

Essentialist (Mis)givings

This paper critiques Eleonore Neufeld's essentialist account of slurs, according to which they function as failed natural kind terms that encode an imagined group essence responsible for negative stereotypical features. Slurs, on this view, are informationally rich despite having empty extensions, since they presuppose a causal “mini-theory” linking imagined essence to derogatory surface features. After reconstructing Neufeld's framework within the Kripke-Putnam view on natural kind terms, I show her theory successfully explains a wide range of canonical and non-canonical slur uses. However, it also underestimates the instability of slurs in natural language. I introduce slurs as floating signifiers by demonstrating two cases where slurs' target groups are unconventional. To accommodate these cases, I propose a modest modification to Neufeld's definition of slurs that foregrounds the speaker's perspective and agency. This adjustment preserves the strengths of essentialism while offering a more politically responsible account of how slurs are discursively weaponized.

In this paper¹, I will read Eleonore Neufeld’s essentialist account of slurs, which treats them as failed natural kind terms.² Neufeld’s account is impressive both in theoretical and interdisciplinary scope. Her work marks a shift from how the analytic tradition has traditionally treated slurs — as paradigmatic hard cases to the Fregean tradition. But it is only the start, not the end of work to be done.

Neufeld assumes the Kripke-Putnam view on natural kind terms.³ I will explain key parts of this view that will be relevant. Natural kinds are categories of nouns, referred to collectively. These categories are in turn things that exist in the actual world. UNICORN⁴ is not a natural kind, because there are no unicorns in the actual world. But HORSE is a natural kind. So is DONKEY. Each kind, which is a set consisting of multiple distinct objects, is also distinct from other kinds. The kind HORSE can be expressed using a set which lists all the horses in the world.

¹ This paper would have been a non-starter without Andriy Bilenkyy. To him I owe my most heartfelt acknowledgement.

² Eleonore Neufeld, “An Essentialist Theory of the Meaning of Slurs,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 19, no. 35 (2019): 1–29, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0019.035>.

³ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Basil Blackwell: 1980), 116–55; Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning,’” *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7 (1975): 131–93, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/185225>.

⁴ A brief note on convention: I use all capital letters (e.g. HUMAN) to designate a natural kind, single quotes (‘ ’) to designate slur terms (mention as opposed to use), and double quotes (“ ”) for standard quotations.

Let us consider the natural kind HUMAN. Had I decided to list the names of all humankind, eight billion strong in a set {Neufeld, Kripke, Putnam, Camp, ...}, I would be writing out HUMAN in extension. But if I do not have nearly enough time, I may also choose to specify the set in intension. Doing so means that I specify some property which x has iff x is a human, and there are various ways to do this. I could write $\{x \mid x \text{ is a member of } Homo\ sapiens\}$.

According to the Kripke-Putnam view, natural kinds are established by fixing an exemplar and establishing similarity. To bring about HUMAN as a natural kind, I first need to find something that can serve as the archetypal representation of HUMAN. Say I pick my friend, Harold. But what counts as being similar to him? He studies physics and mathematics, but I do not. He is Canadian, but I am not. Academic interests and citizenships are not essential for humanity, then. It cannot be that the essence of HUMAN consists of socially variable factors. We want to appeal to something more innate, maybe a biological characteristic. Harold and I both have 46 chromosomes. But my other friend Gerry, who has Down syndrome, does not. So it cannot be that either.

This example is meant to illustrate that the question of essences is an open one. Even though I have succeeded in defining an intension for HUMAN as $\{x \mid x \text{ is a member of } Homo\ sapiens\}$, I have not succeeded in defining what makes someone a member of *Homo sapiens*. The latter question is the question of essence. It may just as well be that the answer is a circular

definition, that $\{x \mid x \text{ bears the human essence, to be determined}\}$. This resort exemplifies the placeholder solution.

Most contemporary theorists working with the Kripke-Putnam view have adopted the stance that natural kind essences are hidden or unobservable.⁵ Neufeld herself proposes thinking of essences as to be determined, a placeholder for the time being. For me and Neufeld, slurs are perplexing in how they seem to behave as natural kinds in some ways, but not in others. Slurs can and do have clear, identifiable initial events wherein an exemplar is selected, for one (fig. 1).

⁵ As for why the essence of a natural kind term is so elusive, one answer suggests the metaphysical premiss that is presented in terms of the “qua problem.” (see Sören Häggqvist and Åsa Wikforss, “Natural Kinds and NKTs: Myth and Reality.” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 69, no. 4 (2018): 915, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjps/axw041>.) Every speaker has a distinct psychological state (“the mental state of the speaker”) which, in concert with their community of practice, determines what their exemplar is and who to defer to. This social externalism of the speaker determines the semantic externalism of the natural kind term in question. If proper names obtain in virtue of an initial baptism event, and then through a causal chain where a speaker intends its use to be identical to the previous speaker in a perennial state of ostension and deferral *à la* Kripke, then it is clear no single causal chain can exist for natural kind terms.



Figure 1. An internet meme illustrating how an exemplar may be selected.⁶

Though she is rightfully proud that her view “does not stand or fall on the basis of a single piece of evidence”, I will show how her account can be strengthened by considering slurs as floating signifiers.⁷ I define floating signifiers as nouns (including nominalizations) which refer not to multiple, but an indeterminate number of referents.

Floating signifiers are special not only due to polysemy. Neufeld attributes to all slurs *S* negative evaluative properties. *S* is said to encode a set of derogatory features embedded semantically or conventionally in itself, the lexical item. I argue that the current framework relying on these features is

⁶ Prestigious_Cat2052 (u/Prestigious_Cat2052), “me_irl,” Reddit, November 30, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/me_irl/comments/1paoz81/me_irl/.

⁷ Neufeld, “An Essentialist Theory,” p. 23.

vulnerable because slurs are fundamentally less stable signifiers than their neutral counterparts. Signifiers float when unmoored, no longer stable.

Exegesis

Overview

The crux of Neufeld’s analytical strategy is as follows, when she lays out the truth-conditional contribution of slurs:

for a given slur S of a social group G and a person P, S is true of P iff P bears the “essence” of G – whatever that essence is – which is causally responsible for stereotypical negative features associated with G and predicted of P.⁸

Neufeld begins by arguing that “slurs are kind terms encoding an ‘essence’ of a social group, which is taken to explain a number of negative features attributed to the group.”⁹ Now let us consider the slur ‘f****t.’ In Neufeld’s view, this term encodes an apparent essence for all its bearers, those that are said to be ‘f****ts.’ These features obtain in virtue of the bearer’s membership within a socially salient group, which are not there in the slur’s neutral counterpart, the kind GAY MAN. She is

⁸ Neufeld, “An Essentialist Theory,” p. 3.

⁹ Neufeld, “An Essentialist Theory,” p. 2.

insistent that this essence does not actually exist, precisely because there is no actual quality uniting bearers of a slur. The kind F****T does not exist, and bearers of ‘f****t’ do not actually possess some negative quality that is essential to their identity. In other words, though the essence for regular natural kinds such as GAY MAN is hidden, unobservable, or a placeholder notion, there is just no property which x has iff x is a f****t. Any attempt at specifying an essence, its homophobia aside, would lead us back to the regular natural kinds. But slurs are clearly different from those in their evaluative connotation.

Slurs differ from their neutral counterparts in that they are dehumanizing, and this dehumanizing nature is present in all slurs. Dehumanization is therefore at the heart of slur use, even when a slur’s speaker does not use the slur exclusively (one may alternate between ‘f****t’ and ‘gay men’ to describe gay men). Someone may use a slur at a particular moment, while resorting to the neutral counterpart otherwise. Neufeld argues that this is because the two terms are not synonymous, but are related in some way (“counterparts”, “slur-relative”).

Therefore, a slur does not actually refer to its bearers, contrary to what its speaker may believe. For that reason, I will write “essence” in quotes moving forward, to emphasize, much like Neufeld does, that there are no individuals who are essentially less human, contrary to what slurs suggest:

More concretely, there is no such thing as a “gayness essence” which disposes male homosexuals to carry HIV or dress stylishly. There is no such thing as a “blackness

essence” which causes black people to deal drugs or receive welfare. Thus, the semantic contents of slurring words are empty.¹⁰

But though the extension of $F^{****}T$ is empty such that $\{f^{****}t\} = \emptyset$ (hence “failed” natural kind terms), slurs are also not semantic failures. In fact, as Neufeld admits, they are quite “informationally rich.”¹¹ Neufeld proposes that a slur has three core elements. We have so far described the first and most important, which is the “essence”, also the slur’s “causal component.”¹² Slurs differ from evaluatively neutral natural kind terms in that the features they encode (in contrast to neutral features) play a special causal role. A slur’s derogatory “essence”, in contrast to a non-slur’s neutral one, causes the bearer of a slur to be viewed in dehumanized form.

Whilst both ‘ $f^{****}t$ ’ and ‘gay man’ pick out members of some social group G in conventional use – that is, gay men – ‘ $f^{****}t$ ’ is negative not only in connotation. According to Neufeld, it also evokes particularly negative stereotype features of gay men, which is the second core element of slurs: pointing to negative stereotypes that are iconic of the group G . For the homophobe who earnestly believes that there is an essence

¹⁰ Neufeld, “An Essentialist Theory,” p. 3.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 6.

¹² Ibid. p. 3.

undergirding F****T, these stereotypes are proof. Their reasoning posits “essence” as mutually constitutive with what they observe:

- “essence” \Rightarrow “observable surface features”
- e.g. “He’s a f****t, so he has to talk like he’s on helium 24/7.”

as well as:

- “observable surface features” \Rightarrow “essence”
- e.g. “He talks like he’s on helium 24/7, so he’s a f****t.”

Finally, there is the causal law relating “essence” with the stereotypes in the context of utterance, which altogether comprise the slur’s “mini-theory.”¹³ We can see how a slur’s bearer is caught in a double bind, damned if they do not (former), and damned if they do (latter). That is because all slurs presume a static typology of what its bearers must be like, whether or not they actually are, which is why slurs say more about its speakers than bearers. An imagined other cannot talk back.

Neufeld then examines seven different cases of slur usage, and shows how she accounts for each of them, including where

¹³ Ibid. p. 4.

her account differs from those of others. One of the seven is standard derogatory use like the example we have just discussed. She also treats G-extending and G-contracting as two cases, but I will discuss them in tandem for clarity.

G-Extending and G-Contracting

Consider two sets. One is the set containing the bearers of S. The other is the set containing bearers of some evaluatively neutral way to pick out members of G. The difference between G-extending and G-contracting is a matter of which set is a subset/superset of the other. In both, we are presuming that they are not equal, where

- $\{x \mid x \text{ is the bearer of 'f****t'}\} \neq \{x \mid x \text{ is the bearer of 'gay man'}\}$.

In G-extending cases, the slur is the hypernym, such that:

- $\{x \mid x \text{ is the bearer of 'f****t'}\} \supseteq \{x \mid x \text{ is the bearer of 'gay man'}\}$
- e.g. “He’s a f****t, though he’s not gay.”

In G-contracting cases, the slur is the hyponym, such that:

- $\{x \mid x \text{ is the bearer of 'f****t'}\} \subsetneq \{x \mid x \text{ is the bearer of 'gay man'}\}$
- e.g. “He’s not a f****t, though he’s gay.”

This case demonstrates well that slurs are truth-conditionally separate from their neutral counterparts, and as such are essentially different.

Non-Derogatory, Non-Appropriated (NDNA) Use

Neufeld considers a case with the slur ‘chink’ and its neutral counterpart ‘Chinese.’ As she writes, “‘Chinese’ and ‘chink’ are not synonymous according to my account; only the latter term is true of those individuals that share a ‘Chinese essence’ which causes them to exhibit negative stereotypical features.”¹⁴ But NDNA use, as she sees it, is more than just a matter of distancing slurs from their neutral counterparts semantically. We have already established that in the above case.

The difference between NDNA use and G-extending/contracting, as Neufeld argues, is that slurs are used in NDNA cases as part of a broader evaluative statement which does seem to be morally acceptable. Such a use is what cancels (if not completely) their being derogatory. Consider these two statements:

- He has a name, and it’s ‘chink.’ (obviously derogatory)
- He has a name, and it’s not ‘chink.’ (much less derogatory)

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 13.

Null-Extension

Neufeld acknowledges that certain negative stereotypes are sociohistorically grounded. In other words, there is a causal connection between membership in G and possessing negative stereotypes associated with G, mediated by structural injustices. A slur may then pass the causal requirement and refer. One thinks of Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son* as a poignant portrait of how African-American identity, paradigmatic of any racialized identity, is caught in a vicious cycle of being both perpetrator and victim of labels of deviance.¹⁵

But as Neufeld would argue, to identify Wright’s protagonist, Bigger, with a slur would be to suggest that he “possesses some intrinsic ‘[blackness] essence.’”¹⁶ Such a suggestion would be mistaken, as it would be confusing the features – causally rooted in oppression – with the “essence.” The latter, as Neufeld shows, has to be intrinsic, but with Bigger,

¹⁵ Readers charitable to my sociological background may be interested in Howard Becker’s labelling theory (a cornerstone of contemporary social psychology) for a perspective on how slurs cause the slurred upon to see themselves in terms of the slur’s presuppositions, thereby internalizing pejorative affect. This phenomenon is perhaps best thought of as delivering the opposite of the emancipation that comes with appropriated uses. It is perhaps interesting to consider the sociological questions surrounding (in)appropriate use, but to venture farther into the social construction of slurs would be outside the scope of this paper.

¹⁶ Neufeld, “An Essentialist Theory,” 3, pp. 13–14.

as with all African-Americans and racialized people, it is not. It is a social property. There is a plethora of sociological literature on the construction of “blackness” and “whiteness” as an imagined dichotomy *vis-à-vis* colonial hegemony which was first and foremost a moral project. Its goal was to distill into the colonized (in this case “blackness”) a genuine psychological inferiority, as part of what Frantz Fanon termed a Manichaeian world.

She goes on to explain null-extension cases which are trivially true, which need not concern us here.

Derogatory Projection

Derogatory projection refers to the use of slurs in a way such that their existence is presupposed, even if their “essence” is not the focus of the assertion. Such a use is more indirectly derogatory, but Neufeld’s account is still able to deny the presuppositions as false when the slurs themselves fail, if separate from the assertion itself.

Derogatory Variation

Finally, derogatory variation addresses the fact that not all slurs are equal. Rather, slurs vary in degrees of dehumanization, which are accounted for by degrees of essentialization. The most derogatory slurs are the slurs which insult the most personal. At the start of the exegesis, I emphasized specifically the bearer’s membership within a socially salient group. A slur relating to my membership in a group which prefers pumpkin over pecan pie

(‘pumpkinhead’) seems innocuous, because the essentialization of food preference pales in salience compared to that of race, sexual orientation, or other demographic factors.

Interdisciplinary Connections

Neufeld concludes with evidence from cognitive psychology on how humans categorize objects in terms of natural kinds, boundaries between these natural kinds therefore being seen as immutable. More specifically, she mentions how nominalization contributes to a feeling of essentialization as an immutable part of identity. Describing someone as a *x*, where *x* is a noun, contributes much more to *x*-ness being seen as a part of their identity than simply saying that someone is/does *x*-ing.

Objection

Overview

Before delving into slurs in natural language, Neufeld contrasts her account with those of others, notably Elisabeth Camp’s perspectival account.

In contrast, although they can reveal something about my perspective ... slurs are not *about* perspectives on my account. In my view, slurs’ meaning is predicative in the full-fledged, traditional sense. What slurs *say* of you is that you have some group essence that disposes you to display bad features; thus, a slur-predication will be either true or

false of you. It is precisely because of the purely predicative function that slurs come out as empty.¹⁷

But Camp’s account of slurs as a dual act may yet yield some insight. Specifically, Camp’s second line of reasoning that slurs act to endorse “a derogating perspective” promises to capture the nuances of affect which have eluded Neufeld, and supplement her essentialist account well.¹⁸ Though Camp writes that “perspectives are modes of interpretation that structure an overall collection of thoughts in an intuitive, holistic way without necessarily committing to any particular proposition, emotion, or evaluation”, it is clear that slurs are sometimes used as floating signifiers, including when they are used for affective hostility flouting conventions, and perspectives *à la* Camp come closest to accounting for this phenomenon.¹⁹ I will consider two cases.

¹⁷ Neufeld, “An Essentialist Theory,” 7.

¹⁸ Elisabeth Camp, “A Dual Act Analysis of Slurs,” in *Bad Words: Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, ed. David Sosa (Oxford UP, 2018), 30, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198758655.003.0003>.

¹⁹ Camp, “A Dual Act,” p. 50.

Use as Floating Signifiers: Semantic Bleaching/Widening

This case bears similarities to G-extending and G-contracting, but it differs from the examples Neufeld considers in that the slur does not have a neutral counterpart. Though G exists, the bounds delineating it are undefined. Let us consider a possible world where, due to various mishaps in my upbringing, I frequently utter statements such as the following pejoratively:

- Canada is full of leftist b***hes.

Who are the bearers of S ('b***hes') in this case? No inference can be made other than the fact that I have expressed a hostile affect (perhaps contempt, frustration, or a mix of both) towards people in Canada. But I am only to find a salient group G because 'Canada' is present explicitly. I am not able to correlate the slur with Canadians of any specific gender, because the gender connotation is not (or perhaps no longer) central to the “essence” of S. I am not even able to correlate S with Canadians that espouse political beliefs left of centre, because I may know nothing about what those beliefs actually are. S ('b***hes') is therefore able to extend and contract without reference to its conventional group G (women), becoming unmoored from its conventional counterpart ('women').

I propose that Neufeld accounts for this case in the way she does between the blending of slurs and “individual

pejoratives.”²⁰ The slur ‘b***h’ is an example of a slur that has undergone semantic bleaching/widening, becoming less stable. The slur can be more individualistic in that it can be tailored bespoke to the target in question. The target for the speaker ranges on a continuum from anyone (very individualistic, like “jerk”) to women with political beliefs left of centre (less individualistic, and more like a conventional slur), depending on what kind of meaning the speaker wants to express. Neufeld’s approach to slurs along a continuum has the potential to accommodate bearers of slurs along a similar continuum. As I see it, the continuum notion is one of the strongest aspects of her theory, itself an introspection into SLUR as a natural kind. Recall that the central reason slurs fail as natural kind terms is that there is no essence – there is no property which *x* has iff *x* is a b***h. This scenario is a more lucid example of how the slur does not refer.

A consideration of perspective which motivates such an utterance could enable Neufeld’s account to deal with affective hostility more directly. One could argue that slurs are at least to some degree cooperative; they express an affective disposition, and the speaker’s intention is for the bearer to know that they harbour pejorative feelings. The appeal of slurs for the ordinary user is that the term is directed at an imagined category, whatever is contextually desirable at the time. As Neufeld shows

²⁰ Neufeld, “An Essentialist Theory,” 18–19.

with the “queers” example (quoted from Jeshion), it is not hard to picture a child growing up who has never met any LGBTQ+ individuals, who has no idea who they even are, but in the case that they hear family members use the slur disparagingly, they will engage in slurring use as well. Affect can be learnt from prosody alone. Insofar as slurs are inherently political, my hope is to converge ever closer on a politically responsible account of them. Slurs are routinely deployed in political rhetoric as vehicles of demagoguery, and I would be irresponsible to neglect such a reality.

Use as Floating Signifiers: Derogation-cum-Infelicity

This case is not categorizable under any type of use that Neufeld considers. Slurs are much more likely than regular natural kind terms to remain charged in meaning even under inappropriate use by an incompetent speaker. Misattribution of a slur may signal incompetence, but it certainly does not cancel derogative attitudes. Consider a speaker singling out an individual who, in their eyes, displays negative stereotypical features associated with being gay, then uttering:

- What a chink!

The speaker has directed the slur at the bearer in virtue of the bearer’s perceived membership in the socially salient group of gay men, but this utterance is not felicitous because of a disjunction in conventionality linking a given G with its conventional S. Perhaps the speaker is not a competent English

speaker, or perhaps they see Chinese men as displaying the same negative stereotypical features as gay men and thus equivocate the two’s “essences”, but we cannot know for sure. A felicitous utterance signals homophobia, but this utterance does not signal the absence of homophobia. It may actually signal additional racist prejudices harboured by the speaker in addition to homophobia if the speaker is able to grasp the meaning of ‘chink.’

Camp is especially helpful here in asserting that we do not need to know what is going on in the speaker’s psyche, writing that “commitment to the appropriateness of a perspective is not itself a straightforwardly doxastic attitude; in this sense, my view is broadly expressivist, although it abjures any conventional connection to the expression of specific feelings like contempt.”²¹ Currently, Neufeld posits that these two lexical items (‘f****t’ and ‘chink’) differ in terms of the surface features that are part and parcel of their respective causal components. In other words, they differ essentially, in terms of meaning. But this architecture still feels too cumbersome. We want to say that the speaker is at least a homophobe if not a racist, and is using ‘chink’ to express at least homophobia if not racism, a standard derogatory use of slurs in either/both cases. It is not the case that perspective is separate from and inherently extrinsic to meaning. If it is “persons *qua* persons” being impacted, then it makes no

²¹ Camp, “A Dual Act,” p. 50.

sense to oppose some slurs *qua* affects and not others, when the affects are the same.²²

Conclusion

Let us return to the passage which is the site of my objection, the specific at-issue claim italicized for emphasis:

In contrast, although they can reveal something about my perspective ... slurs are not *about* perspectives on my account. In my view, slurs' meaning is predicative in the full-fledged, traditional sense. What slurs *say* of you is that *you have some group essence that disposes you to display bad features* [emphasis added]; thus, a slur-predication will be either true or false of you. It is precisely because of the purely predicative function that slurs come out as empty.

I have shown how the causal connection from the bearer of a slur to the truth value of a slur-predication in the following process may be weakened:

- “essence” ⇒ “observable surface features” ⇒ slur-predication

And I have done so through two cases showing how slurs can “*say of*” something else: 1) semantic bleaching/widening, and 2) derogation-cum-infelicity. In the first case, the bounds of

²² Neufeld, “An Essentialist Theory,” p. 12.

the group G are indeterminate. In the second case, slur-predications can return truth or falsity for bearers not traditionally considered to be in G or in another G , due to infelicitous use.

Therefore, I suggest the following modification to Neufeld’s definition of slurs: for a given slur S of a perceived socially salient group G by the speaker P_1 and a bearer P_2 , S is true of P_2 iff P_2 bears the “essence” of G – whatever that essence is – which is causally responsible for stereotypical negative features associated with G and predicted of P_2 .

The adjustment, though seemingly cosmetic, is important in that it emphasizes the speaker’s role and agency, especially where the slur S becomes detached from its conventional group G , but rather becomes a floating signifier of the speaker’s own (albeit social) molding. Both Neufeld and I have focused on approaching slurs in terms of the speaker’s perspective and intention, in terms of what they see or do not see, even though Neufeld mistakes a similar sentiment from Camp to be incompatible.

I differentiate P_1 and P_2 to affirm that the burden of linguistic labour in slurring language lies squarely with the former, not to suggest a division. The slur-predication has little to do with the bearer P_2 , because the slur is not about any real essence that P_2 may exhibit as part of their membership in real natural kinds. It is our hope that the slurred upon should recover a sense of personhood, made evident when Neufeld writes that “by using slurs ... we commit to a way of carving up the social

world that is dehumanizing.”²³ Hence it is toward a humanizing account that we strive, one that does not fetishize the effect of being slurred upon.

²³ Neufeld, “An Essentialist Theory,” p. 23.

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