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Speech and Harm

By ERNIE
LEPORE

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The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

As every public figure knows, there are certain words that can not be uttered without causing shock or offense. These words, commonly known as "slurs," target groups on the basis of race, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status and sundry other demographics. Many of us were reminded of the impact of such speech in August, when the radio host Dr. Laura Schlessinger repeatedly uttered a racial slur on a broadcast of her show. A public outcry followed, and ultimately led to her resignation. Many such incidents of abuse and offense, often with much more serious consequences, seem to appear in the news by the day.

We may at times convince ourselves, as Dr. Laura may have, that there are inoffensive ways to use slurs. But a closer look at the matter shows us that those ways are very rare. Slurs are in fact uniquely and stubbornly resistant to attempts to neutralize their power to hurt or offend.

To be safe, we may ask ourselves how a targeted member, perhaps overhearing a slur, would react to it. Doing so, we will almost always find that what may have seemed suitable most definitely is not.

Slurs are uniquely and stubbornly resistant to attempts to neutralize their power to hurt or offend.

But why are slurs so offensive? And why are some more offensive than others? Even different slurs for the same group vary in intensity of contempt. How can words fluctuate both in their status as slurs and in their power to offend? Members of targeted groups themselves are not always offended by slurs — consider the uses of

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The Stone features the writing of contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless. The series moderator is Simon Critchley. He teaches philosophy at The New School for Social Research in New York. To contact the editors of The Stone, send an e-mail to opinionator@nytimes.com. Please include "The Stone" in the subject field.

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appropriated or reclaimed slurs among African-Americans and gay people.

The consensus answer among philosophers to the first question is that slurs, as a matter of convention, signal negative attitudes towards targeted groups. Those who pursue this answer are committed to the view that slurs carry offensive *content* or *meaning*; they disagree only over the mechanisms of implementation. An alternative proposal is that slurs are *prohibited* words *not* on account of any particular content they get across, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition. This latter proposal itself raises a few pertinent questions: How do words become prohibited? What's the relationship between prohibition and a word's power to offend? And why is it sometimes appropriate to flout such prohibitions?

Let's start with conventional meaning.

Does a slur associated with a racial or ethnic group mean something different from the neutral conventional name for the group, for example, African-American or Hispanic? The Oxford English Dictionary says a slur is a "deliberate slight; an expression or suggestion of disparagement or reproof." But this definition fails to distinguish specific slurs from one another, or even distinct slurs for the same group. Still, from this definition we may infer that slurs *supplement* the meanings of their neutral counterparts with something offensive about whomever they reference. This information, however meager, suffices to isolate a flaw in trying to pin the offensiveness of a slur on its predicative meaning.

Anyone who wants to disagree with what "Mary is Hispanic" ascribes to Mary can do so with a denial ("Mary is not Hispanic."). If the use of a slur was offensive on account of what it predicates of its subject, we should be able to reject its offense simply by denying it. But replacing "Hispanic" with a slur on a Hispanic person does not work — it is no less inflammatory in the denial than the original is. Therefore, however slurs offend, it is not through what they predicate of their subjects.

Another fascinating aspect of slurs that challenges the view that their meaning renders them offensive pertains to their effect in indirect speech. Normally, an utterance can be correctly reported by re-using the very expressions being reported on, as in a quote in a book or a newspaper. What better insurance for accuracy can there be in reporting another than to re-use her words? Yet any such report not only fails to capture the *original* offense, but



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BUGS BUNNY, CARROT CRUNCHING COMIC

HOLLYWOOD. At this point, the three artists would be amusing, even though incorrect, to report that the popular cartoon character, Bugs Bunny, lives in a bottle of ink. Actually, he resides in the minds, imaginations, yes, even in the hearts, of the 20th century and women who produce him and make him cavort across the screen. Surprising though it may be, Bugs Bunny is both the slave and the master of those who plan his adventures, draw his 7,000-odd likenesses for each of his six to eight cartoons a year, and who stand ready to guard his morals, his manners and his methods of getting into and out of trouble. He was created, by pencil sketch, some time in 1936 as an "extra" playing in an "Elmer" cartoon in which Elmer went hunting and the then unnamed rabbit used

At this point, the three directors largely responsible for Bugs Bunny began to interweave each other with suggestions and recollections concerning the development of Bugs. "We made him use his wit," "He was full of mischief," "He has been kept in the wild state, never given houses to live in or clothes to wear. He has no steady girl friend, although he can have occasional romances." Mel Blanc, who supplies the voice, accent and all, for Bugs Bunny, according to all the artists, is allergic to carrots, which he must chew, for the sake of realism, while speaking the rabbit's lines. "He doesn't swallow a piece of the carrot," Bugs Maltese, "he vents, draw his 7,000-odd likenesses for each of his six to eight cartoons a year, and who stand ready to guard his morals, his manners and his methods of getting into and out of trouble. He was created, by pencil sketch, some time in 1936 as an "extra" playing in an "Elmer" cartoon in which Elmer went hunting and the then unnamed rabbit used

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Based fundamentally on the idea of the public enjoys watching an elfensive against his tormentors. Bugs Goes to War

Bugs Bunny made his debut 75 years ago

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interestingly, it guarantees a second offense by whoever is doing the reporting. What's gone wrong? We expect indirect reports to be of others, not of ourselves. This limit on reporting slurs is significant. Is the offense of another's slurring inescapable? Is it possible that we can recognize the offense, but not re-express it? How odd.

Is there someplace else to look for an account of why slurs are offensive? Could it be a matter of tone? Unlike conventionalized content, tone is supposed to be subjective. Words can be different in tone but share content. Might tone distinguish slurs from neutral counterparts? No one can deny that the use of a slur can arouse subjective images and feelings in us that a use of its neutral counterpart does not, but as an account of the difference in offensive punch it can't be the whole story.

Consider a xenophobe who only uses slurs for picking out a target group. He may harbor no negative opinions towards its members; he may use slurs only among likeminded friends when intending to express affection for Hispanics or admiration for Asians but these uses remain pertinently offensive. The difference between a slur and its neutral counterpart cannot be a matter of subjective feel.

A major problem with any account that tries to explain the offensive nature of a slur by invoking content is how it can explain the general exhortation against even mentioning slurs. A quoted occurrence of a slur can easily cause alarm and offense. Witness the widespread preference in some media for using phrases that describe slurs rather than using or mentioning them. This is surprising since quotation is usually just about the form or shape of a word. You can see this in statement like " 'Love' is a four letter word." This suggests that it is something about the form or shape of other four letter words makes them unprintable.

Another challenge to the content view is raised by the offensive potential of *incidental* uses of slurs, as witnessed by the Washington D.C. official who wound up resigning his job over the outcry that [his use of the word](#)

["niggardly"](#) provoked. In 1999, the head of the Office of Public Advocate in Washington, DC used it in a discussion with a black colleague. He was reported as saying, "I will have to be niggardly with this fund because it's not going to be a lot of money." Despite a similarity in spelling, his word has no semantic or etymological tie to the slur it may invoke; mere phonetic and orthographic overlap caused as much a stir as standard offensive language. This is not an accidental use of an ambiguous or unknown slur, but an incidental one. Or take the practice of many newspapers (in case you haven't noticed my own contortions in presenting these materials) that slurs cannot even be canonically described as in "the offensive word that begins with a certain letter..."

What conclusions should we draw from these constraints? One



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Reporting the use of a slur guarantees a second offense by whoever is doing the reporting.

suggestion is that uses of slurs (and their canonical descriptions) are offensive simply because they sometimes constitute violations on their very prohibition. Just as whoever violates a prohibition risks offending those who respect it, perhaps the fact that slurs are prohibited explains why we cannot escape the affect, hatred and negative association tied to them and why their occurrences in news outlets and even within quotation marks can still inflict pain. Prohibited words are usually banished wherever they occur. This explains why bystanders (even when silent) are uncomfortable, often embarrassed, when confronted by a slur. Whatever offenses these confrontations exact, the audience risks complicity, as if the offense were thrust upon them, not because of its content, but because of a responsibility we all incur in ensuring certain violations are prevented; when they are not, they must be reported and possibly punished. Their occurrences taint us all.

In short, Lenny Bruce got it right when he declared “the suppression of the word gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness.” It is impossible to reform a slur until it has been removed from common use.

Words become prohibited for all sorts of reasons — by a directive or edict of an authoritative figure; or because of a tainted history of associations, perhaps, though conjuring up past pernicious or injurious events. The history of its uses, combined with reasons of self-determination, is exactly how “colored,” once used by African-Americans self-referentially, became prohibited, and so, offensive. A slur may become prohibited because of *who* introduces or uses it. This is the sentiment of a high school student who objected to W.E.B. Dubois’ use of “Negro” because it “is a white man’s word.”

What’s clear is that no matter what its history, no matter what it means or communicates, no matter who introduces it, regardless of past associations, *once relevant individuals with sufficient authority declare a word a slur, it is one*. The condition under which this occurs is not easy to predict in advance. When the Rev. Jesse Jackson proclaimed at the 1988 Democratic National Convention that from then on “black” should not be used, his effort failed. Many African-Americans carried positive associations with the term (“Black Panthers,” “Black Power,” “I’m black and I’m proud.”) and so Jackson’s attempt at prohibition did not stick.

In appropriation, targeted members can opt to use a slur *without* violating its prohibition because membership provides a defeasible escape clause; most prohibitions include such clauses. Oil embargoes permit exportation, just not importation. Sanctions invariably exclude medical supplies. Why shouldn’t prohibitions

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against slurs and their descriptions exempt certain individuals under certain conditions for appropriating a banished word? Targeted groups can sometimes inoffensively use slurs among themselves. The NAACP, for example, continues to use “Colored” relatively prominently (on their letterhead, on their banners, etc.).

Once appropriation is sufficiently widespread, it might come to pass that the prohibition eases, permitting — under regulated circumstances — designated outside members access to an appropriated use. (For example, I have much more freedom in discussing the linguistics of slurs inside scholarly journals than I do here.) Should this practice become sufficiently widespread, the slur might lose its intensity. How escape clauses are fashioned and what sustains them is a complex matter — one I cannot take up here.



Ernie Lepore, a professor of philosophy and co-director of the Center for Cognitive Science at Rutgers University, writes on language and mind. More of his work, including the study, “Slurring Words,” with Luvell Anderson, can be found [here](#).

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