# Slurs and Ideologies

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This is a work in progress, so please check with me before quoting.
Comments very welcome!

This paper argues that slurs and ideologies stand in mutually supporting relations to each other. In short, uses of slurs strengthen ideologies, and ideologies make uses of slurs more harmful. A complete understanding of the force and danger of slurs must take their relationship with ideology into account. And because it's possible to slur without the help of conventionalized slurs, a complete account of slurring will have to consider the relationship between language and ideology very broadly construed. Indeed, the account that I develop here helps elucidate even some uses of language that do not slur at all.

Section 1 argues that in theorizing about slurs we need to pay close attention to a neglected class of Gricean conversational implicatures that I call *acceptability implicatures*. These conversational implicatures are, on my view, crucial to the ways in which particular uses of slurs are connected to ideologies. Section 2 presents the way of using 'ideologies' that I find most helpful for thinking about slurs. On this understanding, which owes much to the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and to the work of the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci, ideologies involve clusters of mutually supporting beliefs, interests, norms, practices, values, affective dispositions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world. To evoke or (as I will say) to *cue* an ideology is thus to evoke a broad range of beliefs, interests, practices, and so on (Section 3).

The rest of the paper puts the tools developed Sections 1–3 to work in thinking about the relationships between particular uses of language and ideology. Uses of slurs strengthen ideologies because the use of a slur makes manifest the speaker's consent to and endorsement of an ideology, encouraging the speaker and others to feel that their own consent to and endorsement of that ideology would not be out of

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place (Section 4). Ideologies that have a serious negative impact on a group's material conditions make slurs that cue those ideologies especially harmful (Section 5). And the workings of ideologies help explain the workings of language used to slur without conventionalized slurs, the differences between derogatory and reclamatory uses of slurs, and the emergence and evolution of slurs over time (Section 6). I then consider some language that cues ideologies without slurring, and discuss the implications of such cueing for the ways in which we think about conversational context (Section 7).

What I say here is compatible with many different ways of thinking about the semantics and pragmatics of slurs; incompatible with others. So I hope that philosophers of language and linguists working on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs will see this project as potentially complementary to theirs. Moreover, I see many of their projects as complementary to mine as well. I will not, for example, take any stand here on the semantics of slurs, and what I say about the pragmatics of slurs can be supplemented with some other views about their pragmatics.[1] But I do think that standard ways of thinking about the semantics and pragmatics of slurs neglect some ways in which uses of slurs are related to social and historical features of the speech situation. In particular, standard ways of thinking neglect the crucial ways in which slurs and slurring language more generally are related to ideology.

## 1. Acceptability Implicatures

Much work on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs tries to characterize slurs in terms of a traditional taxonomy of linguistic content—a taxonomy that owes much to H. P. Grice's characterization of conversational and conventional implicatures (1987 [1967]) and to Robert Stalnaker's characterization of pragmatic presupposition (1970, 1974, 2002). One legacy of that taxonomy is the idea that conversational implicatures are 'cancellable.' So if I say, for example,

(1) Some boys left.

I thereby conversationally implicate that not all the boys left. We can see that this is a conversational implicature by seeing that I can cancel that implicature, if I follow (1) with

(2) But I don't mean to suggest that not all the boys left; I had to leave early myself, so I wouldn't know for sure.

The thought that the harm done when a speaker uses a slur is at least in part a matter of conversational implicature has looked to many theorists like a non-starter, because

[1] To give one example, Claudia Bianchi's "echoic" account of slurs (2014) is incomplete, in my view, but compatible with the view I develop here.

the harm is generally done even if the speaker makes an attempt to cancel. Timothy Williamson, for example, dismisses potential appeals to conversational implicature on the grounds that "someone who says 'Lessing was Boche, although I do not mean to imply that Germans are cruel' merely adds hypocrisy to xenophobia" (2009, p. 150).

On my view uses of *any* word are associated with a family of conversational implicatures that are, indeed, often difficult to cancel. I call these *acceptability implicatures*. In using a word *W* a speaker generally conversationally implicates that it is acceptable—conversationally, legally, morally, prudentially, all things considered, and so on—to use that particular word. Thus acceptability implicatures are reflexive and higher-order: their content is a commentary on how what was said was said. In a word, they convey that it was acceptable to put it that way. For on the basis of the assumptions that the speaker is rational, a cooperative interlocutor, not disposed to act rudely or badly, and so on, an addressee will have reason to think that the speaker is putting things in an acceptable way.

To draw an analogy, words are like tools, where which tool we use to do a particular job can matter quite a bit. My grandfather wouldn't use a screwdriver to open a can of paint when I was around, as a child, because so doing would give me the impression that it was *acceptable,* all things considered, to use a screwdriver in such a way. (He definitely didn't want to leave me with that impression!) And so he avoided using a screwdriver in that way, when I was around, to avoid implicating that it's acceptable to *do it that way.*

For a linguistic example, here is a tool that can be used to mention the name of Massachusetts' capital city efficiently and straightforwardly:

'Boston'

Call this tool 'Tool 1'. And here is a tool ('Tool 2') that can be used to mention the same name, but in a somewhat surreptitious and elliptical way:

the word consisting of the second letter of the modern English alphabet,
concatenated with the fifteenth letter of the modern English alphabet,
concatenated with the nineteenth letter of the modern English alphabet,
concatenated with the twentieth letter of the modern English alphabet, …

These two tools are good for different purposes, and a speaker's choosing to use one rather than the other can convey a lot about what the speaker believes about their interlocutors and their speech situation. Using Tool 1 is relatively unremarkable, at least in many philosophical settings. Using Tool 2 when one's only interlocutor would have trouble figuring out what one meant would often be very different. In such a setting the speaker might well convey disdain toward their addressee.

How should we explain this difference between Tool 1 and Tool 2? It's implausible that the distinctive features of Tool 2 are *conventionally* associated with it: on any such account far too many facts about language would turn out to be conventionalized. A fortiori, they are not realized via conventional implicatures. And Tool 2 behaves very differently from paradigmatic examples of presupposition carriers, because its distinctive features 'project' beyond linguistic expressions—like epistemic modals and the antecedents of conditionals—that characteristically filter presuppositions.[2] But we can explain many (if not all) of those features by appealing to acceptability implicatures. Consider a situation in which a use of Tool 2 conveys disdain toward a person who will have trouble working out its semantic value. The speaker who uses Tool 2 will implicate that it's an acceptable tool for them to use in the circumstances, all things considered. The use of such a tool would be acceptable if the addressee deserved to be treated with disdain, and given plausible assumptions a speaker would use such a tool if they felt disdain toward the addressee. To the extent to which this explanation for the use of Tool 2 is apt, I suggest, a speaker who uses Tool 2 will thereby conversationally implicate that the addressee deserves to be treated with disdain, and that the speaker feels disdain toward the addressee.

It's often very difficult if not impossible for a speaker to use Tool 2 and go on to cancel the all things considered acceptability implicature in the ways that conversational implicatures are often canceled. For example, suppose a speaker followed their own use of Tool 2 with something like

(3) But I don't mean to suggest that putting it that way was acceptable all things considered.

Unless the speaker is under duress of some sort—taking a nightmarish and pedantic test, say, about which they cannot tell their addressee relevant details—(3) will look like an odd followup to a use of Tool 2. But if the speaker *is* under duress, it might be appropriate for them to try to cancel the acceptability implicature, and in some cases their attempt might be sufficient to take the sting out of using Tool 2. As Michael Blome-Tillman argues, Gricean cancellability tests should not be formulated to require cancellability in *every* context, but just cancellability in *some* contexts (2008), and contexts of duress are sometimes necessary for cancellability tests to work correctly.[3]

Moreover, some acceptability implicatures are fairly easy to cancel even without a context of duress. A lawyer giving someone advice might, for example, cancel the

[2] In less theoretically loaded terms: like distinctive features of slurs, the distinctive features of Tool 2 cannot be canceled, contained, or filtered out by embedding Tool 2 in a 'might' claim or in a conditional.

[3] For my own part, I don't think that passing cancellability tests is *essential* for some content to be conversationally implicated. Rather, I think that cancellability tests, formulated in Blome-Tillman's way, are good heuristics for identifying conversational implicatures.

implicature that their advice was put in a *legally* acceptable way ("I put it this way because I'm speaking as your friend, not as a lawyer") or might cancel the implicature that their advice was put in a *morally* acceptable way ("I put it that way because I'm giving you legal advice; I realize that it's morally reprehensible to talk like this.") A religious authority who feels a conflict between religious edicts and what morality demands might similarly distinguish between putting something in a way acceptable by the relevant edicts' lights, and putting something in a way acceptable by moral lights.

In the taxonomy of Judith Tonhauser et al. (2013), the content of acceptability implicatures is a kind of non-conventionalized class B projective content. This is because (1) it can be conveyed without the context meeting any particular conditions, and (2) it projects through negation, epistemic modals, questions, antecedents of conditionals that could, in principle, constitute 'filters,' and so on. The non-conventionality of these implicatures is crucial, in my view, to understanding the connections between language used to slur and ideologies in full generality, for as I argue in Section 6 there can be such connections without any relevant conventions.

## 2. Ideologies

There are many different things one might have in mind by 'ideologies,' and I want to be clear that I don't mean to suggest that one is in general better than another. For my purposes here, I find it useful to think of an ideology as, to a first approximation, a temporally persistent and socially extended cluster of mutually supporting beliefs, interests, norms, practices, values, affective dispositions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world. There is a bit more to the notion that's important for my project, however, so I need to make three general points about how I use 'ideologies' here.

First, particular ideologies needn't be articulated by or visible to those who consent to them. They are often both tacit and complex, defying easy characterization. The project of characterizing an ideology in detail is made more complicated by the fact that many components of ideologies—norms, practices, ways of interpreting the world, aliefs (Gendler 2008), affective dispositions, and so on—don't represent the world as being one way or another, and so don't bear truth-conditional content. Some theorists sympathetic with this approach include Louis Althusser (1965, 1969, 1970), Mikhail Bakhtin and Pavel Medvedev (1985 [1928]), Herbert Blumer (1958), Frantz Fanon (2008), Antonio Gramsci (1971 [1929–1935], pp. 323–333), Sally Haslanger (2007, 2011), Claire Jean Kim (2000, pp. 8–10), Rae Langton (2012), Lynne Tirrell (1999), and Cornel West (1989, p. 232). (See also Reiland Rabaka's illuminating discussion of related issues in Du Bois (2010, pp. 139 and 170–171).) The sense of 'consent' in my use of 'consent to an ideology' is thus nothing like the sense it has in

'informed consent.' One can consent to an ideology, in the sense that's most helpful for my purposes, wholly unknowingly and without doing very much. One can also consent to ideologies that are (or at least look) inconsistent with each other. T. J. Jackson Lears' description of consent in Gramsci points in the right direction: consent "mix[es] approbation and apathy, resistance and resignation. The mix varies from individual to individual; some are more socialized than others" (1985, p. 570). With the crucial caveat that approbation, apathy, resistance, and resignation may all be tacit and unconscious, this summarizes nicely what I mean by 'consent.' And although it doesn't take much to consent to an ideology, it bears emphasizing that even parties that *reject* an ideology are nevertheless often constrained by it (Anderson 2010, p. 53). On my view this is in part because to fail to act in accord with the relevant constraints would (falsely) implicate that the parties consented to that ideology.

Second, I diverge from those who use 'ideologies' with a critical, classically Marxian edge. I diverge, that is, from those who treat ideologies in general as things to be transcended or seen through, in the sense that we should strive to achieve a perspective that is free from all ideologies. Tommie Shelby, for example, writes that "an ideological form of social consciousness contributes to establishing or stabilizing relations of oppression *in virtue of* its cognitive defects. …ideologies perform their social operations by way of illusion and misrepresentation" (2003, p. 174; see also Shelby's 2002, 2014, and the citations therein). For Shelby's theoretical purposes, this is an extremely helpful way to think. I take a more expansive view of ideologies here, in part because I don't want to foreclose the possibility that some slurs evoke or cue ideologies that in fact lead us to *accurate* representations of the world—perhaps 'uber rich' and 'neo-liberal' are examples[4]—and in part because I don't want to foreclose the possibility that we cannot fully overcome all ideologies. That is, I want a view consistent with Gramsci's thought that consenting to *some* ideology or ideologies is necessary, because ideologies " 'organise' human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc." (1971, p. 377 [1929–1935]).[5] A theorist like Shelby, who is committed to the claim that ideologies inevitably lead to misrepresentation and misunderstanding, would have to restrict the application of my view to a narrower range of phenomena than I consider here.

Third, it is important to my explanations that an ideology is a *cluster* of *mutually supporting* beliefs, aliefs, interests, norms, practices, values, affective dispositions,

[4]While it's unusual to think of a terms like 'uber rich' and 'neo-liberal' as slurs, their linguistic behavior does resemble that of paradigmatic slurs. (For example, at least some of the normative content associated with them projects through negation, epistemic modals, questions, antecedents of conditionals, and so on.) I think we should follow the linguistic facts where they lead, and simply distinguish between vicious and virtuous slurs. (Thanks to Kenny Easwaran for suggesting 'neo-liberal' as an example.)

[5]Compare Bakhtin and Medvedev 1985, p. 14 [1928], and Althusser 1965, p. 25 and 1969, p. 235.

and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world. An ideology must be a cluster, and the elements of an ideology must be mutually supporting, because these conditions are needed to make the ideology temporally persistent and socially extended. As Gramsci puts the point,

> … mass creation cannot just happen "arbitrarily", around any ideology, simply because of the formally constructive will of a personality or a group which puts it forward solely on the basis of its own fanatical philosophical or religious convictions. Mass adhesion or non-adhesion to an ideology is the real critical test of the rationality and historicity of modes of thinking. Any arbitrary constructions are pretty rapidly eliminated by historical competition, even if sometimes, through a combination of immediately favourable circumstances, they manage to enjoy popularity of a kind; whereas constructions which respond to the demands of a complex organic period of history always impose themselves and prevail in the end, even though they may pass through several intermediary phases during which they manage to affirm themselves only in more or less bizarre and heterogeneous combinations. (341)

To the extent that an ideology is "arbitrary, rationalistic, or 'willed' " it will not last as long or be as socially pervasive and invisible as one the parts of which are mutually supporting in an "historically organic" way (1971, pp. 376–377). This is not to say that any given ideology needs to be logically consistent, on my view. If the web of support relations is large enough, if consenting to the ideology is to one's own benefit, and if the relations of support are not all entailment relations (as will almost always be the case, since the norms, practices, aliefs, etc. that partially constitute an ideology may lend support and be supported without standing in entailment relations), a given ideology may conceal its tensions and inconsistencies very effectively.

The broadly Gramscian understanding of ideologies that I have outlined here generalizes some of the insights that W. E. B. Du Bois conveys through a story about a fictionalized white friend. (Others have had similar thoughts, of course, but Du Bois and Gramsci are path-breakers, and it is fascinating that the frameworks they find helpful for thinking about racism in the United States and fascism in Italy are so similar.) The story explicates race by "personifying [Du Bois's] white and colored environment" (2007 [1940], pp. 70–71). The narrator's friend finds himself subject to and to some extent identifying with each element of a set of "codes"—the code of the Christian, the code of the Gentleman, the code of the American, and the code of the White Man. Uncovering, identifying, and understanding the elements of a code, especially one's own code, is sometimes difficult work (p. 81, p. 83). After cataloging the first three codes, the narrator's friend turns to the code of the White Man.

> The statement of this fourth code of action was found in unfinished assumption rather than plain words; in unfinished sentences, in novels, in editorials written for country papers by city scriveners, in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan which he thought was extremely silly; or the Security League, which was very respectable. This code rested upon the fact that he was a White Man. …he had come to realize that his whiteness was fraught with tremendous responsibilities, age-old and infinite in future possibilities. It would seem that colored folks were a threat to the world. They were going to overthrow white folk by sheer weight of numbers, destroy their homes and marry their daughters.
>
> It was this last point that particularly got upon his nerves. He had, as I've said, a girl of fifteen, rather pretty and fragile; and he and his wife were planning already certain advantageous family and economic alliances for the young miss. Much of their social life was already being guided to this end. Now, imagine a world where she would have to repel the advances of Japanese or Negroes! (p. 81)

The narrator's friend goes on to articulate a code which revolves around War ("Not only preparedness nor simply defense, but war against the darker races"), Hate ("there can be no effective war, no determination to fight evil to the death, without full-bellied Hate!"), Suspicion, Exploitation ("No sense in letting Roosevelt and the 'New Deal' mislead you. The poor must be poor so that the Rich may be Rich"), and Empire ("Naturally white men would and must rule and any question of their ruling should be met and settled promptly") (pp. 81–82).

When the narrator's friend tabulates the elements of all four codes he finds that they involve quite a bit of inconsistency. The narrator comments that "It is not only dilemma, it is almost quadri-lemma," but commends his friend for seeing the tensions between these codes:

> My friend's fault is that he is logical. His reasoning is a clean, simple process like two plus two equal four. This is the cause of his present unrest. Other folk are deliciously impervious to reason. They are pacifists with the help of the police and backed by careful preparation for war. … They believe in liberty under a firm police system backed by patriotism and an organization of work which will yield profit to capital. (p. 83)

The fact that so many are impervious to reason, by Du Bois's lights, suggests that Du Bois also sees particular ideologies as tacit and challenging to characterize. Just as importantly for my purposes, Du Bois also sees a particular ideology as a cluster of elements which mutually support each other.[6] That is, he does not think an isolated

[6]There's ample evidence for this kind of view elsewhere in Du Bois: see, e.g., his discussion of eco-

element of an ideology—a belief, say, that people in one group are more hypocritical or lazier or meaner or stingier than people in another group, or a practice of distrusting women's testimony and trusting men's—could persist for very long. The mutual support relations between the elements of an ideology help that ideology perpetuate itself across people and over time.

## 3. Cueing Ideologies

On my view, uses of slurs *cue* ideologies to do certain things. I mean to draw on two standing senses of the verb 'cue' here. First, to cue a piece of recorded audio or video is to ensure that it is in position for playback or editing. Second, to cue an actor or musician is to signal that that person should begin or enter. Similarly, to successfully *cue* an ideology to $\phi$ is both to put the ideology 'into position' to $\phi$—to make it easily able to $\phi$—and to signal that the ideology *should* $\phi$. A speaker who tries to use a slur in a harmful way toward their addressee attempts to cue an ideology to do something that harms their addressee. That is, they attempt to ensure that an ideology is in a position to harm their addressee, and to signal that that ideology should harm the addressee. (I often write as though exactly one ideology is associated with any given slur and any given act of slurring, but this is only for simplicity.) Those who deny that ideologies act should think of these aspects of ideology cueing as simply facilitating events that are in consonance with the relevant ideology.[7]

An example will help fix ideas. Although it is very, very mild compared to many racial, ethnic, religious, and gender slurs, 'nerd' is illustrative: it exposes important general features of slurs and helps elicit relevant intuitions without the distractions that come with more vicious slurs. Many uses of 'nerd' cue an ideology found in many middle schools in the United States, which associates certain groups of people with concern for academic achievement, social awkwardness, shyness, obsessiveness, and so on. I'll call these groups of people '$\mathcal{A}$-groups.' That ideology treats as normal (even as praiseworthy) disparaging, subjugating ways of interacting with and regarding people in $\mathcal{A}$-groups. It also includes a sort of hierarchy amongst groups of people such that people in $\mathcal{A}$-groups rank lower in the hierarchy than people in many other groups—for example, people in traditionally 'feminine' or 'masculine' groups. And according to the ideology, people ranked by the hierarchy deserve their respective places in that hierarchy.

Ideologies like this one influence the actions of those who consent to the ideology, but to varying degrees and extents at different times. Because cueing an ideology to $\phi$ both puts the ideology into position to make it easily able to $\phi$ and signals that the

nomic inequality (2007, p. 65).

[7] Thanks to John Protevi for discussion here.

ideology should $\phi$, cueing an ideology often makes that ideology have more influence than it otherwise would. Consider, for example, the speech that Coach Harris (played by John Goodman) gives in the 1984 comedy *Revenge of the Nerds* after the 'jocks' lose the talent show:

> You know, when you were a baby in your crib, your father looked down at you, he had but one hope—someday my son will grow to be a man. Well look at you now. You just got your asses whipped by a bunch of goddamn nerds. *Nerds!* Well, if I was you, I'd do something about it. I would get up and redeem myself in the eyes of my father, my maker, and my *coach!*

Coach Harris cues the middle school ideology I described above to motivate his players. His use of the word 'nerd' carries a conversational implicature that it is acceptable, all things considered, for him to use the word 'nerd' in this context and in this way. For it to be so acceptable, the ideology associated with 'nerd' would itself have to be acceptable—indeed even *good*—to endorse or consent to. This implicature helps ensure that the middle school ideology is well-positioned to motivate Coach Harris's players, because their coach's endorsement of the ideology encourages them to endorse it as well. And Coach Harris signals that the ideology should motivate his players, by using 'nerd' in the particular way that he does—as reprobation for a poor performance. He implicates that the ideology should drive his players to act out a certain role within it, because his uses of 'nerd' would not be acceptable if he did not have that intention.

It's not part of my view that Coach Harris *deliberately* positions the relevant ideology to motivate his players, or that he *deliberately* signals that it should motivate them. Many uses of 'dog-whistle' language do involve deliberate cueing of ideologies (Haney López 2014), but ideologies also may be cued without the speaker's intent. Indeed, one can even cue an ideology while intending *not* to cue that ideology. So in some ways the relation between a use of a slur and the ideology cued by that slur resembles the reference relation. Both are often not transparent to competent language users: just as a speaker may refer to Spiro Agnew while having no idea that they are so doing (Kaplan 1978, p. 239), a speaker may cue an ideology and have no idea that they are so doing. Similarly, whether a person cues an ideology is often a matter of the social, causal, and historical context. Again, we see the same phenomenon with reference:

> …*even those propositional attitudes not infected by incomplete understanding* depend for their content on social factors that are independent of the individual, asocially and non-intentionally described. For

> if the social environment had been appropriately different, the contents of those attitudes would have been different. (Burge 1979, pp. 84–85)[8]

Coach Harris's use of 'nerd' wouldn't motivate his players as well as it does if it were not for the ready-to-hand ideology cued by his use. That ideology's accessibility is due in part to social, causal, and historical facts about the speech situation. Variations in those facts could make the ideology hard or even impossible to cue.

One important disanalogy between slurs and, say, proper names, is that with slurs most if not all uses of the slur add to the facts that give the word its distinctive properties; proper names generally don't work this way. Robert Stalnaker in particular argues that one of Kripke's key insights is to distinguish questions of "descriptive semantics" from questions of "foundational semantics." The former are questions about what semantic values expressions contribute to complex expressions of which they are a part; the latter are questions about "what makes it the case that the language spoken by a particular individual or community has a particular descriptive semantics" (1997, p. 535). By separating these questions, Stalnaker argues, we are able to give an answer to the first that is a patent non-answer to the second (namely, directly referential semantics), and an answer to the second that is a patent non-answer to the first (for example, a causal theory of reference). Slurs are different, insofar as simply using a slur in a way that cues an ideology buttresses the association between that slur and that ideology. There need be no "initial 'baptism' " that is the font from which facts about subsequent uses flow (Kripke 1980, p. 96). Rather, when a word is repeatedly used in a way that reflects features of a salient ideology, language users within earshot of those uses increasingly tend to associate the word with that ideology (compare Butler 1993, p. 171). Eventually, uses of the word more and more readily cue the ideology, and with more and more intensity, whatever else is going on in the context, and whether or not the word scopes under negation, epistemic modals, and so on. A slur, as a linguistic tool, cues the ideology that makes it powerful regardless of exactly where and how it is used—though like any tool it can be put to better and worse ends.

Coach Harris's speech to his players is a stark example of ideology cueing: his positioning of the ideology so that it easily can motivate their behavior and his signaling that the ideology should motivate their behavior could not be more vivid. But ideology cueing can be much subtler than that, and generally is. One thing ideologies can do, on my view, is provide speakers with the feeling that they are justified in using a slur—that the targets of the slur either deserve or are not unduly affected by any harm resulting from the use of the slur. Among other things, in using a slur

[8] Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s analytic philosophy of language paid increasing attention to social dimensions of language. It's an interesting question why the discussion didn't go far beyond 'Madagascar,' 'beech,' and 'arthritis,' but I won't try to answer it here.

a speaker positions an ideology to make that ideology able to justify that use of the slur, and also signals that the ideology should make the speaker feel justified in using the slur.

Not all ideology cueing is bad, however. For example, ideology cueing can also constitute a helpful part of ideology *critique*. Consider how James Baldwin cues racist ideology in his letter to his nephew, the first essay in *The Fire Next Time:*

> …[your grandfather] had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him. This is one of the reasons that he became so holy. I am sure that your father has told you something about all that. Neither you nor your father exhibit any tendency towards holiness: you really *are* of another era, part of what happened when the Negro left the land and came into what the late E. Franklin Frazier called the "cities of destruction." You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger.* I tell you this because I love you, and please don't you ever forget it. (1962, p. 291)

Baldwin evokes racial ideology by describing its historical legacy throughout the passage. Both through that evocation and through his mention of an especially vicious and historically loaded slur, Baldwin positions a racial ideology to make it able to impress on his nephew how dangerous it is, and signals that the ideology *should* impress his nephew with how dangerous it is. Baldwin is mentioning the slur to help him critique the ideology that his mention of the slur cues. He is cueing the ideology nevertheless. If he had used a euphemism to mention that slur—' 'n-word' ', for example—then different ideologies would be cued, and the ideologies that the two expressions both cue would be cued in different ways, so that he would have signaled that they should do different things. This is part of what makes Baldwin's word choice so powerful in context.

Even *using* a slur can sometimes be helpful in critiquing the ideology associated with that slur. For example, in his *Strange Fruit* (2014), Joel Christian Gill depicts prejudiced, aggressive agents of Jim Crow as crows *simpliciter*, and depicts their use of conventionalized linguistic slurs using a graphic slur—a conventionalized caricature of black people (see Figure 1). Again, in this excerpt Gill positions a racial ideology to make it able to impress us with its effects, and signals that the ideology should impress us with its effects. Gill's choice to substitute the caricature for speech laden with racial slurs reveals his deep understanding of the function of such speech—two aspects of it in particular. First, the differences between the caricature and the faces of his characters couldn't be clearer. Part of what makes Gill's choice powerful is the clarity of that difference: slurs misrepresent, in a certain sense (Richard 2008, pp. 12–41). Second, and more importantly for my purposes, Gill's choice is powerful


Figure 1: Cueing a racist ideology

also because it so starkly cues an ideology that has real and horrible material effects. Those effects—and that cueing when racist ideology is being cued for harm—harm in ways that go far beyond the fact that one person has misrepresented another with a particular use of a slur.

On my view, slurs like those mentioned by Baldwin and used by Gill have what Jabari Asim calls an "inescapable association with white supremacy" (2007, p. 194). This association makes Asim worry that "Because gangsta rap turns a blind eye to history, it often abets a white supremacist agenda by keeping alive dangerous stereotypes linking African Americans to laziness, criminal violence, and sexual insatiability" (222). (Baldwin and Gill are of course not targeted by Asim's worry, because they carefully situate their mentions and uses of slurs in historical context.) To what extent, then, is gangsta rap able to critique ideology? Take as an example Tupac Shakur's "Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.," (1993) which Asim criticizes for "slavishly adher[ing]" to genre conventions that glorify hedonism and nihilism. While there is little explicit discussion of history in Shakur's lyric, ideology makes history present, whether or not it is explicitly discussed. Bearing this in mind, close attention to Shakur's lyric reveals a pointed critique that crucially deploys a hotly contested word: "I was framed, so don't make the same mistake, nigga / You gotta learn how to shake the snakes, nigga / 'Cuz the police love to break a nigga / Send 'em upstate 'cuz they straight-up hate the niggas." Here Shakur transitions from using 'nigga' in an affectionate way, as a vocative addressing his intended audience, to using it in a distanced way, as though he is indirectly quoting racists: "Send 'em upstate 'cuz they straight-up hate the niggas." In this line, and to some extent in the preceding line ("love to break a nigga"), we simultaneously hear the voice of racist police and Shakur's ironic, distanced voicing of the voice of racist police.[9] Shakur's use of 'nigga' thus helps position racist ideology for critique, and Shakur implicates that the ideology should appall us. *Pace*

[9]This is an example of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "double-voiced discourse": "It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions" (1935, p. 324).

Asim, adding historical background to what is already common knowledge between Shakur and his audience is unnecessary for this critique to be successful.

By contrast, for a person in an oppressive group to engage in ideology critique by using (or even just mentioning) a slur for people in an oppressed group is generally far likelier to be harmful than for a person in the oppressed group to do so.[10] If there is a way for a person in an oppressive group to cue that ideology *without* using or mentioning a slur, then the use or mention of the slur conversationally implicates that they have some reason to use or mention the slur itself. In certain projects—for example, the one I'm engaged in here—this may be necessary. For critiquing the *ideology itself,* however, it may not be necessary. When it's not necessary, the open-endedness of the implicature often raises the possibility that the ideology is intended to be cued in a harmful way. Even if that possibility is somehow excluded, the implicature also raises the possibility that the speaker is not paying sufficient attention to the relationship between language and ideology. When a person in an oppressed group uses a slur in ideology critique, the situation is radically different. For them to use the slur evokes *their own* harms and the harms of those very close to them, as in the Baldwin passage above. And this can be an extremely potent part of ideology critique.

## 4. Slurs Strengthen Ideologies

This section discusses three ways in which uses of slurs often strengthen ideologies. A speaker who uses a slur often (1) further emboldens themself to enact the ideology cued by the use of the slur; (2) signals to others in the linguistic community that the speaker consents to that ideology; and (3) emboldens others to consent to and enact the ideology as well. Speakers can use slurs *without* these effects—as Baldwin and Gill do—in projects of ideology critique and erosion. And it's likely that many uses of slurs contribute to ideology critique and erosion, to some extent, and at the same time harm, since different audiences may take a given use in different ways. For the rest of this section, however, I focus on uses of slurs that mainly inflict harm.

First, in using a slur, a speaker often further emboldens themself to enact the ideology associated with the slur. Unless the speaker has misjudged the speech situation, they will largely 'get away' with using the slur, which gives them a *pro tanto* reason to think that their use of the slur and the concomitant cueing of an ideology is permissible or at least not likely to lead to sanction. This gives the speaker a *pro*

[10] While the connections between uses of slurs and ideologies are more important than the connections between mentions of slurs and ideologies, the latter are still important. It would be offensive to mention a slur in a problem set on quotation, say, even if the mention was non-conventionalized or surreptitious—as in an analogue of Tool 2, above. See also Butler 1997, pp. 99–100 and Tirrell 1999, p. 50.

*tanto* reason to think that the ideology associated with the slur is justified, and that actions indicating or encouraging consent to that ideology are permissible. Finally, such a speaker often not only indicates but also inflames their own feelings of superiority and difference when they use the slur, by emphasizing the differences they see between themself and the target of their slur—their feeling, in the case of a racial slur, that "the subordinate race is intrinsically different and alien" (Blumer 1958, p. 4; see also Tirrell2012, pp. 190–191).

Second, in using a slur a speaker often conversationally implicates that they consent to the ideology cued by the slur, because an abductive explanation of the speaker's finding their use of the slur acceptable will often have to posit consent to that ideology. (It is important to remember that the notion of consent I am working with here is thin: a speaker may consent to an ideology unwittingly, and unwittingly implicate that they so consent.) Here is an example, from a conversation transcribed at a baked goods company in 2002:

> … there was one situation where a warehouse gate was broken. Keith, a white warehouse worker in his early 40s, called up the supervisor, Sam, a white warehouse distribution manager in his mid-50s, and explained the problem to him. "Fix it real fast," Sam commanded. Keith, however, remarked, "There's no way I can fix this shit. I can't even nigger-rig it." After throwing his head back and laughing, Sam responded, "The proper terminology is Afro-engineering." Here, blackness is demarcated in a classed way. "Nigger-rigging" is a quick, temporary fix to a problem, but it is a solution that is second rate to the "right" way. …
>
> In this backstage setting, Sam did much more than let Keith's remarks remain unchallenged. … By responding indirectly to Keith's comment, Sam consents to this classed usage of the word nigger. (Embrick and Henricks 2015, p. 56)

Let's set aside the ways in which Keith and Sam are harmed in this exchange to focus on a less direct but more consequential form of harm. Through their uses of conventional and *ad hoc* slurs, Keith and Sam indicate to each other that they both consent to racist ideology. Indeed, their uses of these slurs ensure that it is possible for them to coordinate on—and potentially act on—that consent. Thus their uses of slurs strengthen the racist ideology cued by those slurs, by making manifest facts about the boundaries of the group that consents to the ideology. The features of those boundaries are often not clear to individuals, and even more often they are not common knowledge. So uses of slurs contribute to the power, persistence, and growth of the ideologies they cue.

Third, in using a slur a speaker often emboldens others to consent to and enact the ideology. We don't have enough information about the circumstances of the

conversation described above to know that that conversation is an example of that phenomenon. But it would not be shocking to learn that Sam, or someone like him, would not use a racial slur—even an *ad hoc* one like "Afro-engineering"—without prompting or encouragement. Suppose for sake of argument that this is true of the case Embrick and Henricks describe. Then Keith's slur emboldens Sam to deepen his consent to racist ideology, and to use an *ad hoc* slur to cue that ideology to create a feeling of solidarity with Keith. Their solidarity is forged from their manifest endorsement of that racist ideology and their endorsement of a related ideology that dismisses and disparages what Sam calls "proper terminology." Slurs can obviously incite more dramatic and direct harms as well, with the help of the ideologies they cue.

It's important to note that some theorists seem broadly sympathetic to the line I am developing in this paper, but don't draw quite the connections to ideology that I am emphasizing, and so would have trouble explaining the phenomena in this section without appealing to something like my approach. Elisabeth Camp, for example, writes that "by employing a slur in a relevant context and with a relevant tone of voice, a speaker not only manifests her own contempt, but also evokes all those other people who feel contempt for *G*s, which feeling they are prepared to enforce in a range of reprehensible ways" (2013, p. 339).[11] In particular, Camp sees slurs as harmful not just because they convey the speaker's contempt, but also because they "evoke" others' contempt and ways of acting on that contempt. Camp's move from an individualistic conception of the harms associated with slurs to a more social notion goes in the right direction. But we need to push the social move farther—to the point of involvement with ideology—to explain how the use of a slur cues an ideology as an "historically organic" (Gramsci 1971, pp. 376–377), socially extended and temporally persistent cluster of beliefs, interests, norms, practices, values, affective dispositions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world. This is what allows me to explain how uses of slurs strengthen ideologies, as opposed to just strengthening contempt. Also, many theorists working in terms of relations of subordination (MacKinnon 1987 and 1993, Langton 1993 and others) may be broadly sympathetic to my project. However, I do not think that to cue an ideology is *ipso facto* to subordinate. And so the Authority Problem—the problem of saying what gives certain speakers the kind of authority necessary to subordinate and silence others with their speech—is not a problem for my view.[12]

[11] For similar views, see Hayes 1981, p. 33 (cited in Tirrell 1999), Butler 1993, p. 171, and Butler 1997, p. 80.

[12] For an excellent discussion of subordination and racist speech, see Maitra 2012.

## 5. Ideologies Contribute to the Power of Slurs

This section argues that ideologies contribute to slurs' power and harmfulness in crucial ways. The many theorists who are careful not to include a 'that's all' clause in their analyses of slurs may be able to help themselves to aspects of my account here. But if they do not supplement their accounts with some attention to the contributions of ideology, their explanations of the harms done by slurs will remain incomplete.

Appeal to ideology very fruitfully supplements certain views of slurs. For example, Mark Richard writes that

> A slur is a device made to denigrate, abuse, intimidate, and show contempt. Such is its conversational potential. But because of this it is also a device that is used to portray, to represent its targets. The racist *thinks of* the targets of a slur S as Ss. (Indeed, he wants us and the targets themselves to think of them(selves) in this way.) (2008, p. 40)

But what is it to think of the target of a slur S *as* an S? Here I think ideology has a crucial role to play. It's not enough simply to think of the target "as contemptible" "on the basis of his being" in a certain group (40). Rather, the ideology associated with S must be woven into one's thoughts, attitudes, values, affective dispositions, and practices with respect to the target: one cannot think of a person as an S without consenting to the ideology cued by uses of S. Using a slur S thus implicates that the speaker consents to a certain ideology and thinks it acceptable to so consent. The slur's punch thus has the weight of that ideology behind it.

Appeal to ideology also complements Richard's view, and many others. The fact that a speaker who uses a slur consents to a certain ideology, and cues that ideology in using the slur, gives the use of the slur a potential to harm that derives in part from the very ideology that the speaker cues. As Judith Butler writes,

> …in the speaking of [a racial slur], one chimes in with a chorus of racists, producing at that moment the linguistic occasion for an imagined relation to an historically transmitted community of racists.… racist speech could not act as racist speech if it were not *a citation of itself;* only because we already know its force from its prior instances do we know it to be so offensive now, and we brace ourselves against its future invocations. (1997, p. 80)

But I want to go farther than Butler on this point: racist speech harms not just because it evokes past racist speech, but also because it evokes past racist actions, institutions, practices, scripts, and structures that were enabled by and that help constitute the ideology cued by the speech. And racist speech threatens not just because the ideology

it cues helps enable future racist speech, but also because that ideology helps enable future racist actions, institutions, practices, scripts, and structures.

Slurs that aren't particularly racist, sexist, classist, and so on—slurs like 'nerd'—help illustrate how the harm of a slur is affected by the harmfulness of the ideology that the slur cues.[13] Uses of 'nerd' targeted at a middle schooler are more harmful than uses targeted at an adult in part because the ideology cued by 'nerd' is so much more harmful to the middle schooler than to the adult. Indeed, the relevant hegemonic ideology for many adults is one that inverts the middle school hierarchy. Once we see that the extent to which the harmfulness of a slur is a function of the harmfulness of the ideology cued by uses of that slur, we can appreciate why slurs for dominant groups don't have much sting. 'Honky' and 'cracker' don't have much sting, for example—particularly when targeting the sort of white person that Chevy Chase and Richard Pryor caricature in the famous job interview comedy sketch[14]—because the ideology they cue doesn't have much negative effect on people like the interviewer. The horrible material effects of the ideology cued by the interviewer, by contrast, make his slurs very harmful. This comes out sharply as Pryor's character grasps for ways to match the interviewer's slurs, moving from "Honky!" to "Honky honky!" and finally "*Dead* honky." The interviewer's slurs are so much more harmful

[13]Hom 2008 makes a broadly similar point (p. 433); see also Tirrell 2012, p. 192.

[14]This sketch (Mooney 1975) is brilliant throughout, but for those who haven't seen it, here is the most important passage for my purposes:

> Interviewer (played by Chevy Chase): [casually] "Negro".
> Mr. Wilson (played by Richard Pryor): "Whitey."
> Interviewer: "Tarbaby."
> Mr. Wilson: [silent, sure he didn't hear what he thinks he heard] What'd you say?
> Interviewer: [repeating] "Tarbaby."
> Mr. Wilson: "Ofay."
> Interviewer: "Colored."
> Mr. Wilson: "Redneck."
> Interviewer: "Junglebunny."
> Mr. Wilson: [starting to get angry] "Peckerwood!"
> Interviewer: "Burrhead."
> Mr. Wilson: [defensive] "Cracker!"
> Interviewer: [aggressive] "Spearchucker."
> Mr. Wilson: "White trash!"
> Interviewer: "Jungle Bunny!"
> Mr. Wilson: [upset] "Honky!"
> Interviewer: "Spade!"
> Mr. Wilson: [really upset] "Honky Honky!"
> Interviewer: [relentless] "Nigger!"
> Mr. Wilson: [immediate] "Dead honky!" [face starts to flinch]

Mooney discusses its genesis in his 2009, pp. 162–165.

than the interviewee's because slurs for black people in the United States cue ideologies that are so much more harmful and threatening than the ideologies cued by slurs for white people. This difference means that, in the end, for the interviewee to meet the interviewer's slurs he must make a fully explicit threat.

## 6. From Slurs to Slurring Language…

Many theories of slurs don't generalize to *slurring language* more broadly construed—that is, to language used to slur which may or may not contain conventionalized slurs. This is a real disadvantage of such theories, in part because it makes the evolution of slurs harder to explain. By appealing to acceptability implicatures and the ways in which they help cue ideologies, we can get broader empirical coverage and a more unified explanation of slurring language.

I earlier discussed one example of what I call an *ad hoc* slur: " 'The proper terminology is 'Afro-engineering' " (Embrick and Henricks 2015, p. 56). In the relevant context, the use of 'Afro-engineering' cues an ideology of white racism toward blacks in the United States and a related ideology of dismissiveness toward 'political correctness.' This is because the warehouse manager's use of the term implicates that it's acceptable to use it in the context, and a speaker generally would not find it acceptable to use it in this context unless they consented to those ideologies and wanted to cue those ideologies in particular ways. Namely, the use positions those ideologies so that they are able to be manifestly endorsed by both conversational participants, and signals that they should manifestly endorse those ideologies. Although there is no conventional connection or historical association between the expression 'Afro-engineering' and these ideologies, it's not at all hard to see the intended connection. Indeed, the fact that that connection is clear despite the absence of conventional connection between 'Afro-engineering' and these ideologies helps underscore the ideologies' clustering nature, power, and pervasiveness. Similarly, the dehumanizing ideology of slavery in the United States is cued by what Hortense Spillers calls the "simultaneity of disparate items" in contemporaneous legal documents: " 'Slave' appears in the same context with beasts of burden, all and any animal(s), various livestock, and a virtually endless profusion of domestic content from the culinary item to the book" (1987, p. 79). This stylistic mannerism adds to the cueing that is done with 'slave,' but *not* as a matter of convention.

In other cases a great deal of information about the conversational context is necessary to see that a use of a word is intended to cue an oppressive ideology. Depending on the context, a wealthy white person who calls a Hispanic man working as a day laborer 'Paco' might be slurring that man, but also might not be. (Suppose it's common knowledge between them that the man's first name is Francisco, that 'Paco' is a diminutive for 'Francisco,' that they are such close friends that using a diminutive is

natural, perhaps that they are both fluent in Spanish, and so on.) Because some uses of 'Paco' constitute slurring language, and some do not, we can't simply categorize 'Paco' as a slur. And it's implausible to think that it's ambiguous between a slur and a non-slur. Similarly, 'Cuffy' and 'Rastus' are (antiquated) slurs as well as being widely used names for enslaved people. At various times in the histories of their use they could in principle be used without slurring, depending on context (Green 2011).

Part of what makes slurring uses of all these names so offensive is the way in which they cue ideologies committed to interchangeability of certain persons. The historian Edward Baptist aptly puts the point, citing attested examples like "I suppose you are not buying any Cuffys right now" and "The price of Cuffy comes on" to argue that "The singular term 'Cuffy' standardized the human produce shipped from the Chesapeake, using a partitive term to imply that selling slaves was no different from selling 'soup' or 'lumber.' The product was uniform: the main difference between one and thirty was one of the quantity of packages" (2001, p. 1633).[15] What makes slurring uses of generic names harmful is not *simply* something conventional about the names: conventions to use a name generically contribute to those uses' harmfulness but do not exhaust it. This is because the speaker's implicature that it's acceptable not to care about what their addressee's name really is—because it doesn't really matter which particular person being addressed—is not wholly conventionalized. Using *any* name common to persons in an oppressed group in a way that manifests blatant disregard for a given person's actual name is offensive, because of this acceptability implicature. When a slurring use of a generic name happens to be directed at a person who does have that name, we find fascinating counterexamples to Rebecca Kukla and Mark Lance's view that "To utter a vocative is to *call* another person—in calling out 'Hello, Eli!' I *recognize* the fact that that person there is Eli, and I do so *by* calling *upon him* to recognize that he has been properly recognized" (2009, p. 138; see also Althusser 1970 and 2014, pp. 189–191, and Korsgaard 1996, pp. 139–140). Kukla and Lance are absolutely right, I think, to say this about non-slurring uses of names. And this is part of what makes it so offensive for a speaker to brazenly disregard a person's actual name, as in slurring uses of 'Paco,' 'Cuffy,' 'Rastus,' and the like.

Here is another example of non-conventionalized slurring. A recent Saturday Night Live sketch depicted a morning television show taking place in Greater St. Louis, in the wake of the grand jury's decision not to indict Darren Wilson. The hosts—Jenny (a white woman) and Kip (a black man)—are interviewing a guest (Chef Daryl).

[15] See also Newbell Niles Puckett, who writes that "…slaves seem to have been simply merchandise *en masse,* not distinguished by individual names until they had entered into the occupational life of their subsequent owners. …A name gives individuality and character even to animals. The slave, until his purchase, had neither" (1981, p. 158 [1938]).

> Jenny: …now this fritatta got an award at the Aspen Food and Wine Festival.
> Chef Daryl: Yes. It won the Grand Jury Prize. And who am I to argue with a grand jury?
> Kip: Oh my God!
> Chef Daryl: Sorry, sorry. I heard that as I was saying it.
> Jenny: Too late. You said it and now we're all on YouTube forever.[16]

James Franco in fact plays Chef Daryl as though his word choice was just accidental—this is part of the conceit of the sketch, which is full of similar examples. But we can easily imagine the script above being played in a different way, with Chef Daryl slurring without using any conventionalized slurs. Played that way—with, e.g., a sneering tone and emphasis on 'grand jury'—Chef Daryl would cue a racist ideology. This is because his attitude would convey, via an acceptability implicature, that he manifestly endorses a racist ideology—for if he did not, he would not find the use of 'grand jury' with a sneering tone acceptable. In context it's easy to see why we make this inference. But appealing to conventionalized aspects of the meaning of 'grand jury,' whether semantic or pragmatic, won't help.

Several approaches that are otherwise quite consonant with mine are unable to make this extension to non-conventionalized slurring language. Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore, for example, argue that "slurs are prohibited words; and as such, their uses are offensive to whomever these prohibitions matter" (2013, p. 43). I agree that many slurs are prohibited, and that this contributes to the ways in which their uses harm. But we cannot simply say that slurring language in general is prohibited, unless we've identified slurring language—including non-conventionalized slurring language—to begin with. (Indeed, non-conventionalized slurring language is often a reflex of prohibited conventionalized slurring language, introduced in an effort to avoid the letter of the prohibition.) Other theorists, like Lynne Tirrell (1999), Christopher Hom (2008), and Jason Stanley (2015, p. 156), draw out important connections between slurs and ideology—significantly improving on most theories of slurs in the literature—but rely on the putative conventional nature of slurs. So they cannot explain slurring language in general.[17] Moreover, to extend accounts like theirs to non-conventionalized slurring language it is essential, I think, to conceive of ideologies in the way that I have urged—as large clusters of mutually supporting

[16] `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVzCih9RnWg`, starting at about 2:41.

[17] Although Tirrell observes that slurs project out of embedded linguistic contexts (1999, p. 50), it's not clear to me how her account is supposed to predict this, without positing and developing a distinction between inferential roles that project and inferential roles that do not. (There are similar problems for Dummett's account of slurs (1981, pp. 397, 454) and Brandom's (2000, pp. 69–72); see Williamson 2003 and 2009 for development of related criticisms.) For very compelling criticisms of Hom's view, see Jeshion 2013; see also Hornsby 2001, pp. 136–137.

beliefs, interests, norms, practices, values, affective dispositions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world. The clustering nature of ideologies keeps the range of possible explanations of non-conventionalized slurring language small enough that any given acceptability implicature cues at most a fairly small number of ideologies. If the range of explanations were very large, then too many explanations would look defensible for any given use of non-conventionalized slurring language, leaving us with no explanation of the very definite force that such language often has.

When an ideology with horrible material effects has thoroughly permeated a society, even well-intentioned uses of a term may be *de facto* slurring uses. This can cause neutral terms to evolve into slurs. 'Hearing impaired' is often used with good intentions but harmful effects, cueing an ideology of disability and deficiency.[18] 'Negro' replaced 'colored,' because 'colored' was a slur; eventually 'Negro' was a slur and needed to be replaced by 'black'; the status of 'black' is often questioned. A middle schooler in a very affluent Californian town once asked me to tell him the polite term for people from Mexico. He thought 'Mexican' was a slur, even when applied to people from Mexico. This was because he had so often heard the word used in a way that cued racist ideology. On my view, these words accrete problematic features because they are sometimes used to cue harmful racist ideology.[19] If this is right, then concern about words may distract us from the importance of the ideologies those words cue, because introducing new words or shifting to old ones doesn't prevent the ideologies from being cued. Dave Chappelle puts a version of this worry starkly: "If people stop saying the 'N' word is everything going to be equal? Is a rainbow going to come out of the sky, and all of a sudden things are going to be better for black people?" (2004). (And, tellingly, this kind of worry is not new. For example, in 1930 a still fairly liberal George S. Schuyler writes that "…it doesn't matter really a tinker's damn whether Negro is spelled with a small or large 'N,' so far as the Negro's economic, political and cultural status is concerned" (1930, p. 10).) On the other hand, my arguments in Section 4 suggested that slurs strengthen ideologies. If this is right, then the project of ideology critique might be made more effective if we can undercut the ways in which slurs strengthen ideologies, without pushing the relevant bumps to other parts of the carpet.

## 7. … and from Slurring Language to Cueing Language

Finally, this approach can be generalized from slurring language to ideology cueing language. Anderson and Lepore demur from theorizing about 'positive epithets,' writing that "Our interest is in the offense potential of certain expressions; if they

[18] Thanks to Teresa Blankmeyer Burke for this example.

[19] For another example, see the discussion of 'Jew' in Timerman 1981, pp. 60–80.

have none, we are interested in how they lost it; if they never had any, we are not interested in them" (2013, p. 47). It's hard to see what other response they could have, since it's hard to see what could play the role of prohibition for positive epithets. By contrast, I can say the laudatory aspects of a term like 'baller' or the Israeli 'sabra' are due to the ideologies that uses of them respectively cue—and that uses of such words can strengthen both the ideologies they cue and the boundaries between those who do endorse those ideologies and those who do not.

A stranger once praised my relationship with my younger son by saying "It's great that you help his mom so much." This is clearly not slurring language. But the stranger's use of 'help' did cue a particular ideology, and she did convey that that ideology should influence the way I think of my role as a parent.[20] Similarly, words that often cue class and gender ideologies—words like 'janitor,' 'secretary,' and 'stewardess'—often convey that the ideologies they cue should influence the way we think of people with certain jobs. Other words, like 'custodian,' 'administrative assistant,' and 'flight attendant,' may not cue these ideologies, or not cue them as effectively.[21] But if the objectionable aspects of the cued ideologies persist, there is a danger that, again, the new expressions will accrete social and historical relations to ideologies that are similar to those that made the old expressions problematic in the first place.

I have been suggesting that to account for the force of slurs, of other language used to slur, and even of some language not used to slur, we need to push our theorizing in a very socialized, externalist direction. In particular, we need to be careful to pay attention to the ways in which language interacts with a broader ideological background, whether or not conversational participants are aware of that background. This is some reason not to think of the contribution of conversational context solely in terms of what Stalnaker calls "mutually recognized shared information" (2002, p. 704). Our shared information just omits too many social and historical facts that are relevant to the force of language. Rather, as Bakhtin puts it,

> When we seek to understand a word, what matters is not the direct meaning the word gives to objects and emotions—this is the false front of the word; what matters is rather the actual and always self-interested *use* to which this meaning is put and the way it is expressed by the speaker, a use determined by the speaker's position (profession, social class, etc.) and by the concrete situation. *Who* speaks and under what conditions

[20] In particular, using 'help' in the way she did conveyed that she consented to that ideology, through an acceptability implicature. Following Sally Haslanger, I would say that 'mom' also cues ideologies (and indeed helps this use of 'help' cue the ideologies that it cues). But on Haslanger's view "the schemas are (in a loose sense) conventionally linked to the terms" (2013, p. 35). It's not plausible that convention explains why 'help' cues ideologies of parenting in this case.

[21] Thanks to Matt Kotzen for this suggestion.

> he speaks: this is what determines the word's actual meaning. (1935, p. 401)

The relationships between language and ideology that I have been discussing are often not part of language users' shared information, and often not part of any intentions they could articulate or even uncover. Focusing on those latter facts about the speech situation can obscure the broader situation that interests Bakhtin: a situation that includes the speaker's "position" and also the positions of interlocutors. This broader speech situation makes crucial contributions to the force of language, as I hope to have shown. But I must leave further exploration of this picture to future work.

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