Can slurs be used without being mentioned? Evidence from an inference judgement task

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Different types of content and ellipsis/anaphora

Performative content (which hinges on performing a certain act, e.g., producing a certain linguistic form) is lost during ellipsis/anaphora resolution, as these phenomena rely on not saying the thing. E.g., purely expressive content:

(1) A: Did you bring a fucking gun to my house?
     B: No, I didn't. / Yes, I did. / Yes, I did so. / Yes, I brought one.
     {→ A / ↛ B} is experiencing strong emotions.

In contrast, **presuppositions** of items like *stop* or *regret* are always preserved in such environments:

(2) a. Pam stopped smoking, {but Kim didn't / and Kim did, too / and so did Kim}.
         (i) {→ Pam / → Kim} used to smoke.
     b. Bo regrets leaving, {but Jo doesn't / and Jo does, too / and so does Jo}.
         (i) {→ Bo / → Jo} left.

Different types of content and ellipsis/anaphora

Note of caution: some truth-conditional, but not-at-issue content can get ignored during ellipsis/anaphora resolution, too (see, e.g., Esipova 2019, Sailor & Colasanti 2020), so the entailment only goes in one direction:

If a piece of content gets preserved during ellipsis/anaphora resolution, it cannot be purely performative.

So... what about slurs (denotational component + prejudice component)? **Is the prejudice component of slurs purely performative, or can it get preserved under ellipsis/anaphora?**

E.g., Saab 2020: "ellipsis is an apt strategy to nullify the bias encoded in some lexical items"
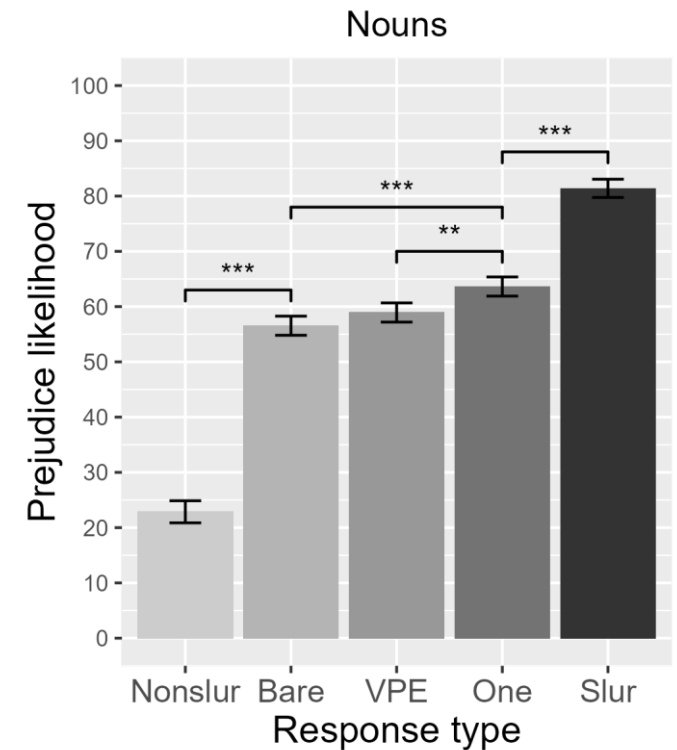
My study

I looked at paradigms like (3); the results suggest that **the prejudice component of slurs is partially, but not fully performative**, warranting a hybrid analysis (contra, e.g., Potts 2007; Schlenker 2007; Saab 2020)

(3) *Context: We are in a fictional universe where humans co-exist with centaurs, dwarves, elves, orcs, etc. The exchange happens in the context of a criminal investigation. 'Tusky' is a slur for orcs.*

Detective: Did you see a tusky?

Witness: Yes. ('Bare') / Yes, I did. ('VPE') / Yes, I saw one. ('One') / Yes, I saw a tusky. ('Slur') / Yes, I saw an orc. ('Nonslur')

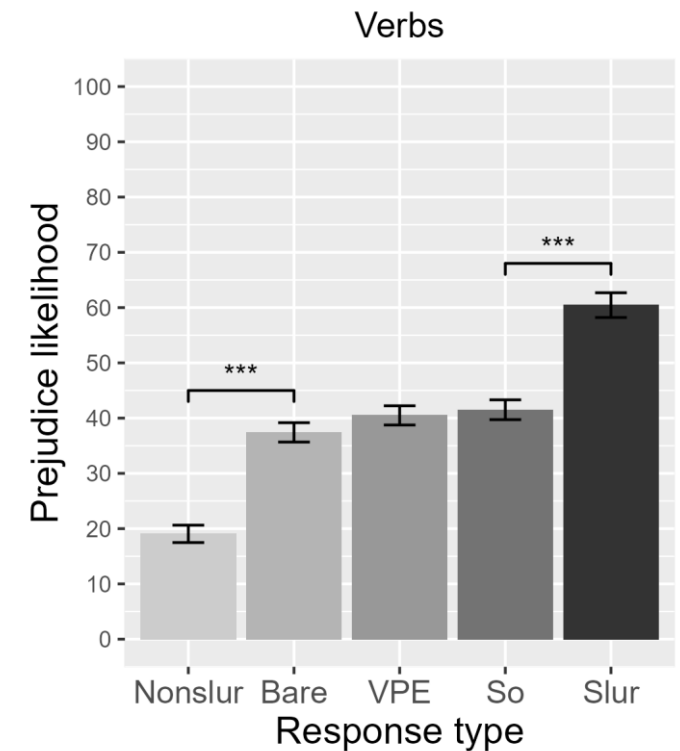*Question: How likely do you think that this witness is prejudiced against orcs?*

My study

I also have data on verb slurs! Ask me about it!

(4) *Context: 'Tusky' is a slur for orcs. This slur can also be used as a verb meaning 'to crawl' (for any race), because orcs are stereotyped as living in caves and, thus, having to crawl through narrow spaces all the time. The detective is asking a question about a human.*

Detective: What happened next? Did he tusky under the table?

Witness: Yes. ('Bare') / Yes, he did. ('VPE') / Yes, he did so. ('So') / Yes, he tuskied under the table. ('Slur') / Yes, he crawled under the table. ('Nonslur')

Question: How likely do you think that this witness is prejudiced against orcs?

References

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