

# Preservation of prejudice: elliptical responses to antecedents with slurs

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'You're on mute', NYU

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- b. Lea regrets leaving, {but Mia doesn't / and Mia does, too / and so does Mia}.
- (i) → Lea left. (ii) → Mia left.
- c. Zoe knows that she is in danger, {and Ash does, too / and so does Ash}, (#although Ash is not actually in danger, they just believe that they are). (sloppy reading)
- (i) → Zoe is in danger. (ii) → Ash is in danger.
- (Note that under the standard story, *know that p* and *believe that p* are truth-conditionally equivalent in their local contexts.)

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- (2) 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.
- (i) → A is experiencing strong emotions.
  - (ii) ↗ B is experiencing strong emotions.



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(3) *Context: In the 'Blade Runner' universe, 'skinjob' is a slur for synthetic humans (neutral term 'replicant').*

A: Did you see a skinjob?

B: No, I didn't. / Yes, I did. / Yes, I saw one.

*Question probing the presence/strength of the **prejudice inference**:  
Is B prejudiced against replicants? (How likely? / How prejudiced?)*

# Outline of the talk

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Background: more on different types of content under ellipsis
- 3 Hypothesis: multiple semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic factors are at play, resulting in a gradient picture
- 4 Methods: inference judgement task
- 5 Results: full corroboration of the hypothesis for noun slurs, partial corroboration for verb slurs
- 6 Discussion: the prejudice component of slurs is partially, but not exclusively performative, and is thus preserved to some extent if the slur itself is recovered during ellipsis resolution
- 7 Conclusion: limitations of the present study and moving forward

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- ① Unlike *stop*, *fucking* in (5) is an adjunct (?) inside an nP that, in turn, is targeted by *one* (?) or is inside the vP targeted by VPE/*do so*. Cf. truth-conditional, but not-at-issue modifiers (see Esipova 2019, 2021b; Sailor & Colasanti 2020; also Esipova 2021a on how truth-conditional evaluative modifiers differ from expressives like *fucking*):

(6) *Context: A loves all scotch; they are in a bar with B.*

A: Could you get me another delicious shot of Laphroaig?

B: OK, I {will / will do so / will get you one}. (I don't know how you drink this stuff, it's disgusting.)

↗ B considers all (or any) shots of Laphroaig delicious.



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↗ B is experiencing strong emotions.
- ② The presupposition of *stop* is a precondition for the at-issue content of the sentence to make sense (see Schlenker 2021 on presuppositions as epistemic preconditions), but that's not the case for the expressive contribution of *fucking*. Note, however, that this is not necessarily the case for *know* either. But not being such a precondition is at least a prerequisite for ignorability.

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↗ B is experiencing strong emotions.
- ③ Acts of producing expressives like *fucking* in (5) are **performative**: the speaker achieves their expressive goal (e.g., to let out their frustration) by producing a given form (use via mention) and can't do so w/o performing this act (no use w/o mention). But anaphoric phenomena like ellipsis hinge on not producing the form (they are instances of use w/o mention).

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- ③ Slurs can be used performatively (use via mention) and can even have a performative effect of offense by virtue of being uttered in the absence of such intent on the speaker's part (mention w/o use), but it is unclear if the prejudice component can be preserved if a slur is recovered but not uttered (use w/o mention), i.e., if it is purely performative.

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Question: what factors affect the presence/strength of the prejudice inference in different types of (non-)elliptical responses to antecedents with slurs, and what does this tell us about the nature of the prejudice component of slurs?

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Detective: Did you see a tusky?

Witness: Yes. ('Bare') / Yes, I did. ('VPE') / Yes, I saw one. ('One') /  
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(8) *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')

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

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  - Further assumption: abstract identity (in the sense of Harley 2014) only required for the "main root" of the constituent targeted by *one*-replacement/VPE/*do so*-replacement. (Alternatively: all roots are recovered, but there are further differences in salience and how much you can "negotiate" about their identity.)
    - For noun slurs, we only require root identity in *one*-replacement, but not in VPE or bare particle responses.
    - For verb slurs, we only require root identity in VPE/*do so*-replacement, but not in bare particle responses.

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      - For verb slurs, we only require root identity in *VPE*/*do so*-replacement, but not in bare particle responses.
- (9) *Predicted prejudice likelihood ratings (from lowest to highest)*
- a. Nouns: 'Nonslur' < 'Bare'/'VPE' < 'One' < 'Slur'
  - b. Verbs: 'Nonslur' < 'Bare' < 'VPE'/'So' < 'Slur'



## Additional considerations

- I also expected verb slurs to be harder to judge than noun slurs (as no perfect counterparts of such slurs exist in English) and possibly less “offensive” (due to the less direct link b/n their meaning and the targeted group), so no direct comparison of nouns and verbs was planned.

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- I also conjectured that for some people shorter responses might minimize complicity, which might introduce further gradient distinctions across ‘Bare’ vs. ‘VPE’ vs. ‘One/So’ and potentially obscure some of the contrasts predicted by the hypothesis.

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- Participants were recruited on Prolific (final  $N = 128$ ) and paid £1.25 for completing the task



# Typical trial



progress

*Context: 'Stunty' is a slur for dwarves. This slur can also be used as a verb meaning 'to fall' (for any race), because dwarves are stereotyped as clumsy and, thus, prone to falling. The detective is asking a question about a human.*

Detective: What happened next? Did he stunty down the stairs?

Witness: Yes, he stunted down the stairs.

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

Not at all likely  Very likely

Confirm my answer

## Results

(10) *Predicted prejudice likelihood ratings*

- a. Nouns: 'Nonslur' < 'Bare'/'VPE' < 'One' < 'Slur'
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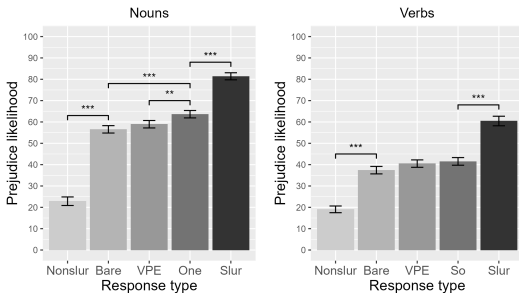


Fig. 1: Mean prejudice likelihood ratings of different types of responses to antecedent utterances with noun and verb slurs. Crucial significant contrasts are indicated. Error bars show standard error.

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  - Saab 2020 (about slurs, a.o.): “ellipsis is an apt strategy to nullify the bias encoded in some lexical items”—My results suggest that ellipsis attenuates said bias (by avoiding the performative effects of saying the slur), but doesn’t completely nullify it (when the slur itself is recovered).

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- This calls for a hybrid analysis for the prejudice component of slurs that doesn't reduce it to just a truth-conditional presupposition (as in Schlenker 2007) or just a performative effect of uttering a certain form on the context (as in Potts 2007 or Saab 2020).



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  - Also, I am not talking about truth-conditionally referring to a performative act or inferred mental state (e.g., *–Damn!* / *EYEROLL* / *\*punches wall\** *–Same.*)
  - Also also, I'm with Potts 2007 and Saab 2020 (contra reductionism à la Schlenker 2007) on needing to properly distinguish b/n performative and non-performative contributions in general (see Esipova 2021a).

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  - In the absence of perfect English counterparts (and w/a very bare-bones explanation of use), the fictional verb slurs were harder to intuit about.



## Discussion: verb slurs

The results for verb slurs corroborate parts 1 and 2, but not 3 of the hypothesis. A few relevant considerations:

- Perhaps the identity requirements for VPE and *do so*-replacement are not the same as for *one*-replacement?
- Perhaps *tusky* as a verb is not assumed to be truly co-extensive with *crawl* (cf. *tusky* as a noun and *orc*).
- The contrasts were overall less pronounced for verb slurs:
  - In the absence of perfect English counterparts (and w/a very bare-bones explanation of use), the fictional verb slurs were harder to intuit about.
  - Less direct link between the meaning of the slur and the targeted group, hence a lower upper bound for the ratings.

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(12) A: How is Pam doing?

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- Quality of data from Prolific workers? Ask me what I think.

## (Other) potential follow-ups

- Other syntactic configurations (e.g., *–Did you see a picture of a tusky?*  
*–Yes, I saw one. / Yes, I saw a picture of one.; –Is she a tusky? –Yes, she is. / Yes, she is one.*)



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- Other languages, in particular, those with other types of fragment responses and ellipsis in general (e.g., Russian)

## Some final words

- Inferences about prejudice are an empirically messy phenomenon, with many factors affecting them, so we need to be careful about making categorical empirical claims about them, let alone drawing theoretical conclusions about the semantics of slurs from said claims.

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- When looking at slurs under ellipsis, we are essentially trying to use two phenomena we don't understand well to explain one another, which is a reason to be extra careful.

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