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Fictionalist truth conditions for an expressivist semantics of slurs

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FICTIONALIST TRUTH CONDITIONS FOR AN EXPRESSIVIST SEMANTICS OF SLURS

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ABSTRACT

There are broadly two kinds of accounts of slurs: ones that place the derogation in the

content of *what is said*, or some concept associated with the words themselves, or those that

argue derogation takes places in the expression of some state of the slur-user – that derogation is

part of the *use* of the slurring words. In this paper, I argue that an expressivist account of slurs

can be combined with a semantic account in which the truth conditions of the semantic account

are fictional.

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I. A SEMANTICS OF SLURS FOR ADDRESSING MORAL OBJECTIONABLENESS

Slurs are pejorative terms used by the racist, sexist, or homophobe to derogate a group of people. Slurs derogate on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, socioeconomic status, occupation, and other social features, which are also ways that people form identities.[1] Because these terms derogate, they are morally objectionable and offensive.

One question that can be asked is why these terms are intuitively worse, and more harmful than bad words in general. Slurs, unlike some bad words, both can offend and degrade. They degrade based upon targeting social characteristics that they identify certain people as having as part of their identities. This can be contrasted with the way in which other bad words seem to degrade on the basis of behavior, and not on the basis of social features relevant to someone's identity.

Slurs share linguistic features that can be accounted for semantically. These features are that they:

(1) Derogate individuals on the basis of their perceived or self-identified membership in the relevant group.

(2) They take characteristics of self-identified or perceived groups as worthy of negative moral evaluation.

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[1] See Robin Jeshion "Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation: The Power of Expressivism" *Phenomenology and Mind* 11 (2016): 131.

(3) They express derogatory attitudes towards the targeted individuals.

(4) They have the power to make hearers feel complicit in derogation when uttered, and for this reason, they resist simple negation, like when someone merely says "No, they're not," in response to a speaker calling someone a slur. Some have argued, giving accounts of the derogation that slurs effect, that slurs can function to make hearers feel complicit in derogation. In this way, slurs can function to *sully* the hearers,[2] and so they can *damage the integrity of the hearers*.

There are broadly two kinds of accounts of slurs: ones that place the derogation in the content of *what is said*, or some concept associated with the words themselves, or those that argue derogation takes places in the expression of some state of the slur-user – that derogation is part of the *use* of the slurring words. In this paper, I argue that an expressivist account of slurs can be combined with a semantic account in which the truth conditions of the semantic account are fictional.

Robin Jeshion's expressivist account of slurs captures derogation in several ways: first, by the expression of contempt for a person that the slurrer targets – an emotion that one may or may not be aware of – and, secondly, by identifying properties about a perceived group as relevant for negative moral evaluation. And third, by designating the neutral counterpart of a slur as a truth-conditional referent for the slur taken as a noun. So, for Jeshion, Jake is a Kike if Jake is Jewish. The truth-conditional level on Jeshion's account is committed to the equivalence between slurs and their so-called neutral counterparts.

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[2] See Ralph DiFranco "Derogation Without Words: On the power of non-verbal pejoratives." *Philosophical Psychology* 30 (2017): 789.

This truth-conditional level of Jeshion's account is problematic because when neutral counterparts are truth-conditionally equivalent to slurs, it looks like it is *true* that Jake is a Kike, or following Hom and May (2018), it would be the case that "African American" is equivalent in semantic content to the N-word. That is, slurs taken as nouns having semantic content, are intersubstitutable without loss of truth with the related group-identification terms. So, this will yield that because Jake is Jewish, Jake is a kike.

Hom and May (2013) and (2018) argue that this is an incorrect analysis of the semantics of slurs. What motivates their argument is to give an account of the truth conditions of slurs as they are embedded within the relevant propositions. For this reason, Hom and May argue that it is false that Jake is a Kike if Jake is Jewish. This motivates their argument that the extensional class of slurs is null.

Thus, for Hom and May, racists or sexists demonstrate the false belief that slurs refer to material reality. Hom and May argue that what speakers are actually discussing in these cases is a mythological kind of truth, in which it is not explicit that speakers have agreed upon the fact that they are taking part in fictional talk. For Hom and May, speakers engaging in slurring language are partaking in mythology. Or, the belief that slurs are truth-conditionally equivalent to their so-called neutral counterparts can be located within a bigoted mythology.

In this way, Hom and May argue that slurs make fictional reference. Hence, Hom and May separate the intended referents of slurs, which can be mythological or fictional, from actual, or materially real referents. For example, on Hom and May's account, slurs behave analogously to how people used the term "unicorn horn" in the Middle Ages. People in the Middle Ages engaged in a mythology about unicorn horns. They believed that they existed and they were

highly prized. What were thought to be unicorn horns, however, were narwhal tusks of the Arctic whales. Thus, the terms "unicorn horns" were used to designate objects in order to speak about them meaningfully, even though what were thought to be unicorn horns were narwhal tusks.

Hom and May argue that the same thing applies to slurs. Slurs don't make successful material reference on their account, and so they don't take part in materially truth-evaluable claims. But slurs act as a part of a bigoted social mythology, and slurs have real effects on the individuals they wrongly target.

Thus, Hom and May hold that slurring words themselves are intrinsically morally bad. That no matter their effect (namely, dehumanizing) on hearers, slurs express inherently false attitudes because the meaning of the words is an expression of contempt and of negative normative judgment. So Hom and May aim to explain the semantic content of slurs, and they believe that slurring words are intrinsically derogatory because they derogate on the basis that someone is a perceived member of some group, in which a bigoted mythology will suggest that such a person – having properties perceived to be relevant for moral evaluation – "ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation because of being a G," where *G* is a any person belonging to a perceived group. Thus, Hom and May offer that the extensional class of slurs is null, and that slurs do not make materially real reference.

This can be contrasted with Jeshion's approach, who gives an account of slurs by trying to answer the question of how slurs dehumanize groups of people by both subordinating the targets of slurs, and by threatening the dignity of the individuals perceived to belong (or self-identified as belonging) to such groups. The way in which slurs dehumanize for Jeshion is *expressively*, though the use of the words to express the moral-psychological affective state of

the slurrer as being one of contempt. Slurrers, on Jeshion's account, identify characteristics about a person as worthy of contemptful moral evaluation. I argue that these expressive features of slurs explain derogation, and match up with the intuitive harm that slurs promote, but I argue that the truth conditions on Jeshion's account do not match up with the intuitive understanding of the harm that slurs do. Thus, I argue that the designational content of Jeshion's component expressivist semantics should be supplemented with a fictionalist semantics proposed by Hom and May.

I suggest that Hom and May's fictionalist truth conditions can replace a truth-conditional level of reference on Jeshion's account. This will prevent the intersubstitutability, semantically, of slurs with their neutral counterparts. Yet, Jeshion's account explains derogation in terms of use, and therefore captures the features of slurs that can be attributed to the moral responsibility of a speaker. And, Hom and May's account captures the intuition that slurs have no extensional reference class, and therefore, because of their derogatory meanings, slurs cannot be a part of true propositions. Therefore, if we combine these two accounts, we get an account of slurs that combines semantic and pragmatic features of the way in which slurs derogate people. My argument is that a combination of these two accounts will best explain the harmfulness of slurs, and also the way in which they work semantically, and in terms of their truth-conditions.

Theorists about slurs have widely-accepted the view that slurs and their neutral counterparts share the same truth conditions. That is, a neutral counterpart will designate to whom a slur refers successfully on this view.[3] So both slurring terms and their neutral

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[3] See Jeshion (2013a), (2016), (2018), Camp (2013) for proponents of this position. Hornsby (2001) has a slightly different treatment of this position, but see Jennifer Hornsby, "Meaning and Uselessness" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXV (2001): 129. See also Ralph DiFranco, "Do Racists Speak Truly? On the Truth Conditional Content of Slurs." *Thought* 4 (2015): 29-32, and Lauren Ashwell, "Gendered Slurs" *Social Theory and Practice* 42

counterparts will be truth-conditionally equivalent in propositions and statements. However, as recent philosophers of language point out, they do not appear to behave linguistically the same way as do supposedly neutral terms designating members of a group.

Take the following examples.

A: "My boss Xenia is African American."

B: "My boss Xenia is an N-word."[4]

In (B) above, merely denying the claim that "Xenia is an N-word" still leaves the conversational context as implicitly charged with the comment that is derogatory. Thus, merely saying, for example, "No, Xenia isn't" assumes that Xenia could be. Here, there remains morally objectionable content in the background of the conversational ground that the two participants have covered. Conversational ground can be thought of as conversational context. It includes all the features of a conversation that are relevant for understanding a speaker's meaning, like intonation and presupposed information. So, merely denying the claim that Xenia is an N-word implies that she could be one, if some condition or another were met. And thus, derogation is left implicit in the conversational ground in mere denial of a slur. This leads to the bigotry formation problem that Jeshion (2016) observes. This is the problem that slurs have the power to form and perpetuate bigoted beliefs.[5]

This would motivate the following claim for instance,

C: "No, Xenia is not an N-word because there are no such people as N-words, and it's not right to say or believe those things about people."

(2016): 230-231, for critiques of this position. Hom (2008), and Hom and May (2013) and (2018) also critique this position, which I discuss here.

[4] I prefer to use an abbreviated slur "N-word," since it is conventionally understood what this abbreviation means in English, and the full word can be unnecessarily harmful for my purposes.

This would be the only way to negate the presupposition that Xenia could be an N-word so long the claim were true under the right circumstances.

In the examples above, a distinction can be made between the way slurs are used. In (B), it is used to slur, whereas in (C), it is used as a report on the slurring claim in (B). The difference between these claims can be understood in terms of the use-mention distinction.[6] In (B), the pejorative is *used*, while in (C) it is *mentioned*. This suggests that there are some cases in which the moral offense of a slur wouldn't be as evident in the conversational ground covered by the speakers. For example, in reporting on the use of a slur, or in reporting about it some other way, a speaker could be free from making others complicit in derogation, if, for example, the report is necessary in conveying a relevant fact. The slur might, for example, be used in academic work, classrooms, or in legal cases. If the following claim is used in a classroom setting, the moral objectionableness is less evident.

D: "The N-word is a term that dehumanizes, and is rooted in the following abhorrent, oppressive histories…"

Here, (D) is not a case of slurring, i.e., *using a slur*, but of *mentioning* a slur. It is also important to note that, somewhat controversially, for those who are part of an appropriate group, a slur can be reclaimed. That is, with some slurs, there appear to be patterns of use that suggest there are appropriate in-group uses, and inappropriate out-group uses. For people who are not in the appropriate group, the use of the slur would be morally objectionable.

What these cases show is that slurs have the power to make hearers feel complicit in derogation. Robin Jeshion's hybrid expressivist semantics of slurs captures these features of

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[5] See Jeshion "Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation," 132.
[6] See J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

slurring language and others. One other feature that Jeshion's semantics of slurs attempts to address is to solve what the *dehumanization problem*.[7] This is the problem, Jeshion says, of how and why slurs do more than merely derogate and debase their targets, but of how they *dehumanize* their targets. To dehumanize a target is to take them as having a lower status on the dimension of personhood, and to lower their humanity in the moral sense.[8]

Jeshion argues that slurs have designational content, which means that slurs pick out a group of individuals to which they refer. They have expressive content, which can be understood as being content which conveys emotion. This content does not state or assert anything and so is not truth-evaluable. Examples of expressive content can be seen in phrases like "woohoo" and "damn," for instance. Lastly, slurs on Jeshion's hybrid expressivist semantics, have descriptive, identifying content. This content identifies properties about some group that suggests that they are deserving of moral contempt.[9] Jeshion calls this content *identifying* content because it aims to capture properties about a target, and in slurring, it negatively defines targets' social identities.[10] This content can also describe why a slur targets some group or person. A slurrer – the racist, bigot, sexist, or homophobe – takes perceived or real properties as relevant to identifying some social group and its members, and takes these properties to be relvant for negative moral evaluation, which translates to the slurrer's contempt for these individuals. Jeshion believes all three of these types of content are needed to explain why slurs dehumanize the people they are intended to target.

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[7] Robin Jeshion, "Slurs, Dehumanization, and the Expression of Contempt," in *Bad Words: Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs* ed., David Sosa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), .
[8] Ibid., 77-9.
[9] See Robin Jeshion, "Slurs, Dehumanization, and the Expression of Contempt," in *Bad Words: Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs* ed., David Sosa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 78-9, 84.
[10] Ibid., 78.

Jeshion calls this expressivist view *hybrid* because it is characterized by these components (group-designating, expressivist, and identifying). While a hybrid account like Jeshion's is needed to account properly for the linguistic behavior of slurs, Jeshions account of designational content faces a significant problem.

The problem is that the designational content suggests that slurs can refer to real individuals. That is, on Jeshion's account, a slur and its neutral counterpart will be truth-conditionally equivalent: a statement containing a slur will be true when a statement with a corresponding neutral counterpart is true. The problem with this is that it seems to imply that slurring phrases can then be true, when, for example, phrases containing group-identification terms (namely, neutral counterparts) are true. This allows that such phrases are equivalent descriptions of terms that represent various social identities. Thus, because slurs derogate and because slur-users[11] assign moral contempt to their targets, it appears fair to say that group-identification terms license moral contempt.[12] This is why it is arguable that the truth conditions of sentences containing slurs, and sentences containing group-characterizing terms should not be the same.

Take the following example of this problem from above:

A: "My boss Xenia is African American."

So we can infer in a truth-preserving way, that therefore,

B: "My boss Xenia is an N-word."

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[11] A slur-user is the racist, bigot, homophobe, or sexist who uses pejorative language to derogate people.

[12] I discuss the feature of moral contempt as a psychological state of a slurrer in section two. The psychological affective attitude of contempt for some is part of Jeshion's expressivist semantics.

In Jeshion's three-component view of the objectionableness of slurs, (A) and (B) may have different expressive and descriptive contents, but they both will be true in the same circumstances. Arguably, this is something we should try to avoid.

And from (A) and (B) we can infer;

A': "Xenia's mom thinks she is African American."

B': "Xenia's mother thinks she is an N-word."

In this way, Jeshion's three-component view allows for the same truth-conditions between slurs and supposedly neutral counterpart terms. This shows how this account might be tacitly committed to the kind of thinking that the racist person would be adhere to. If truth-conditions between a designational component and the expressive and descriptive components can differ, then the inferences in (A') and (B') would not be licensed. Ultimately, this is desirable for explaining why slurs are objectionable. Part of the reason they are objectionable is because they are thought to refer to people, when they do not, in fact, refer to anyone, as I will argue. One way to understand the thesis that slurs do not refer to anyone is in the sense that they have fictionalist truth conditions and can only fictionally refer.

Thus, I argue that the designational content of Jeshion's component expressivist semantics can be supplemented with a fictionalist semantics proposed by Hom and May instead. On Hom and May's account, the referents of slurs are fictional. On this view, slurs are used as part of a social mythology about who the individuals are that slurs represent.

In Hom and May's positon, slurs make fictional reference. Accordingly, Hom and May separate the *intended referents* of slurs, which can be mythological or fictional, from *actual*, or *materially real* referents. For example, on Hom and May's account, slurs behave analogously to

how people used the term "unicorn horn" in the Middle Ages. People in the Middle Ages engaged in a mythology about unicorn horns. Speakers believed that they existed, and they were considered to be of great value. What were thought to be unicorn horns, however, were actually narwhal tusks of the Arctic whales. Thus, the words, "unicorn horns," were used to designate objects in order to speak about them meaningfully. Yet, what were thought to be unicorn horns were, in fact, narwhal tusks. Despite this, speakers in the Middle Ages still engaged in meaningful talk about unicorn horns, and in this way, these speakers were partaking in mythology.

Hom and May argue that the same thing applies to slurs. Slurs don't make successful material reference on their account, and they don't take part in materially truth-evaluable claims. But slurs act as a part of a bigoted social mythology, and slurs have real effects on the individuals they wrongly target.

Supplementing a fictionalist account about the referents of slurs for Jeshion's designational truth-conditions would have the benefit of pairing the affective moral-psychological state of a slur-user, with the fact that the slur-user is engaging in a mythology when they believe derogatory words truthfully characterize individuals.[13] On this account, a slur-user is not insulated from moral blame: they can be criticized in two ways: (1) that they hold the evaluative attitude of contempt for some intended target of their slur, and (2), their intended targets are human beings; that there are the types of individuals to which they believe they are referring is false.

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[13] I will use the pronoun "they" as a singular usage here.

The benefit of Hom and May's account, then, is that there are no people who stand-in as the referents of slurs. Instead, the expressive content offered in Jeshion's account may be about real people, even if no real groups of people, only fictional groups are designated by slurs.

One might have the worry, however, about this account, that is absolves the slurrer from responsibility for slurring, since the reply could be made that no one can be injured by their slurring. That is, the worry is that this account insulates a slurrer from criticism since the slurrer can claim that their words are not directed at anyone. I will, however, argue that these problems can be avoided.

II. JESHION'S THREE-COMPONENT EXPRESSIVISM

Broadly, Jeshion's semantics of slurs attempt to address and solve what she calls the

dehumanization problem.[14] This is the problem, Jeshion says, of how and why slurs do more than

merely derogate, or debase their targets, but of how they *dehumanize* their targets. To

dehumanize a target is to take them as having a lower status on the dimension of personhood,

and to lower their humanity in the moral sense.[15] In this way, Jeshion demarcates different types

of dehumanization and the corresponding psychological perspectives of these types, and the way

that dehumanization then takes shape in action.[16] The question of explaining how slurs

dehumanize their targets motivates Jeshion's component expressivist semantics.

Jeshion calls this view hybrid because it is characterized by three components: a group-

designating component, an expressivist component, and an identifying component. The first

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[14] Jeshion, "Slurs, Dehumanization," 78.

[15] Ibid. 80.

[16] Ibid., 79. Jeshion distinguishes several types of dehumanization. She says that dehumanization can be understood as a psychological state: "Dehumanization thought-weak (TW)" means to conceive of humans as inferior as persons, and this means to conceive of them as inferior and "unworthy of equal standing or full respect as persons." "Dehumanization thought-strong (TS)" is to conceive of humans or human groups as less than human. Dehumanization for Jeshion can also be understood in terms of actions: "Dehumanization action-weak (AW)," is instantiated when persons treat other persons as inferior. It means to treat others as "unworthy of equal standing, or full respect as persons," and "Dehumanization action-strong (AS)," is instantiated when people treat individuals or groups as though they are less than human; as if they lack moral standing as persons. Dehumanization (AS) also involves treating humans or human groups as "creatures believed to be *evil, destructive, or a contaminating threat* to humans." (Jeshion 2018, 79). My emphasis.

component attempts to demarcate the reference class of slurs from the slurring expressions that convey contempt. The group-designating component picks out what the neutral counterpart of a slur would refer to.[17] For example, Jeshion states, "slurring terms designate a particular group, the very group that their neutral counterpart designates if in fact the slur possesses a neutral counterpart."[18] Jeshion argues that the group-designating component is the only component that contributes to the truth conditions of the relevant utterance or statement. Jeshion states, "Because it encodes exactly what its neutral counterpart does, the group-designating component contributes nothing to solving the Dehumanization Problem."[19] That is, the group designating component does not speak to how slurs dehumanize persons at which they are aimed. The *dehumanization problem*, Jeshion offers, is how slurs convey about their targets, that they are inferior persons *qua* persons.[20]

Jeshion submits that slurs dehumanize their targets by being tools of subordination and threats to human dignity. This is because slurs dehumanize by conveying that the targets have less worth as human beings. Jeshion says, "To dehumanize, slurs need not convey that targets are subhuman, creatures wholly undeserving of all respect. They need 'only' convey that targets are beneath the rest, possessing lower status along the moral domain, broadly construed."[21] So the group-designating component only picks out the class to which certain slurs would refer by a neutral counterpart. It does not address the offensiveness of slurs, and it does not address the

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[17] Jeshion, "Slurs, Dehumanization," 81.

[18] See Jeshion "Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation," 132-33. There, Jeshion also observes that some slurs may not possess a neutral counterpart. Jeshion gives an example of the term, 'hillbilly' to refer to people of poor economic status, often from rural parts of the United States (Jeshion 2011, 135). This slur does not, however, have a single neutral counterpart term.

[19] "Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation," 133.

[20] Jeshion, "Slurs, Dehumanization," 80.

[21] Jeshion, "Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation," 131.

contemptful attitudes individuals hold who use slurs. Moreover, Jeshion argues that slurring terms refer to what their neutral counterparts would refer to, prefaced by, or paired with a contemptuous intonation. Neutral counterpart terms paired with contempt-expressing adjectives, or expletives can also be the referents of slurs.[22]

Jeshion gives the example,

[1a] Jake is a Kike.
[1b] Jake is a Jew^C.
[1c] Jake is a dirty Jew.[23]

Here, the superscript, "C" will signify contemptuous intonation. The truth conditions of [1a] and [1b] are such that they will be true, if Jake is Jewish.[24] These conditions are problematic in that they suggest that slurring terms can be part of truthful claims in much of the same way as group-identification terms. That is if [1a] and [1b] are true when Jake is Jewish, the slurring claims will then characterize Jake truthfully. But this is counterintuitive. We'd intuitively want to say that [1a] and [1b] are false. Yet, that slur-user holds the moral-psychological attitude of contempt is part of the reason why they make derogatory statements. So, if we supplement the expressivist component of the objectionableness of slurs with fictional truth conditions about who slurs refer to, we get the intuitive result that slurs do not refer to types of people. Jeshion's identification component about the content of slurs, in which slurs are uttered because of a slurrer's contempt for *intended* targets can also be combined with this revised acount. In this way, [1a] and [1b] would come out false when Jake is Jewish.

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[22] Ibid., 132.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Cf. Ibid., 133.

The expressivist feature of Jeshion's account involves the expression of contempt when a person uses a slur. The expressivist feature, as I alluded to above with examples like 'damn,' and 'woohoo,' involves the expression of an emotion that a pejorative or slurring term conveys. The expressivist component of Jeshion's account will have it that slurs express contempt for the members of the group of the slur's neutral counterpart. Accordingly, the expressivist component of slurring language does not contribute to what utterances containing slurs state or declare.[25]

Instead, slurs are used as an expression of a morally evaluable attitude, which is that of contempt. Jeshion states, "With a use of a slur, a speaker expresses his attitude of contempt for members of a socially relevant group G on account of their belonging to G or having a group-defining property *g*."[26] Jeshion speaks here of the contempt a speaker has for members of a socially relevant group having certain perceived or real properties. This constitutes the identifying component of Jeshion's account. For Jeshion, when a speaker uses slurring language, this necessitates that their affective attitude is one that is morally evaluative of the person or persons that it identifies; specifically, it is a negative moral evaluation fueled by a contemptful affect. Jeshion argues that any language user, making use of a slur, holds the affective attitude of contempt for the supposed members of the group to which a slur is to refer.[27]

The identification component of Jeshion's account takes the targets of slurs to have properties that slur-users assign as being morally contemptible. The identifying component, Jeshion argues, follows from the expressivist component because when one uses an expression like a slur, sparked by contempt, they identify their contempt towards some target. That is, contempt, unlike hate or disgust, involves having an affective state directed at an object, and in

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[25] Jeshion, "Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation," 133; and Jeshion, "Slurs, Dehumanization," 82.
[26] Ibid.

the case of slurs, the object is a person who is taken to be lower in the dimension of humanity.[28]

Because contempt is person-directed, Jeshion argues it is unlike other affective states which are

not about the person *qua* person. Jeshion states,

> Contempt shares its status as a moral emotion with reactive attitudes like resentment
> and indignation. Unlike them, contempt takes whole persons, not actions, as its primary
> objects. One may resent someone's manipulation, be indignant to acts of dishonesty and
> injustice. Such emotions are directed and persons' actions or persons for performing
> particular actions - at their *wrongdoing* - and thus are attitudes responsive to moral norms
> governing action. Contempt, by contrast, is *whole-person focused*, and will have none of
> (Augustine's) 'Despise the sin, not the sinner.' The "sin" … is simply an outer
> manifestation of something taken to go to the core of the "sinner," something taken to be
> contemptible. While particular actions may spawn contempt… the attitude itself is
> directed to the whole person - at their *badbeing* - and this is governed by moral norms
> setting standards of worth and respect for persons as such.[29]

In this way, the identity component is related directly to the moral-psychological state of

contempt: the slurrer has to perceive properties of others as deserving of negative moral

evaluation. The contempt had by a slur-user, on Jeshion's account, when directed at the persons

in question (whom may possess identifying properties that are not appropriate for moral

evaluation, which might normatively be associated with various social groups, or whom may not

possess such properties, but be mistakenly assigned properties by a bigot, sexist, or homophobe),

also forms the moral norms by which others negatively regard the targeted individuals. Jeshion

calls this the "transpersonal normative power of slurs,"[30] which is the power that slurs have to

make hearers feel complicit in what the speaker is attempting to convey. Jeshion also refers to

this as the power that slurs have to enjoin others in the same derogatory attitude as that of the

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[27] Jeshion, "Slurs, Dehumanization," 82; and Jeshion, "Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation, 134.

[28] Jeshion, "Slurs, Dehumanization," 90; and Jeshion, "Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation," 133.

[29] Jeshion, "Slurs, Dehumanization," 92-3.

[30] Ibid., 87-9, 99.

slur-user.[31] So, on this account, the identity component will influence how those identified by derogatory words are morally regarded by others.

The identity component, Jeshion argues, is a separable semantic component from the group-designation component, and the expressivist component. This is because, broadly, a character-defining feature of an individual can be fundamental to their identity. In no way, however, is this feature associated with desert of contempt, except from the racist's or sexist's point of view.[32] That is, one can take the property of being Hispanic, Chinese, Muslim, or gay as a character-defining part of a person's identity without associating the trait with any negative moral evaluation.

Jeshion argues that that the moral-psychological structure of contempt requires that it have a basis, and this would be apparent in the properties that the slur-user takes to be fundamental to the target as a person.[33] A slur-user takes the property of being G, where G is any member of a targeted group, as fundamental to a person's identity. Jeshion gives an example: "By using the slur, and by virtue of its semantics, the anti-semite indicates that being Jewish is a *fundamental negative characteristic-defining feature* of the target's identity *qua* person."[34] For Jeshion, the identification component is the basis for contempt that a slur-user has for a person who, on this basis, the slurrer evaluates as having lesser moral standing as a person.

Another case that might be revisited is example (A) above. Here, when the speaker of (A) claims their boss is an N-word, it would be because they feel contempt for those he or she identifies as meeting the properties of the neutral counterpart term. It can be said that the neutral

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[31] Ibid., 87.

[32] See Jeshion, "Slurs, Dehumanization," 84.

[33] Ibid., 84, 87.

[34] Ibid., 83. Emphasis is original.

counterpart of the "N-word" is African-American. Let Q be the class of African-American individuals. So, the speaker of (B) has contempt for Q, and the speaker affectively expresses their attitude with the slur. But, on Jeshion's account, this slur is part of a true statement when Xenia is African-American (if that is its neutral counterpart). This is the result that seems to be avoidable by supplementing fictional truth conditions for group-designating truth conditions.

II.1 SLUR CREATION AND BIGOTRY FORMATION

Besides the dehumanization problem, Jeshion also focuses on two further problems that hybrid

expressivism can answer. The first problem that hybrid expressivism can answer is that of *slur*

creation. Jeshion explains this as the problem of understanding how slurs come to be slurring

terms.[35] The second problem that Jeshion observes about slurs is also one that any account of

slurs needs to address, and that is the *bigotry formation* problem. This is the problem of

addressing speakers' primary role in "bigotry formation, not solely bigotry perpetuation."[36] It is

arguable that other semantic and pragmatic accounts of slurs and their offensiveness are not as

equipped to explain or describe these problems theoretically. Thus, I argue that Jeshion's

expressivist account is a preferable semantics of slurs because it addresses the affective

phenomena concerning how slurs are formed, and why hearers feel complicit in derogation in a

conversation in which someone uses a slur. However, there remains the problem that the truth

conditions on Jeshion's account license the intersubstitutability of slurring words for group-

identification terms in truthful claims about people.

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[35] Jeshion, "Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation," 131.
[36] Ibid., 136.

III. SUBSTITUTIVITY PROBLEMS FOR GROUP-DESIGNATION

Jeshion's account takes the truth conditions of slurs to depend on their reference to neutral counterparts. If neutral counterparts have semantic content, they refer to a group that satisfies some properties or characteristics named in the term in question. More generally, neutral counterparts can be thought of as group-identification terms. Groups can either self-identify as a group, or individuals can be perceived by others as belonging to some group, according to social norms, for example. It is the case, then, that for the group-designation level of Jeshion's account, the problem of intersubstitution will arise.

Take the following example that Hom (2008) offers:

(2a) Oprah believes that Martin Luther King Jr. was African American.

(2b) Oprah believes that Martin Luther King Jr. was an 'N-word.'[37]

Hom argues in his (2013) and elsewhere that since the truth conditions of (2b) depend on (2a), (2a) and (2b) they are intersubstitutable. We can see that this is problematic for Jeshion's view that a slurring term refers to what its neutral counterpart designates. The example that Jeshion gives which was related to the argument that the slur and the neutral counterpart have the same truth conditions was seen in [1a] and [1b] above. Both [1a] and [1b] are true just in case

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[37] Christopher Hom, "The Semantics of Racial Epithets," *The Journal of Philosophy* 8 (2008): 422.

Jake is Jewish.[38] So the truth conditions for Jeshion's account imply, in terms of this example, that Jake is a Kike if and only if Jake is Jewish. It then follows that if Jake is Jewish, then he is a Kike.[39] Take another example of this problem:

(3a) Nora is a woman.

(3b) Nora is a mean bitch.

Here, (3b) depends upon Nora being female. In this way, designation is intersubstitutable, so we could just as easily have that:

(4a) If Princess Diana is a woman, then she is a bitch.

or, (4b) If any Z is a woman, then Z is a bitch.

Here is another case:

(5a) Cheney believes that Carlos Santana is a beaner.

For Jeshion's group-designation level, (5a) is true so long as Carlos Santana is Mexican. If this is the case, then we can infer,

(5b) If someone is a beaner, then they are Mexican.

(5c) Frida Kahlo was Mexican, so she was a beaner.

The problem presented here is that slurs and their neutral counterparts are intersubstitutable when they have the same truth conditions. But, the problem is that slurs and their neutral counterparts appear to share semantic equivalence when they share the same truth conditions. Because of this problem, it may work to supplement the group-designation truth conditions on Jeshion's expressivist account with some other truth-conditional framework where the truth-conditional equivalence between the dehumanizing term, and the counterpart to which

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[38] Cf. Jeshion, "Slur Creation, Bigotry Formation," 133; and "Slurs, Dehumanization, and the Expression of Contempt," 81.

it is to refer is precluded. I suggest that such truth-conditions can be found in Hom and May's

(2018) semantic account of the offensiveness of slurs.

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[39] Hom and May also present a similar example in Hom and May "Pejoratives as Fiction," 121.

IV. HOM AND MAY'S FICTIONALISM

Hom and May (2018) subscribe to a fictionalism about the entities to which slurs are supposed to refer. Hom and May argue that terms for racial slurs do not refer to anything in the world because they hold that we would not want to classify people in a way in which neutral terms co-designate derogatory terms. So, for Hom and May, the referents of slurs are fictional.[40] Moreover, they hold that speakers are unaware that they are engaging in fictional discourse when they engage in discourse containing slurs if these speakers believe that there are real referents of slurring terms[41]

Hom and May compare their position to a story about the beliefs speakers held in the Middle Ages about what they thought were unicorn horns. In the Middle Ages, Hom and May submit, unicorn horns were a highly prized possession which were thought to be able to assist in healing diseases, in purifying water, or more generally, in providing other healing properties for those who had them in their possession (for example, by trading for them).[42] Hom and May make evident, however, that what were thought to be unicorn horns were actually narwhal tusks.[43]

For Hom and May, the speakers of the Middle Ages believed in an impure fictional mythology, in which it was not a shared belief (or a shared conversational presupposition) by the

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[40] Christopher Hom and Robert May, "Pejoratives as Fiction" in *Bad Words: Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, ed. David Sosa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 110-1.

[41] See ibid., 109.

[42] Hom and May, "Pejoratives as Fiction," 107-9.

speakers, that they were discussing unicorn horns as fictional. Rather, Hom and May argue that, in this case, the speakers believed that they were speaking about reality, when they were, in fact, speaking about shared mythological beliefs. Hence, Hom and May distinguish truth-within-fiction from truth about reality.[44] Hom and May apply this argument to the extensions of slurs: racists or sexists demonstrate the false belief that slurs refer to material reality. Hom and May argue that what speakers are actually discussing in these cases, is a mythological kind of truth, in which it is not explicit that speakers have agreed upon the fact that they are taking part in fictional talk.

In a mythology, Hom and May offer, there can be intended objects of reference, which appear to meet the criteria of materially real objects, but yet do not because they are fictionally real objects. In the mythology of unicorn horns, there were objects believed to be the referents of unicorn horns, but those objects were only fictionally real. In this mythology, people spoke meaningfully about unicorn horns as intended objects of reference. Similarly, these speakers were not referring to real objects – the narwhal tusks. Rather, their fictional talk mischaracterized these objects.

Hom and May argue, then, that to believe that slurs refer to classes of real individuals is to mistake fictional truth with material truth, which is truth about reality.[45] Instead on their account, slurring terms have intended targets, but they ought not to, and they have no referents. Hom and May suggest that this avoids the intersubstitutability problem. Hom and May also think

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[43] Ibid., 107.

[44] In their words, they distinguish *material truth* from *fictional truth*. See ibid., 109-110.

[45] Hom and May, "Pejoratives as Fiction," 110, 127.

that this avoids commitment to semantics of slurs that is aligned with what the racist or sexist thinks.[46]

Thus, Hom and May hold that there are no real groups of people that meet the criteria of being a referent for a slur in virtue of the fact that slurs have the power to degrade people. Instead, Hom and May argue that slurs refer to no one in reality, though people may falsely believe that there are referents of slurs, while, at the same time, they not aware that these beliefs are false. In this way, Hom and May suggest that the referents of slurs are fictions. For Hom and May, bigoted or sexist speakers falsely believe that there are actual referents of slurs. The claims made by the racist, sexist, or homophobe, on Hom and May's account, would be true within a mythology of *false* beliefs about reality, and *false about reality itself.* Thus, For Hom and May, the referents of slurs or pejoratives are fictions which we can speak meaningfully about, but they have no truth-conditionally relevant semantic component.[47]

Using Hom and May's fictionalist truth conditions, consider (B) again: "Xenia is an N-word." (B) will now be false if Xenia is African-American because there is no such thing as an N-word. Just as in Hom and May's argument, people spoke meaningfully about unicorn horns, while there were none, we may be able to speak meaningfully in using derogatory language. Though, there will be no real people which are designated by these terms.

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[46] Hom and May, "Pejoratives as Fiction," 108-131, esp. §8; and Christopher Hom and Robert May, "Moral and Semantic Innocence," *Analytic Philosophy* 54 (2013): 296-297, 299.
[47] Hom and May, "Pejoratives as Fiction," 111.

V. POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS TO HOM AND MAY'S FICTIONALISM

One worry that one could have about an account that holds that the referents of slurs are fictional, might be that such an account might absolve a slur-user from moral blame. When charged with having said something objectionable, the slurrer might respond that there are no real people that slurs characterize. They might then believe that it is morally benign to use slurs, since they might argue that they cannot offend anyone.

Someone who held a fictionalist view about the referents of slurs, however, might suggest that there are still intended targets of slurs. That is, Hom and May do not deny that there are people that slurs are meant to target, but what they argue is that there are no people to which slurs refer. Slurs may have intended targets, but the words do not classify real individuals or groups of individuals. This provides the advantage, in conceptualizing the objectionableness of slurs in this way, that the slur-user might be criticized not just for having a moral-psychological attitude of contempt, but also for holding false beliefs. The slur-user can be criticized on the grounds that they falsely believe that are such people about which they are intending to derogate. For a fictionalist semantics of semantics of slurs, there are no such people to whom the slurrer wants to refer.

Consider this point with the following example: In Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, it was believed that there were such a thing as witches. People were tried for committing the crime of practicing witchcraft in a Puritan community. Twenty people were convicted of practicing

witchcraft in this trial, and were executed by hanging. The persecution of people who were thought to be witches was common in general, in Europe at the time. The argument I am making will suggest that there is no such thing as a witch. There may be people believed to possess character-defining traits that are more or less positively morally evaluable. But, there are no witches, regardless of the character traits people possess. Similarly, there are no people who stand in for racist and sexist slurs.

As in the Salem witch trials, real people were persecuted because they were believed to be witches. But there were no actual witches in the witch trials. Accordingly, real people can be targeted by slurs, even though there are no such people to which slurs and pejoratives refer.

If this is the case, then a slur-user will not be insulated from criticism and moral blame on an expressivist semantics with fictional truth conditions. The person who uses slurs still can be blamed for *attempting* to refer to targets. Furthermore, this person can be criticized on the basis that they falsely believe that people stand-in for the derogatory language in which they are using.

VI. HOM AND MAY'S FICTIONALISM AS A SUPPLEMENT FOR JESHION'S EXPRESSIVIST GROUP-DESIGNATION LEVEL

If we supplement Hom and May's fictionalist truth conditions for Jeshion's group-designation component in a semantics of slurs, then this account will have the following benefits: the person who uses slurs would feel contempt for intended targets, but their derogatory language would have no actual – but only mythological – referents. Accordingly, on such a semantics, a slur-user could take a property about a person as relevant for negative moral evaluation, but that property would be entirely fictional.

The supplementation of Hom and May's truth conditions in Jeshion's hybrid semantics can be compatible with the broader aims of Jeshion's account in the following way: the person slurring would be directing contempt at intended targets that can be spoken about on a material truth-conditional level. But the slurrer's evaluative moral-psychological attitude would make reference to no individuals in reality, and slurring words would only refer to fictional concepts. This is because, in this instance, the speaker is partaking in a mythology. For example, we can revisit [1a], which will be false with an expressivist-fictionalist semantics. The speaker of [1a], however, still has an intended target in mind that he or she feels contempt for, and can identify certain properties about Jake that are the basis for the speaker's unthinking contemptuous regard. In assigning contempt to the speaker, I offer that we have a place to start in order to assign moral blame to speakers who use slurs. This is why an expressivist semantics is valuable for

understanding the objectionableness of slurs. But in a semantics of slurs with fictional truth

conditions, we can also criticize slurrers on the basis that their claims are false.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

One problem with Hom and May's semantic account of fictional truth conditions is that, on its own, this account does not solve the problem that when someone utters a slur, that person has said something charged with hate. Hom and May's account does not address why, when someone utters a slur, they have said something that will make hearers feel complicit in their contemptful emotion. This is why I have argued that Jeshion's expressivism should be paired with a fictionalist account of the referents of slurs. I am arguing that we need a semantics of slurs that addresses how slurs are formed, how they perpetuate hatred, and how they enable feelings of contempt. An expressivist account of slurs is in a position to address those phenomena. At the same time, if the truth-conditions of slurs and group-identification terms are equivalent, then it seems that slurs actually characterize individuals in the way the slurrer wants to characterize them. But if people who use slurs are taking part in a mythology, moral responsibility can be assigned to them in two ways: the first is on the basis that they possess beliefs that do not match up with reality, and the second on the basis that they possess negatively evaluative moral-psychological attitudes. Such a semantics of slurs will likely explain the objectionableness of slurs in a more dynamic way than an expressivist and a fictionalist semantics would be able to do separately.

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