

Perspectivalism & Combinatorial Externalism; Are Slurs okay to Mention?

Abraham Miller

In this paper I claim that racial slurs are rarely if ever appropriate to utter, even in non-derogatory contexts. I will demonstrate that Christopher Hom's theory of combinatorial externalism underestimates the influence that racial slurs can have, and naively disregards intuitions in order to give a consistent, yet limited and dangerous account of slurs as derogatory tools. Hom's missteps wrongly encourage the non derogatory usage of slurs. I will argue instead for Elizabeth Camp's theory of Perspectivalism. Perspectivalism acknowledges slurs as having complex and difficult to categorize effects, above and beyond their use in derogation. Camp urges even those with the purest of hearts to avoid needlessly mentioning slurs, and gives a convincing explanation for how slurs can draw from the perspectives that are associated with them to act as harmful rhetorical agents, under any circumstance of use.

In pursuit of proving my claim that mentioning racial slurs not acceptable, first, I will briefly outline both the theories of Hom and Camp. Next, I will contrast the theories, and illustrate the major differences, focusing on each philosopher's thoughts about the acceptability of mentioning slurs. Finally, I will give two arguments siding with Camp's theory, both demonstrating why it is unacceptable to mention slurs in the vast majority of cases.

Hom's theory of Combinatorial Externalism falls under the umbrella of semantic externalism, and is centered around social institutions of racism. The motivation for this theory is to generate an account of slurring that can encompass all of the unique aspects of slur words. Hom begins his theorizing listing out the "adequacy conditions" for a successful theory of slurring. This contains both common and unusual qualities of slurs that a theory of slurs would have to recognize. For example, one quality is that of appropriation: slurs can be appropriated by a target group and have their meaning altered (Hom 438). This particular feature of slurring is not successfully accounted for by previous prominent theories of slurring, such as Jennifer Hornsby's semantic strategy (Hom 418). The adequacy conditions do a good job at identifying shortcomings in older theories; I will leave the reader with the chore of examining the rest of these conditions, found in Hom's "Semantics of Racial Epithets" starting at 426. As one might

guess, Combinatorial Externalism successfully passes all the adequacy conditions. An externalist theory, CE holds that slurs gain their meaning from a causal connection with the outside world. The social institutions of racism present in one's linguistic community are what is said to populate the semantic content of a slur, and that semantic content is what allows them to express complex negative properties, capable of powerful derogation against a target (Hom 431). What kind of content does a racist institution emboss on its slur? Hom outlines how a slur might function as a complex predicate:

“ought to be subject to these discriminatory practices because of having these negative properties” (Hom 431),

and also with the example of a slur that refers to Chinese people:

“ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards and, ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and ..., because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundering, and ..., all because of being Chinese” (Hom 431).

This theory put forth by Hom seems to capture many of the qualities of slurs that previous theories are shown unable to. Hom's theory naturally explains the case of appropriation brought up earlier. He sees appropriation as a severing of the causal association with the racist institution that originally brought derogatory meaning to the word, and a replacement with a causal link to a counter institution (Hom 438). The remainder of Hom's solutions to the adequacy conditions he proposed are available starting on 432 of “Semantics of Racial Epithets”

Five years after the release of Hom's essay, Camp disclosed her alternative theory to Combinatorial Externalism. Perspectivalism relies not on the causal association with a racist institution relevant to the linguistic community, but instead on the bond slurs form with the perspective of slur users who commonly employ the slur in signalling allegiance to a racist perspective. Camp claims that the commitment undertaken by someone who subscribes to the perspective offered by some slur, is that the property picked out by that slur has high relevance for predicting and evaluating the qualities of any particular member who has that property (Camp 337). For example, a person who is racist towards chinese people would believe that the quality of being chinese is particularly diagnostic of the attributes that any individual chinese person might have, and they might use a slur when referring to chinese people

to signal this perspective to others. Perspectivalism, like CE, is externalist, since the perspective associated with a slur is causally determined by the attitude of its most frequent users and the ideology of the racist institutions which promote both the slur and the beliefs about the target race. Something interesting about Camp's theory is that perspectives are not said to express any explicit content or feelings, but rather just offer a lense for evaluation of facts, in the case of slurs: a racist lense (Camp 335). Perspectivalism posits that the use of slur words is mainly to signal this racist perspective. It also posits that in order to understand the meaning of a word which signals a perspective, one must understand the perspective associated with it to some degree. These two points together entail that upon hearing an utterance of a slur word, one must cognitively invoke the racist perspective to some degree, in order to understand the meaning of the utterance. Thus, according to Camp, slur words have a sneaky ability to inject an objectionable racist perspective into the mind of the non-racist audience, even when not being used in a derogatory manner or by a person with a non racist attitude (Camp 343).

Hom and Camp see a significant underlying difference in their base assumptions on what makes slurs *slurs*. Hom believes that the essential component of what makes a word a slur is the uniquely strong derogatory force that these words harness. He perceives the derogatory capability as the main problem with slur utterances, and the reason for their highly taboo status. On the other hand, Camp believes that slurs are special among words not because of their ability to derogate, but instead due to the powerful association which slurs hold with the racist attitudes of their most common users. For her, the derogation falls out as a by-product of the negative associated perspective (Camp 338). In a Perspectivalist account, the reason slur words should be taboo is not solely to reduce racist derogation, but more importantly because limiting the usage of slurs inhibits the rhetorical goals of racists.

The schism between Hom and Camp begins with their assumptions about what to weight as important to consider in a theory of slurring, so it will not come as a surprise that their opinions on the adequacy conditions required for a theory of slurring would stray. While Perspectivalism more or less manages to pass the adequacy conditions set forth by Hom, this is merely a coincidence. Hom's adequacy conditions are motivated by the assumption that slurring words can be powerful derogatory tools, while Camp believes that derogation is a small part of a more complex phenomenon, a theory of

which might need to incorporate a different and larger, more generalized set of adequacy conditions. Changes to Hom's adequacy conditions are required to encompass Camp's assumptions about slurring words. Practically all of the conditions would need to be generalized to account for the entire complex semantic content of the slur rather than the derogatory force alone. Also, the following additional adequacy condition might be added to fully conform with Camp's assumptions about slurs.

Innate offensiveness:

A slur need not be used in a specifically derogatory way, or towards the target race in order to produce a negative cognitive response in the hearer.

The trend should be clear: Camp believes that slurs are semantically active in additional ways besides their truth functional and derogatory content. The difference in base belief of what kinds of significant functions slurs have is manifested in how each philosopher approaches the scenario of non derogatory, non appropriating slur usages. Hom would deny the importance of the additional condition I offered. He believes that any negative cognitive response incurred by hearing a NDNA usage of a slur is simply a mistake of human intuition (Hom 435). Camp would agree that NDNA usages of slurs exist, but would state that any non racist person should still hesitate allowing these uses. She believes that slurs can still carry their associated perspective even in contexts devoid of derogation. Encouraging NDNA usage facilitates these perspectives entering into the minds of people who might hear the utterance, which is equivalent to doing the racists' work for them (Camp 344). When it comes to NDNA uses of slurs, the theories of Hom and Camp see a dramatic divergence. CE states that offense taken in these cases is simply squeamishness caused by a mistake of intuition. Perspectivalism posits that usage of slur words even in non derogatory contexts can further the goals of racist rhetoric, and therefore NDNA usage should not be acceptable.

I believe that Camp's theory of Perspectivalism better coincides with our intuitions on whether slurs are acceptable to mention or attempt to use in non-derogatory contexts. Hom would not deny that his theory fails to account for scenarios where offense is transmitted without an intentional derogatory

usage of a slur, because Hom specifically denies that intuition to take offense is useful in this case, saying “Because these words are so highly charged, our intuitions have limited value from the outset”; he refers to the intuition as an unnecessary “squeamishness” (Hom 435). Hom proposes that either the intuition is misguided, or mentioning slurs is somehow derogatory. Once it is made clear that mentioning slurs is not a derogatory act, it seems to follow that the squeamish intuition must be misguided. The reasoning is valid, but his premise ignores the third option: the possibility that some other facet of slur use besides derogation generates the squeamish intuition. By ignoring a plausible case, Hom’s argument falls victim to the false dilemma fallacy and exposes a serious shortcoming for CE. On the other hand, Camp’s Perspectivalism explains why this squeamish intuition exists without denying its usefulness. For Camp, the derogatory content of a slur is not alone what makes utterances taboo, but rather: these words should not be said due to the detrimental associated perspective that is forced upon those privy to an utterance of a slur, even if the utterance is non derogatory.

Intuition is a powerful philosophical tool, and it should not be overridden lightly. Given two theories, one of which accounts for our intuitions by denying their accuracy, and one which accounts for our intuitions by giving a plausible explanation for their existence, the latter will appear more appealing unless there is good reason to suggest that the intuition is inaccurate. Hom’s fallacious logic mentioned earlier does not cut it. The only remaining reason to support the denial of intuitions Hom proposes, might be to remain consistent with the rest of the CE theory, supposing that it has other strong advantages. However, Since Perspectivalism manages to remain consistent with all the adequacy conditions put forth by Hom anyway¹, it entirely eclipses the need for CE.

The argument already offered should be compelling enough in advancing Perspectivalism as a more appealing alternative to CE, but regardless of whether you prefer CE or Perspectivalism, I argue that it remains morally inappropriate to mention slurs. A straightforward argument by probability comes next, which shows that when given two hypothetical theories, one that allows for NDNA and one that does not, the immorality of slur mentioning prevails until the latter theory can be proven incontrovertibly false.

¹ I do not give an explanation for why this is the case, since it is a bit outside the scope of the paper. The reader should be capable of maneuvering through the adequacy conditions and doing this themselves. Keep in mind that in Camp’s view, the capability of a slur for derogatory force is considered a derivative of the negative perspective it embodies.

Let us suppose that you believe racism is immoral, and due to a flawed human mind, your theory evaluation ability is limited. When given the two hypothetical theories of slurring, you must assume a chance that either theory could be true. Although you can postulate that one might be more accurate than the other, to assume that certainty is possible evinces arrogance when evaluating complex theories about a topic as amorphous and confusing as language. Thus we are left only with the following *certain* facts:

1. A consistently moral person avoids any chance of performing an act which serves the goals of racists.
2. You cannot be certain whether a NDNA usage of slurs serves the goals of racists.

With these premises in mind, suppose you mention a slur. By premise two, you cannot be 100% sure whether the act has negative consequences, and then premise one demonstrates that you are immoral. Now suppose you never mention a slur. In this case, you contradict neither premise. You maintain certainty that you have not committed a racist act, without needing certainty on whether it is immoral to mention slurs or not. Thus it follows that even if the theory which allows for NDNA is preferred, mentioning slurs remains unacceptable on the off chance that the alternative theory is correct. The mentioners of slurs must heft the burden of proof. If one believes that NDNA usage should be allowed, they are tasked with explaining the exact reasons for the acceptability, and incontrovertibly proving that Camp (and other silentist theorists) employ explicit logical errors. After all of this work, the prospective slur mentioner then must consider: what was it that motivated them so strongly to want to allow the mentioning of slurs in the first place?

No matter how you slice it, no reason seems acceptable to advocate for the acceptability of slur words uttered in public conversation under any context, and Hom's theory of Combinatorial Externalism is dangerously misguided in encouraging NDNA slur use. I hope I have made clear why Camp's Theory of Perspectivalism provides a more appealing account of slurring words with regards to non derogatory non appropriating uses, while also maintaining the advantages that Hom's theory yields for other cases.

Works Cited

Camp, Elisabeth. "Slurring Perspectives." *Analytic Philosophy*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2013, pp. 330–349., doi:10.1111/phib.12022.

Hom, Christopher. "The Semantics of Racial Epithets." *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 105, no. 8, 2008, pp. 416–440., doi:10.5840/jphil2008105834.