

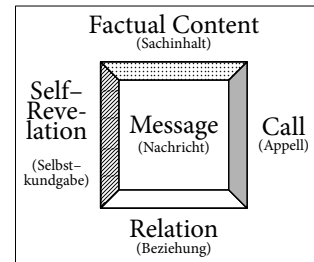
An Interactivist Approach to Slurs
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Recent approaches to slurs (cf., e.g. Gutzmann, 2019; Davis and McCready, 2020) typically invoke expressive or use-conditional *semantics* in order to account for such expressions. That is, they assume roughly a meaning as follows for a slur S (this version taken from Davis and McCready, 2020: 65), where the left side of the lozenge corresponds to its group, and the \heartsuit corresponds to its expressive content:

$$(1) \llbracket S \rrbracket = \lambda x.G(x) \heartsuit \langle e, t \rangle^\alpha \times t^s$$

Such content-based approaches assume thus that the negative part of a slur resides somewhere in its *lexical* (though generally in not-at-issue) meaning. However, Nunberg (2018: 248) has shown that one can state the presumed derogative content without producing a tautology, and contradict the same content without producing a contradiction – which is totally constrary to what would be expected if such content were part of the *semantic* content of the word. Furthermore, content-based theories face difficulties with accounting for the development of slurs, and for their appropriation by the slurred group. If semantic content is to be excluded, the slurring element might be either part of the pragmatic content, or of sociolinguistic (indexical) content. This paper will take the latter view, and embed it in Schulz von Thun’s theory of communication. Furthermore, it will focus particularly on the habitually neglected aspect of slurring as a means of the speaker’s identity management.

Schulz von Thun (1981) (henceforth: SvT) proposed a theory of human communication, which assumes that a communicated message always consists of 4 different types of submessages, as illustrated in the figure on the right. In a declarative sentence, the *Factual Content* corresponds to the uttered meaning; the *Call* is what the speaker intends the hearer to do as a result of the utterance. *Self-Revelation* is the representation of themselves the speaker wants to communicate, and *Relation* contains both the representation of the hearer, and their relation to the speaker. Of special interest is the fact that with the side of Self-Revelation and Relation, SvT’s framework allows to integrate 3rd wave sociolinguistics in a broadly pragmatic theory of slurs, in that these sides of the message can be seen as containing the speaker and hearer personæ.



As a case study, I will consider the Austrian German slur “*Piefke*” for (typically Northern) Germans. The origin of this term as a slur goes back to the immediate aftermath of the Prusso-Austrian war of 1866, in which Austria was defeated, and as a consequence definitively lost political hegemony in Germany to Prussia.

In Austria, Germans are stereotypically seen as highly efficient, but without humour, and as having a tendency to be arrogant and know-it-alls. This may be seen as the corresponding expressive element of the term *Piefke* (i.e., the \heartsuit in (1)). However, Nunberg (2018: 252) underlines the necessity that research on slurs also look at the group the utterer of the slur identifies with, since slurring is part of the speaker’s identity management. With *Piefke*, it is clear that the speaker identifies as Austrian (which will fill in SvT’s Self-Revelation). However, by uttering *Piefke*, a speaker not merely identifies as Austrian, but as *Austrian in opposition to Germans*, that is, as being humorous, laid-back, and generally disposing of a certain *savoir-vivre* (see, e.g., Koellen, 2016: 1–3).

Abstracting away from this particular case, a speaker’s identity management by using a slur can be expressed more generally as follows:

- (2) By using a term S , characterizing a group G , and which is associated stereotypically within a group G' with negative evaluative predicates $\{\text{neg}_0, \dots, \text{neg}_k\}$, a speaker belonging to G'

intends to characterize themselves (and possibly the group G' they identify with) as having the opposite positive evaluative predicates $\{\text{pos}_o, \dots, \text{pos}_k\}$.

Notice first that (2) does not presuppose that S be an accepted slur; it may however explain why in many languages, some terms (e.g., for handicapped persons) often do become slurs. Second, (2) does not rely on any kind of lexical content, but on stereotypes of groups, and oppositions between groups, that is, *a priori* extralinguistic facts. Third, this is entirely compatible with Davis and McCready (2020: 66) idea that nobody, not even the speaker, is able to predict the exact meaning effect of the slur in an addressee. This would be a strange effect if the meaning were included in the sign, but it is perfectly natural if we assume that nothing prevents subgroups in a linguistic community to have the different (negative) stereotypes wrt. G .

Let us now consider different communication scenarios in the light of SvT's theory. Assume first a standard configuration of slurring, where the speaker does not belong to the slurred group G . If the addressee is a fellow member of the speaker's group G' , the Relation side of the message will be something as follows: "*We are fellow Austrians, and you are (just like me) funny, charming, etc.*" (and hence the observation by Davis and McCready, 2020: 70 of *complicity*). However, if the addressee is part of the slurred group G , we obtain a very different Relation: "*You are (unlike me) humourless, a nitpicker etc., and my group has better characteristics than yours*" (and hence, the speaker intends *subordination*, following Davis and McCready, 2020: 70).

Let us now look at how appropriation uses would work in this framework (as far as I know, *Piefke* has not been appropriated). In an appropriation context, the speaker belongs to the slurred group G . However, standard self-serving biases will make sure that the speaker does not consider themselves to have the stereotypical, negative properties, and these will therefore not enter directly their Self-Revelation. However, by using the slur, the speaker will make two things salient to the hearer: i) the negative properties themselves; and ii) the fact that a group G' holds these negative attitudes towards G .

As before, we have two cases to consider: in a first case, the addressee belongs to the slurred group. In the Relation part of the message, we will get therefore something like "*We are both fellow members of the embattled group G , and (at least an important part of) the world is against us*". This is naturally interpreted as a Call for ingroup solidarity (once again, see Davis and McCready, 2020: 70). In a second case, we have to consider what happens if the addressee does not belong to G (that is, either to a group G' in which stereotypical negative contents about group G circulate, or to another group not belonging neither to G , nor G'). In this case, the Self-Revelation part will come down to "*I am part of a persecuted minority*", and the Relation will be either "*You are part of the persecuting group – and should feel guilty for it*" (if the addressee is a member of G') or "*You are neither in our group nor in our oppressor's group – take our side*" if the addressee is not taken to belong to G' by the speaker.

Conclusion This paper pursues a socio-pragmatic account of slurs, where the negative content is neither part of the sign (as opposed to content-based theories of slurs or Burnett, 2020), nor a conversational implicature (as proposed by Nunberg, 2018), but is derived from the sociological background of the communication. It can deal successfully with appropriation, as well as with the development of new slurs. Furthermore, this paper locates the crucial contribution of the slur as being about the speaker's identity management, which is inextricably linked to the negative properties attributed to the slurred group, but not fully reducible to it.

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