



## Evaluatives and Pejoratives

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[Scuola Normale Superiore, April, 15<sup>th</sup> 2016]

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### 1 Introduction

Tackling the issues raised by evaluatives and pejoratives means to adopt an interdisciplinary perspective, where the issues in Linguistics turn out to be crucial for philosophical purposes. The first question to ask is the following: What is to be evaluative? Is it more robust than just being used evaluatively?

Väyrynen sets aside two broad notions of evaluativeness:

- a) A comparison of any kind. All gradable adjectives would be evaluative in this sense, even terms like ‘tall’.
- b) Among gradable adjectives, predicates of personal taste whose interpretation seems to depend on a judge.

The notion of evaluativeness in which philosophers are interested is more restricted than (a) and (b). There are standards, but they are not experienter/judge-dependent. Still, even with these restrictions, the class of candidate evaluative terms looks pretty heterogeneous, including at least:

- “Thin” evaluative terms (“good”/ “bad”; “right”/“wrong”, maybe even “rational”). Semantically, there is basically no restriction on what can be called “bad”, for instance; it depends on something that is extralinguistics.
- “Thick” evaluative terms (“cruel”, “courageous”, “selfish”, “smart”, “tactful”, “graceful”). Compared to thin terms, they have more descriptive information built in: not any kind of “bad” can be “cruel”.
- “Affective” terms (“desirable”, “admirable”, “contemptible”, “loathsome”, “harrowing”).

- “Pejorative” terms (racial and ethnic slurs, but also expressions like “jerk”, “bimbo”, “asshole”).

The two main claims of Väyrynen are the following: (i) An old claim, that is that thick terms and pejoratives are sufficiently dissimilar linguistically that giving different treatments of their relationship to evaluation isn't a mark against a theory; and (ii) a more recent claim, that in fact a pragmatic treatment of evaluatives and pejoratives (and of the evaluative uses of some affective terms) might be defensible. Maybe not true at the end, but at last defensible.

## 2 Thick Terms and Pejoratives

You might think that it is not so strange to find that Thick Terms and Pejoratives (especially slurs) are analyzed differently *if* they behave differently. Well, the thing is, slurs and pejoratives do have something in common. The use of each in some way involves both non-evaluative description and evaluation.

Hare, (1963), Blackburn, (1992), Gibbard, (1992) and Richard, (2008) suggest that slurs and objectionable thick terms are similar in their relation to evaluation. And indeed, there are similarities of course at least between slurs and objectionable thick terms; moreover, if we assume that in principle any thick term is open to be considered objectionable, then that is a further argument to support the parallel between slurs and thick terms in general. If you look at the discussion on slurs it is very common to locate the derogation that they carry in their semantic – broadly meant –, so truth-conditions (Hom, 2008), conventional implicatures (Whiting, 2013), and semantic rules of use (Jeshion, 2013). And indeed if you look at the discussion on thick terms, it is very common as well to locate evaluation at the semantic level, even at the truth-conditional (Kyle, 2013).

### 2.1 Linguistic Similarities

The most striking similarity between pejoratives and thick terms is that the evaluative content seems to project out from embedding at least under negation, questions, possibly modals and conditionals. Consider:

- (1) Speaker A: Hans is a kraut.  
Speaker B: No he isn't.
- (2) a. Hans is not a kraut.  
b. Is Hans a kraut?  
c. Hans might be a kraut (Or: Maybe Hans is a kraut).  
d. If Hans is a kraut, we shouldn't gossip in German.

- e. If I were racist, I probably wouldn't like krauts.

If we interpret (1) in a non-metalinguistic manner, B's denial targets the descriptive content (Hans being German). On the other hand, the mere occurrence of the slurring term "kraut" suggests that the speaker endorses the germanophobic attitude and embraces the practice of classifying and referring to Germans by using the slurring term.

When it comes to thick terms, intuitions are clearer in the case of thick terms that usually taken to be objectionable.

- (3) Madonna's show is lewd.
- a. Madonna's show isn't lewd.
  - b. Is Madonna's show lewd?
  - c. Madonna's show might be lewd.
  - d. If Madonna's show is lewd, we won't go.

Projection data like those in (2) and (3) suggest something about where to locate the evaluative content of pejoratives and evaluatives: all those contexts (like embedding in the antecedent of a conditional) block entailments; so if the evaluation survives, it means that the evaluation is not an entailment, it is not truth-conditional. Brent Kyle (Kyle, 2013), on the other hand, claims that there is a way to explain these data. For example, if I ask (3-b), I leave it open for the possibility for Madonna's show to be lewd. Whereas for a lewd-objector, that term would be empty, so it would not be employed.

### 3 Some significant linguistic differences

Let's now consider some crucial linguistic dissimilarities between pejoratives and evaluatives.

#### A. Indirect reports

- (4) Pam believes that Madonna's show is lewd. (But I think it isn't bad in any way for being sexually explicit).
- (5) Pam believes/said that Hand is a kraut (I think Hans is a fine person).

According to Väyrynen, a speaker of (4) succeeds in making it clear that she does not endorse a negative evaluation of sexual display, whereas a negative attitude seeps through the operator in (5).

We observe that pejoratives that are not slurs ("asshole", "damn", etc) behave like thick terms in this respect rather than like slurs:

- (6) Pam believes/said that Hans is a [jerk/asshole]. I think he's a nice guy.
- (7) Pam believes/said that the damn Tories are shafting the poor again. (# I think they're good guys in politics).
- (8) Pam believes/said that that asshole Hans is behind the rumors about her. (? I think Hans is a good guy).

Slurs and expressives seem to be speaker-oriented (Potts, 2005), in the sense that their use is taken to indicate that the speaker holds derogatory attitudes, even in reported speech. On the other hand, other pejoratives and thick terms are not. This might be related to the fact that the mere mention of slurs can generate discomfort, whereas mentioning objectionable thick terms does not.

**B. Valence reversal and suspension** With “Valence reversal” we refer to the following feature of thick terms: thick terms normally associated with a negative evaluation can be used to convey positive evaluation and vice versa. It is not quite the same for slurs.

- (9) The carnival was a lot of fun. But something was missing. It just wasn't lewd. I hope it'll be lewd next year.
- (10) College masters dispense hospitality. But mine is frugal.
- (11) ? Yes, he's certainly a kraut, but that's what it makes Hans such a good guy.
- (12) ? I really like Hans. I just wish he was a kraut.

Moreover, the evaluation typically associated with thick terms can be also suspended without infelicity. Again, the same does not happen for slurs.

- (13) Whether or not it's a bad thing, Madonna's show can be truthfully and neutrally described as being lewd.
- (14) # Whether or not it's a bad thing, Hans can be truthfully and neutrally described as a kraut.

#### 4 What does all this show?

The data presented in 2.2. under-determine the theoretical location of the derogative/evaluative content of slurs and thick terms. But there are enough differences that it's not a mark *against* a theory if it says that the uses of slurs and thick terms convey derogation/evaluation through different mechanisms of information transfer.

In a nutshell, the main points of Pekka Väyrynen's approach (Väyrynen, 2013) are the following:

- The overall set of data presented so far is best explained if these evaluations are implications of utterances involving thick terms which are normally “not at issue” in their literal uses in normal contexts, and which arise conversationally.
- “Not at issue”: the main point of uttering “Madonna’s show is lewd” is not to assert the evaluative content. That is backgrounded, while only the descriptive content is asserted (and this suggests a presuppositional approach).
- The fact that uses of thick terms systematically trigger certain evaluations does not show that they are systematically or lexically encoded: they are triggered in virtue of some shared extra-linguistic beliefs/knowledge concerning what sort of evaluative perspective is normally held, and commonly known to be held, by a speaker who recognizes a given thick term as “one of their words”.

## 5 A new Development

Pragmatic views of thick terms might be seen as special cases of a general pragmatic mechanism applicable also to slurs. An interesting account in this sense is the one developed by Bolinger, (2015). Bolinger’s theory is based on the contrastive choice principle, and it is based on linguistic work on impoliteness. The principle that does the explanatory work has independent support from research about impoliteness behavior and it sounds like this:

For some content  $\varphi$ , when it is common knowledge in the linguistic community that:

- i.  $\alpha$  is an expression for  $\psi$  associated with  $\varphi$ , and
- ii.  $\beta$  is an expression for  $\psi$  not associated with  $\varphi$ ,

Then the situations where the choice of expression is not forced, and the speaker is aware of (i) and (ii), selecting  $\alpha$  in contrast to  $\beta$  signals that the speaker endorses or shares  $\varphi$ .

Applied to slurs, this means that speakers can choose between a slur and its neutral counterpart and their choice signals the endorsement of the content associated to the expression.

Going back to thick terms, things are slightly more complicated, as they do not have a proper counterpart, in the sense that any paraphrase only vaguely capture the descriptive meaning. This might depend on the fact that thick terms display much more context-sensitivity than slurs; they involve multiple dimensions, for example. Just how those dimensions are established and how they are

weighed in each context is context-sensitive. Nevertheless, there are some ways to “relax” the word choice principle: speakers can signal that they do not endorse a certain evaluative content. Since thick terms do not display the same speaker-orientation of slurs, it should be possible to make it clear whether the speaker endorses a certain perspective or not.



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