to token slurs in utterances that take issue with them. (See Hornsby 2001, Potts 2005, and Williamson 2009 for similar judgments about the acceptability of slurs under quotation.) By contrast, Lepore and Anderson (2013b, 7) caution that the context of philosophical theorizing and debate might itself invite particularly generous intuitions about the acceptability of slurs. As a matter of fact, the *New York Times* and every major broadcast network *do* categorically forbid occurrences of slurs, whether used, quoted or otherwise mentioned—and they seem to do so because the alternative could be deemed offensive.

That said, prohibitions can arise in all sorts of ways; accordingly, violating prohibitions can have all sorts of consequences. The prohibition against profanity does seem to be in place, at least in part, because of what such items refer to. There are matters that are too abject—or too awesome—to name. We have to describe them indirectly if we are to keep a polite focus on our personal concerns. At one extreme, naming shit can be too awkward a reminder of the necessities of life for courteous discussion. Better to describe it as 'waste' or 'excrement': the results of that unfortunate process. At the other extreme, to utter the Hebrew tetragrammaton presumptuously claims a grasp of the absolute that in

fact escapes us.[2] To postulate a semantic origin for the prohibition against profanity comports with the limits of the prohibition. A group of well-acquainted adults can generally opt out of the prohibition against profanity, as an indication of their honesty and authenticity. (Or, as, Camp 2013 p. 347 admits, "there are occasions on which I myself token them, because I take it that conditions are such as to warrant their use".) In the same circumstances, comedians—famously George Carlin—can feel comfortable ridiculing the prohibition as prudish and hypocritical.

Slurs are not prohibited for such straightforward reasons. The alternative to a slur is a neutral name, not a circumlocution or a euphemism. In fact, using a description like 'those people' might be just as offensive in the contempt it indicates for a target group. (Lepore and Anderson 2013b highlight this contrast between slur terms and the action of slurring.) A comedian who utters a slur aims to derive humor from undermining the fairness and inclusivity his audience might normally identify with or aspire to, not just from mocking their prohibitions. Thus, it's not simply the reference of a slur term that makes it objectionable.

In fact, Lepore and Anderson (2013a, p 351) suggest that there need be *no* basis for the prohibition of a term, beyond the consensus of those the term picks out. They write

> Names are often important aspects of a group's culture, and so, it is reasonable to include the manner in which a group is referenced as a part of its right to self-determination generally.

> If this is correct, it is a short step from a right to determine whether the use of a name is permissible to one to determine whether its use is impermissible.

One of us was originally inclined to doubt that such stark considerations could comport with the felt injury of slurs. Then he remembered his personal opinion, thankfully now long outgrown, that there was no insult graver or more infuriating than being addressed as 'Matt' rather than 'Matthew'. As long as people have such preferences, words will inevitably give evidence of the respect and autonomy speakers grant them—or deny them. Semantics need not enter into the picture.

For Lepore and Anderson (2013a,b), this is the only general thing we can say about slurs. They would stop here. Their critics see a further role for the philosophy of language in explaining how the prohibitions against slurs come about. We can certainly trace the motivations for prohibitions against expressive actions in many cases. It would be surprising if similar fates could not befall words, and thereby reveal philosophically significant aspects of how we use them. Though we follow up this suggestion in this paper, we do not think it reveals any distinctive semantics for slurs.

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[2] Anderson and Lepore (2013a, 357) rightly point out that the divine name in Jewish tradition certainly picks out nothing offensive. Here, we hypothesize a broader basis for the prohibition, but still a semantic one.

In this connection, we think it is instructive to consider prohibitions against other kinds of expressive actions that are associated with histories of violence and oppression. For example, consider the German law against the display of the Swastika and other Nazi iconography, or laws against the display of burning crosses and other activities of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. The German penal code prohibits the dissemination of the propaganda of unconstitutional organizations—of which the National Socialists are one—except in certain limited circumstances involving such purposes as research or education. In the US, with its strong First Amendment protections for free expression, the relevant prohibitions must be much more closely drawn: states such as Virginia have specific statutes that, for example, prohibit cross burning that is intended to threaten or intimidate. Both kinds of laws thus acknowledge and respond to the evocative potential of the symbols in question; the prohibitions are targeted at individuals who would use these symbols to telegraph their values and terrorize their opponents. At the same time, if these symbols had the same kinds of meanings as words, no special laws would be required to ban them. There are already general prohibitions in place, against anti-democratic advocacy (in the German case) or criminal threat (in the American case), which proscribe objectionable content that seems similar in kind to what the symbols might be taken to express. These evocative symbols are treated distinctly, as though their expressive effects involve something looser and less regimented than meaning, though still powerful and important. Such effects might involve a mix of expectations, connotations, associations, analogies and more: any of the interpretive resources and strategies that we use to help make sense of expressive actions in general. And, of course, words themselves can carry the same effects, which we have been calling tone. In short, we should not be surprised if what makes some slurs objectionable is something other than their linguistic meaning.

Before we proceed, a number of cautionary notes are in order. Even if slurs carry problematic tone, we shouldn't expect to describe it in ways that are systematic and general. Many different effects may be at work within and across the different terms. Nevertheless, we may have good reasons to object to problematic tone, and to avoid expressions that carry it. Our view is that we are part of a community that has banded together to lessen the harm that slurs can exact by prohibiting their use. This is a reasonable strategy, and we accept that we are subject to it, including in this paper itself. We have tried to refrain, wherever possible, from exhibiting slurs, instead speaking allusively, especially for the racial slurs of American English, whose power we are in no position as philosophers and critics to defuse. Where we need concrete examples, we proceed not in the spirit of neutral scientific curiosity but rather with the sense of having chosen the lesser of two evils. We invite our readers to receive these examples in this spirit. For the most part, however, we motivate our discussion of tone through unproblematic cases. That's partly to avoid offense, but there's another important reason as well.

If, as we suggest, tone is heterogeneous and diverse, then it's an empirical question how and why tone makes particular items problematic. Alternative items will be different. Moreover, to the extent that we judge slurs problematic for their demeaning tone, what carries weight will be the interpretive reasoning of the individuals that the slurs target. In

the first instance, they are the ones under threat. Accordingly, powerful people must be very skeptical about their intuitions about the tone of slurs that target others. Their experience may be far removed from the factors that really matter. In fact, we personally are writing this chapter largely from a position of privilege. By our standards, the slurs whose tone we are prepared to comment on in detail are few indeed. Thus, we think it will be more convincing and less contentious to avoid delineating specific examples of objectionable tone, and simply to sketch some possible ways objectionable tone might arise. So our case studies of tone are not slurs, although the mechanisms we advert to do comport with our limited exposure to slurs used against us. We invite the reader to assess them the same way. But we cannot fill in the details. We must leave it to future investigations to work out whether and how these suggestions fit particular items.

3. *The Limits of Meaning: Content versus Tone*

At the heart of the philosophical debate about slurs lies the challenge of describing the interpretive differences among near synonyms. In some cases, there seems to be something objectionable about a slur term that its neutral counterpart lacks. What could be the source of such differences in significance?

In §1 and §2, we have already hinted at our answer: such differences may be due to differences in tone. We'll say more about our positive view of tone in §4, but we've already made it clear that we view tone as a messy, heterogeneous, psychological, historical and social construct, not as a linguistic one. We expect that our critics will want to resist this account of the differences among near synonyms. Why can't we always reduce interpretive differences to suitable differences in meaning? Semanticists have a diverse array of linguistic constructs for characterizing the differences in meaning among linguistic items. We now know that meaning is much more finely articulated than Frege's austere theory of reference and sense. Surely, these are important resources for getting clear on the interpretive differences among items.

In fact, we can do a lot with these new kinds of meaning, but not everything we need. Meaning does not exhaust tone. We think the offensive tone of some slur terms is an important illustration, but it is far from the only example of tone that's hard to fit in meaning as linguists and philosophers understand it. Consider the difference between 'bloom' and 'flower' and 'blossom' as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary:

> [Of the term 'bloom'…] Not extended like 'flower' to a whole 'flowering plant', and expressing a more delicate notion than 'blossom', which is more commonly florescence bearing promise of fruit, while 'bloom' is florescence thought of as the culminating beauty of the plant. Cherry trees are said to be in blossom, hyacinths in bloom.

The words 'bloom', 'flower' and 'blossom' have several senses each, not all of which overlap. We can use 'flower' but not 'blossom' or 'bloom' to refer to some entire plants, such as tulips. We can use 'bloom' but not 'flower' or 'blossom' as a mass noun to refer to all the flowers on a plant collectively. But in their basic senses, the words pick out the same things. The difference is one of *perspective* (in the sense of Camp 2013): according to the OED, the words somehow invite you to *think* of flowers in different ways. This is

not a different in *content,* we will argue, and thus cannot be explained even in terms of the nuanced articulation of linguistic content of contemporary semantic theory.

3.1 At-issue content: The most direct way to explain differences in meaning is to give items more specific, contrasting truth conditions. For example, we might try to define 'blossom' as the flower of a plant cultivated for its fruit, or define 'bloom' as the flower of a plant at the peak of its beauty. Similarly, we might try to capture the meaning of a slur as a person who is inferior in virtue of their membership in a target group, someone who fits the ideology of racism (or another oppressive regime) and ought to be subject to its practices (Hom 2008). However, we don't find the truth-conditional differences this view predicts. Every flower can be called a blossom or a bloom, more or less evocatively but equally truly. You cannot truly claim that a flowering red maple tree is not in bloom because its beauty will not peak until the fall when its leaves are turning. You cannot truly claim that a flowering plant has no blossoms as a way of asserting that it will bear no fruit. (In fact, the ornamental cherry trees whose flowers are most often called blossoms do not always bear fruit, and when they do it is too small and sour for us to eat.) Slurs also seem to be truth-conditionally equivalent to their neutral counterparts: they simply describe membership in a target group (see Lepore and Anderson 2013b for elaboration). Differences in meaning, if they exist, must lie elsewhere.

3.2 Presupposition: Another approach is to explain differences in meaning as differences in *presuppositions*. Linguistic items are often thought, as a matter of meaning, to signal assumptions that speakers take for granted in the contexts in which utterances are used. These assumptions are known as presuppositions, and closely related items can differ in presuppositions. For example, contrast 'Chris entered the room' with 'Chris reentered the room'. The second conveys that Chris had been in the room earlier. We see that this is a presupposition by seeing that we make the same assumption with the negated utterance 'Chris didn't reenter the room' as well as the interrogative 'Did Chris reenter the room?' and even the imperative: 'Chris, reenter the room!' All of these utterances make sense only on the assumption that Chris has been in the room before.

Perhaps tone is a matter of the presuppositions of contrasting items. Perhaps the word 'blossom' presupposes that the plant in question is cultivated for its fruit; perhaps 'bloom' presupposes that the plant is at the peak of its beauty when it flowers. Perhaps a slur presupposes that the members of a target group are inferior (Schlenker 2007).

However, to encode tone as presupposition is also too strong a constraint. Normally, if the presuppositions of an utterance are false, then the utterance is semantically defective. For example, there's no way to answer whether Chris reentered the room if Chris has never been in the room before. The question doesn't arise. If anything, we are disposed to reject utterances with false presuppositions as false (see von Fintel 2001).[3] But that's not

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[3] This is one telling diagnostic that can be used to distinguish presuppositions from conventional implicatures—another dimension of not-at issue meaning with a very

how we react to utterances whose tone is not apt or appropriate. Even if we hold that red maple trees are at their height of beauty in the fall, we nevertheless still judge it to be true in the right circumstances that the speaker's maple tree is in bloom. Even if we know the fruit will be meager and unpleasant, we nevertheless judge it to be true in the relevant circumstances that the speaker's cherry tree is in blossom. Meanwhile, while we do normally reject uses of slurs, we do so because they are offensive, not because we cannot make sense of the idea the speaker aims to express. If slurs gave rise to presupposition failure, we think it would be difficult to explain the reactions speakers have to them. On the one hand, we find members of targeted groups who feel the demeaning force of slurs more sharply because they do take the terms to apply to them. On the other, we find bigots who disingenuously frame the truth of utterances formulated using slurs as a justification that excuses the offense: they are just "telling it like it is."

3.3 Conventional Implicature: A different strategy is to attribute differences in tone to conventional implicature (Grice 1989). The classic conventional implicature is the sense of contrast that distinguishes 'but' from 'and', on display in the difference between 'She is poor but honest' and 'She is poor and honest'. Potts (2005) offers a precise notion of conventional implicature that covers conventional, non-cancelable speaker-oriented commitments to content that's logically and compositionally independent of what is said in an utterance. Perhaps differences in tone amount to differences in conventional implicatures. For example, perhaps it's a conventional implicature of 'blossom' that fruit is coming, and a conventional implicature of 'bloom' that the plant is at its peak of beauty. Perhaps, as Potts (2005) and Williamson (2009) suggest, a slur carries the conventional implicature that some target group is inferior.

Even here, we think the view is too strong for typical cases of tone. The challenge comes in saying what is entailed by the speaker's commitment when she uses a term that carries a conventional implicature. With prototypical examples of conventional implicature, it seems that speakers make the same kinds of commitments as they would make with a corresponding assertion. For example, given the ordinary contrast interpretation of 'but', it would be incoherent to say 'She is poor but honest, though I don't mean to convey a contrast between honesty and poverty.' (Accordingly, Bach 1999 argues that conversational implicatures simply are secondary or incidental assertions, not a special category of contribution to conversation.) Tone, however, is not the source of commitments of this kind. It is not incoherent to say, 'The cherry trees have beautiful blossoms, though I don't mean to convey that they bring any prospect of fruit', or 'That maple has a striking bloom, though I don't mean to convey that now is the height of its beauty.' The qualified advice of the OED—with its "delicate notion", "more commonly" and "thought of"—again casts differences in tone as optional and provisional, in contrast to the typical commitments of meaning.[4] In the case of slurs, we can draw a similar

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similar interpretive profile, which, as we will see shortly, has also been suggested as a location for the problematic content of slur terms.

[4] Camp (2013, p 343) invokes this difference in support of her perspectival approach to slurs: "Whether sincerely or disingenuously, the speaker of a slur who invokes

lesson from considering the consciousness raising that is often necessary before a speaker can appreciate why some might regard the use of a particular term as offensive. Such a speaker can hardly be discovering that the word simply encodes the information that a target group is inferior.

3.4 Expressive Meaning: Another strategy is to associate tone with *expressive* meaning: content that reveals the sentiment of the speaker towards a target referent (Kaplan 1999, Potts 2007). Kaplan's discussion of the exclamations 'Oops!' and 'Ouch!' reveal them to be clear cases of expressive meaning. An utterance of 'Oops!' marks the speaker's feeling that some event has had a minor, unintended negative consequence; that of 'Ouch!' marks an experience of acute but mild pain.

A more interesting case is the expletive 'damn' as in 'The rent is too damn high!' or 'Damn good coffee… and hot!' Potts (2005) proposes that such items are expressives, but—as we observed in §2—such items are simultaneously prohibited as profanity. It is not easy to disentangle the pure prohibition from items' alleged expressive content. As we saw in §2, whenever a speaker who would normally respect the prohibition on profanity intentionally produces an utterance that violates it, she reveals that she has been unable to formulate her ideas in a way that respects the limits of propriety. She has lost her cool, in the face of sentiments that demand urgent and authentic voice. That's just what 'damn' seems to signal. It's instructive in this connection to observe that 'damn' expresses strength of feeling generally ('damn good!'), not mere antipathy; there isn't the precise judgment behind it that we find with 'Oops!' If that's all there is to our interpretation of profanity, we don't need to hypothesize expressive meaning for it: the items gain an expressive function simply as a side effect of their prohibited status and our intuitive understanding of the ways people behave in the grip of strong emotions. In short, meaning looks like the wrong way to describe such effects: we have genuinely arrived in the realm of Fregean tone.

What, then, would it mean to postulate a linguistic difference in expressive meaning to distinguish near synonyms? We'd have to find specific sentiments that prompt, and so, are revealed in, the use of specific words. Perhaps, the speaker who uses 'blossom' thereby expresses some hope for the future that the flowers arouse; perhaps the speaker who uses 'bloom' thereby expresses her appreciation of the flowers' beauty. Perhaps, the speaker who uses a slur expresses her contempt for the target group.

This proposal comports with the felt nuance of near synonyms in many contexts. However, it goes too far, we think, in elevating that nuance to the status of a linguistic rule. With core cases of expressive meaning like 'Oops!' and 'Ouch!' the rule is clear. No competent English speaker would use 'Ouch!' sincerely in reaction to a tickle, an itch, or an ache—or for that matter in response to an obvious but painless injury. This is why we take the experience of acute but mild pain to be encoded as a matter of meaning in the

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cancellation exploits the indeterminacy, open-endedness, and abstractness of perspectives to disavow any particular factual or affective commitment."

conditions for the use of the word 'Ouch!'

By contrast, the tonality of words does not constrain speakers' expressive use of language to the same degree. A rose gardener might use 'bloom' indifferently to refer to the flowers of thriving and blighted plants alike: this is a quirk of style, not ignorance of the meaning of the word. Similarly, suppose a community exclusively uses a slur in preference to its neutral counterpart, even in circumstances where their feelings toward the target group are indifferent or even positive. (Indeed, we are acquainted with many such cases.) We generally conclude that the speakers in question are insensitive, not that they use the slur term with a different meaning.

3.5 General objections. Again and again in this section, we have argued that specific kinds of linguistic rules cannot accommodate the differences in tone that we find among these near synonyms. In particular, it's a mistake to model slurs differently from their neutral counterparts with respect to any of these semantic categories. As our arguments have chipped away at semantic accounts of slurs, we think they have started to reveal principled reasons to differentiate meaning from tone. For one thing, tone, unlike meaning, doesn't straightforwardly show up in the proposition expressed in an utterance or even more generally in the commitments and attitudes of speakers. For another, tone, unlike meaning, does not seem to be a feature of language that speakers negotiate among one another and coordinate on. Indeed, tone, unlike meaning, does not seem to be something that speakers generally command in virtue of knowing their language or universally respect in their choices of linguistic behavior. We elaborate on these considerations in §4.2. In short, Frege was right: tone "is not part of the thought expressed."

There is much more to complain about with respect to content theories (see Anderson and Lepore 2013a, b for further criticism), but we conclude this section with a particularly evocative illustration of the distinction between tone and meaning: so-called reclaimed or reappropriated uses of slurs. Members of oppressed communities often adopt the slurs that target them as a strategy of solidarity and activism. Reclaimed slurs can express pride in precisely those aspects of people's identity that have been demeaned by powerful elements of the broader culture, or call attention to the politically problematic status of even comparatively neutral categories. Part of reclaiming slurs involves creating an environment in which their use is not regarded as offensive—a strategy that often meets with some degree of success. So, what changes when speakers reclaim a slur in this way?

Content theorists seem obliged to explain this as a change in linguistic meaning. But speakers have not coined a new word to replace the slur in their dialect, nor have they extended the meaning of the slur with a new sense. The reclaimed use does not simply spread from link to link in a chain like the name of a newly discovered category. It is the slur itself the speakers are reclaiming: other speakers must be convinced, other listeners educated. And for those outside the target group, it may always remain offensive to use the term. In short, to reclaim a slur is not to establish a difference in meaning but to cultivate a difference in tone.

4. Slurs and Tone

Let's drop this talk of "near" synonymy. Difference in tone is synonymy, pure and simple. Slurs in particular are identical in meaning to their neutral counterparts. As far as language goes, the only thing that distinguishes slurs is the prohibition against them.

As we noted already, in some sense, we could end here. We have nothing else general to say. But to stop now might seem to leave a mystery. How can words differ in tone if they agree in meaning? Why do these differences among synonyms arise? When and where in interpretation do the differences surface? Those used to locating interpretive differences in semantics might think these questions unanswerable on our view. In fact, the reverse is the case: there are lots of good answers to these questions—too many to enumerate. We can only give a flavor.

4.1 Sources of Tone. One source of tone is, of course, the difference in perspective the OED appeals to in distinguishing the interpretation of 'blossom' and 'bloom'. As we converse, we take on different ways of thinking about the topics of our discourse. We can think of a flower as an indication that fruit is coming; we can think of a flower as beautiful; we can think of a flower merely as part of a plant. Such perspectives, as we describe them in our discussion of metaphor in Lepore and Stone (2015), following Camp (2006, 2008, 2009), are open-ended, non-propositional psychological constructs; they don't encode information about how the world is. All flowers are parts of plants; they have all evolved to be attractive to pollinators; and all flowering plants bear fruit. The different perspectives cannot distinguish some flowers from others—but just the same these different perspectives have the power to draw our attention to different aspects of flowers and influence how we think about them. Take the speaker who says, 'Clark Kent has arrived.' She prompts different imaginings in her audience than one who says, 'Superman has arrived.' Identical situations make the two utterances true, but with the first, we can't help but imagine a nerdy, bespectacled reporter approaching on foot, whereas with the second, we imagine a muscleman descending from the air in spandex.

But could not slurs also invite a certain perspective, as Camp (2013) suggests? Shouldn't we be offended if a powerful person's use of a word invites us to delineate our thinking by the tenets of some negative stereotype, or otherwise puts disproportionate attention on a problematic conceptualization of specific members of the community? Even if a speaker avoids bigoted content, aren't we right to object to, and to resist, such bigoted tone?

Now, Camp's view is that "slurs conventionally signal a speaker's allegiance to a *derogating perspective* on the group identified by the slur's extension-determining core" (2013, p 331). We see no reason to assume that perspectival thought is implicated in all tone, or even in all slurs, however. More importantly, Camp's appeal to conventions, signaling, and allegiance (a kind of commitment) frames perspectival thought in semantic terms. As we return to in §4.2, we reject the theoretical framework she appeals to in this characterization. We prefer a psychological, causal framework. We would say only that people readily draw on perspectival thought when prompted by salient experiences,

associations, or social practices.

Another source of tone is the metaphor that grounds so many of the literal meanings of words. Normally, speakers and hearers appreciate the imaginative force lurking in dead metaphors only haphazardly, if at all. But sympathetic speakers—and sympathetic listeners—often provoke insights by taking such metaphors seriously. Here is Cathleen Schine's masterful (but somewhat tongue-in-cheek) illustration:

> I am often accused of "flying off the handle." What does that mean? It used to mean, to me, that some member of my family was insensitive, unsympathetic, uncooperative and unsupportive. Now, I see myself flying through the air, flung from the handle of an ax like a loose blade, sparkling steel cutting through the blue of the bright sky, soaring, noble and alone, toward the heavens! My life has been considerably enriched. (Schine 1993)

As Schine shows us, metaphor involves its own kind of perspective taking: we use imagery of one thing ("the vehicle", here the ax) to draw attention to analogous attributes of another ("the tenor", the speaker herself). This makes metaphor another open-ended, non-propositional psychological construct (Camp 2004), and not a semantic or pragmatic one (Lepore and Stone 2015).

But the imagery associated with metaphor—especially that of stock metaphors long elaborated in popular culture—often frustrates the listener's creative and accurate understanding of the vehicle or the tenor; the imagery trades merely in familiar stereotypes. Take 'Sandy is a gorilla.' As Max Black puts it in his influential critique of metaphor (1955), to understand this utterance isn't so much a matter of applying one's factual knowledge of the great apes (they are highly emotional and intelligent vegetarians living in close-knit family groups). The point of the utterance is to connect Sandy to a presumption that gorillas are dangerous brutes—what Black calls "a system of associated commonplaces"—that is irrevocably implicated in the imagery the metaphor invites.

What, then, when the metaphorical tone of a word is demeaning? (There are many metaphorical slurs.) However else such an utterance invites its hearer to respond, it probably embodies an invidious and ignorant comparison. Even if it's just a dead metaphor to the speaker, the audience might well be alert and sensitive to these interpretive possibilities—especially if the word applies to them. We snub such listeners if we too do not judge the word objectionable for the tone it carries.

Perspective taking and metaphor are two of many interpretive strategies that we and others have studied. Camp (2008) also considers *telling details,* evocative and affectively-laden ways to set the scene and deepen the audience's appreciation of the situation described. Lepore and Stone (2016) describe *poetic interpretation,* as, in part, an exploration of the evocative potential of the articulation of language itself. The list goes on. Repetition might reduce any of these effects to cliché—'rain' or 'falling leaves' as telling details; 'languorous' or 'brooding' as poetic sounds—or to a potential for tonality available to a sophisticated listener. But what if such tone also plays into stereotypes and prejudices—the sights and sounds which powerful people have taken as emblematic of their targets' inferiority? Shouldn't we be suspect of words whose loaded associations

evoke and perpetuate offensive imagery in such ways?

Our examples thus far have focused on imagery in language. We hope they have convinced you of the richness and diversity of tone on our view and of its relevance to the interpretation of slurs. But tone arises in other ways, some of which may be particularly important for the most threatening and repugnant slurs.

Words have histories. They evoke the people who have used them most notably. Use of those words can become a kind of quotation that summons an attitude or milieu that the speaker identifies with. Think of the hipster who adopts the vivid but now outdated slang of the 1930s and 1940s. He refers to error-prone workmen as 'numbskulls', addresses strangers in casual encounters as 'mister', or announces monetary values as so many 'clams'. The hipster's words, irretrievably tied to an extinct but influential culture, invite an ironic engagement. To catch the hipster's tone is to treat the hard-boiled Los Angeles of film noir or the slapstick New York City of Vaudeville as a model or foil for our current circumstances. As in Schine's metaphor, such attention to the nuance of language promises to assuage our everyday indignities—reframing them as vignettes in a timeless and cathartic drama.

But the history of slurs is not so innocent. Think of the Swastika and the burning cross we noted in §2. There are words whose most evocative users waged all-out war on their referents—and could have won. The link between these words and the ideologies and practices of oppression matters (Hom 2008): though in our view it is simply a historical fact, not a semantic one. Just like our hipster, speakers who use these words also take antecedent speakers as a model for our current circumstances. They threaten to resume the old wars—or invite sophisticated listeners to conclude that they might. No wonder the words they use are among the most offensive.

As with metaphor, such signs of affiliation are sometimes as much about the stories we tell ourselves, and about the expectations audiences bring to bear, as they are about the facts of history. If we take a new perspective, become acquainted with new communities and values, we can change the background we associate with the use of a word. We saw several cases of this in §3, with the expressive force of meaningless profanity and with the reclamation of slurs. Andrew O'Hehir, writing in *Salon*, explores the analogous logic of a quite different case:

> Should we stop using the adjective "niggardly," because it accidentally resembles another word?
>
> That one is instructive, in a way. Along with roughly 100 percent of the media, I thought that controversy was ludicrous when it came up in the late '90s and early 2000s: If we consult the dictionary, we learn that "niggardly" can be traced back to Middle English and Old Norse, and has no etymological connection to the racial slur. But I have to say that my perspective has since shifted. We pretty much have dumped that word, because it is so easily misunderstood and other words will do, and also because it carries a permanent taint: The only person who would conceivably use it now would be a snickering, anti-p.c. asshole trying to make an obnoxious point. Do we miss it? I submit that we don't. (O'Hehir 2015)

Such examples hint that tone is just as varied and open-ended in drawing on the historical

uses of a word as it is in drawing on a word's evocative imagery.

4.2 Tone in Interpretation. Our worry now is that we have perhaps done too good of a job making the case for tone. Tone may escape the subcategories of meaning we surveyed in §3, but it obviously exists. Why should we think that tone escapes the category of meaning altogether? Many philosophers see room for it. For example, Richard (2008) takes the kind of thought and attitude associated with slurs to be part of what's said in the utterance of a slur. Camp (2013), similarly, invokes the perspective-taking tone of slurs with the aim of uncovering *meanings* that distinguish slurs from their neutral counterparts, as well as from other slurs for the same target group.

Our thoughts on this are, in some sense, an elaboration of Frege. In describing tone—what he calls coloring or shading—he writes "… coloring and shading are not objective and must be evoked by each hearer or reader according to the hints of the poet or speaker" (Frege 1897, 30). Tone involves guesswork, and "[w]here the main thing is to approach what cannot be grasped in thought by means of guesswork these components have their justification" (Frege 1918, 22-23). In short, there's something qualitatively different between semantics—the propositional information speakers make public—and tone—the open-ended strategies speakers use to shape one another's thoughts and feelings.

This difference—between *Imagination* and *Convention*—is obviously a key theme of Lepore and Stone (2015). We refer the reader to our book for a full discussion, but we can give a brief overview of the considerations we think distinguish the two. These considerations substantiate our intuitive assessment of tone as non-semantic on theoretical grounds.

The conventional content of language, together with the collaborative rationality of all joint activity, allows interlocutors to use utterances to contribute propositional content to conversation. A key feature of this content is that it is objective and publically retrievable. For example, when we say, 'It's raining,' we normally contribute that it's raining to the conversation or least that we think it is. We might also be contributing—more indirectly—that we think our addressee should bring her umbrella. The semantics and pragmatics of discourse work together to explain how these contents are contributed. When we say, 'That was a great lecture,' contingent on the prosody we use to articulate the utterance, our audience may come away thinking we believe the lecture was great or that we are speaking sarcastically and intend to contribute "the opposite". There is a matter of some dispute over whether the latter inference is fixed by the semantics of English or the pragmatics of collaborate conversation. One way or another, we usually succeed in retrieving what our interlocutor is trying to contribute.

It's traditional to cash out this idea of retrieval of meaning in Gricean terms (Grice 1989). Meaning must be what Grice calls *calculable:* it must be capable of being worked out on the basis of (i) the linguistically coded content of the utterance, (ii) the Gricean (1989) Cooperative Principle and its maxims, (iii) the linguistic and non-linguistic context of the utterance, (iv) background knowledge, and (v) the assumption that (i)-(iv) are available to

both participants of the exchange and they are both aware of this. However, when we need to tease apart the content of utterances from the inferences that speakers merely reveal, prompt or invite, Grice's framework is difficult to apply. It is better, in our view, to focus on the distinctive role for coordination in communication, following Lewis (1969). Meaning involves a shared effort to demarcate the issues that matter and to adjudicate the answers. Multiple alternative solutions are possible, so mutual expectations are decisive in settling the meanings communicating agents agree on.

The diagnostic of coordination offers clearer grounds to distinguish tone from meaning. As Frege says, sometimes we "approach what cannot be grasped … by means of guesswork." When tone exploits listeners' stereotypes or perspectives in some domain, their creative imaginative elaboration of imagery, or the social and historical associations a term has for them, listeners draw on their personal experience, not mutual expectations. These inferences are not undermined by knowledge that the speaker might not have expected them. A common theme of our many examples of tone—blossoms and blooms, flying off the handle, falling leaves, brooding, numbskulls (and, implicitly, slurs)—has been the way that a listener's ear for language can develop a feel for an utterance that complements or even transcends the intentions of the speaker. In such cases, there need be no end to how much a listener can amplify on the point the speaker is trying to get across with her utterance—and nevertheless, the listener may never completely or fully capture the speaker's point.

That's why we think figurative speech in general goes beyond meaning. Interpreting a metaphor, for example, is an open-ended process. Someone calls Bob 'a bulldozer'. What's her point? Suppose you continue with 'Oh, yes, he often just flattens anyone who disagrees with him'. Does it follow that you have understood what the original speaker meant? Suppose she replies, 'That's a good one'—indicating that she herself had not thought of that particular framing of Bob's actions, but agrees that it captures part of the spirit of her comment. Can it still be along the lines of a correct interpretation? And if so, when does interpretation come to an end?

In short, with some conversational contributions, like metaphor, interpretation is genuinely open-ended. It's important to distinguish such open-ended contributions from the retrieval model implicit in notions of propositional content. Content, after all, by its very nature, is supposed to be publicly retrievable, something that can be shared. How could we *share* an open-ended propositional content? Regardless of how much of the content is—explicitly or implicitly—shared, it would always remain open whether we share it all. Anyway, such alignment would be quite unrealistic if each speaker's interpretive elaborations involve personal associations derived from her individual experience. Meaning is simply not the sort of thing that is supposed to be left to speakers' hints and audiences' guesswork.

Open-ended interpretive effects are nevertheless important—they "have their justification" as Frege writes. And they can be prompted by the speaker's choice of specific words. A sensitive speaker can invite a sympathetic reader to get more precise insights through any of these associations. Conversely, a hearer may run with any of

these interpretive strategies, regardless of the speaker's intent, simply because they strike her as apt or illuminating. This is tone—in its optimistic aspect. These mechanisms can also work in problematic ways—reminding us of difficult histories, revealing the speaker's prejudices, evoking upsetting situations as models for our present interactions, inviting demeaning perspectives. Such tone can be objectionable; we may prohibit the corresponding items as slurs.

5. *Conclusion*

In sum, we have argued that interpreting the use of a slur is not the same as ascribing meaning to it—whether semantic or pragmatic. Slurs can infect our judgments and shape our responses because of the particular way of thinking that they provoke. One reason slurs do this is that they are prohibited: their utterances are deliberate violations, which we cannot help but react to. But slurs, we have argued, can carry a wide range of tone and so work a wide range of effects. Nevertheless, to have any hope of distinguishing determinate propositional contributions from the guesswork of open-ended, improvised rapport, we *must* exclude tone from meaning. It is here where the boundaries of meaning are most naturally and usefully drawn. In short, slurs have no special meanings.

The traditional semantic approaches to slurs elide too much of the subtlety and sophistication of speakers' interactions with one another. Granted, people can convey meaning with language, but it would be strange if they did not use language in other ways for other purposes. Elsewhere we have suggested principled ways of distinguishing the meaningful contributions associated with utterances from their imaginative insights (Lepore and Stone 2015). And we have offered principled ways of understanding how interlocutors pursue these contributions and insights collaboratively in conversation, both to reach agreement on how things are and to share their thinking and perspectives. The approach involves more distinctions about meaning and agency than philosophers are used to making, but we think it's crucial to draw them. They are needed to reconcile ordinary intuitions about language with the rich interpretive landscape we actually live in.

It is important to emphasize that none of what we've had to say denies that slurring has a *point*. The slurring utterance is not merely an affective or expressive act that displays negative feelings for its target. However, even though an individual may intend to get something across with a slur, what the audience actually takes from it is complex and indefinite. When taking in the point of such utterances, we draw upon a particular kind of engagement with the speaker's utterance and the world she describes. We are using the speaker's language as a prompt. Such aims do not seem propositional in nature. There does not seem to be anything specific that the slurring utterance means. Any utterance can make contributions to discourse, reveal its speaker's assumptions and suggest a particular perspective on its subject matter. Recognizing that an utterance is exhibited for a certain kind of effect gives the audience's understanding a new interpretive twist.

In some cases, we can explain the prohibition of a slur in terms of such interpretive twists. In particular, the explanations of taboos against slurs found in Hom (2008) or Camp (2013) among others remain possible on our Prohibitionist view. Of course, there

are many reasons terms are prohibited (Lepore and Anderson 2013a). We need not always justify prohibitions in terms of interpretive differences. But if a term is loaded with certain kinds of tone, then a speaker who uses it, wittingly or not, foists on an audience something difficult to reject, something, after all, resistant to direct challenge. In particular, engagement with a slur potentially renders an audience complicit in the response it provokes, even when they find it repugnant. We can view the prohibition against its use is as attempt to protect an audience from the workings of their own psychology, to protect them from the potential infections slurring can cause.

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