Preservation of prejudice: elliptical responses to antecedents with slurs

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‘You’re on mute’, NYU

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(1) a. Pam stopped smoking, {but Kim didn’t / and Kim did, too / and so did Kim}.
   (i) → Pam used to smoke. (ii) → Kim used to smoke. (modulo local accommodation: presupposition not ignored, but at-issue)
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  2. Lea regrets leaving, {but Mia doesn’t / and Mia does, too / and so does Mia}.
     (i) → Lea left. (ii) → Mia left.
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b. Lea regrets leaving, {but Mia doesn’t / and Mia does, too / and so does Mia}.
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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.
Focus of today’s talk: slurs in elliptical responses

Today, I will focus on slurs (denotational component + prejudice component) and whether/to what extent the prejudice component of slurs is preserved in different types of elliptical responses:
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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
More on different types of content under ellipsis

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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.)
 \(\not\to\) B considers all (or any) shots of Laphroaig delicious.
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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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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).
So, what about slurs?

Slurs are a more complex case, however:

1. A slur doesn't have to be an adjunct, and, in fact, can be the "main root" of the constituent targeted by different types of ellipsis, as in noun slurs in nPs targeted by one-replacement (like stop, unlike fucking in the examples above). Less ignorable? (*Or whatever the right structure responsible for the slur meaning is.)

2. Despite that, the prejudice component of a slur is not crucial for the at-issue content of the sentence containing the slur to make sense (unlike the presupposition of stop, like the expressive component of fucking). So, in principle ignorable.

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.

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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Set-up: The exchanges are set in a fictional universe where humans co-exist with centaurs, dwarves, elves, orcs, etc. and happen in the context of a criminal investigation.
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(7) Context: ‘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’)

(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.

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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(9) Predicted prejudice likelihood ratings (from lowest to highest)

a. Nouns: ‘Nonslur’ < ‘Bare’/‘VPE’ < ‘One’ < ‘Slur’

b. Verbs: ‘Nonslur’ < ‘Bare’ < ‘VPE’/‘So’ < ‘Slur’
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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- 10 conditions (2 parts of speech, w/5 response types for each)
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- Items similar to (7) and (8) (4 race–slur pairs: centaur–hoofy, dwarf–stunty, elf–leafy, orc–tusky)
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- The prejudice likelihood was assessed by dragging a slider on a pseudo-continuous scale (mapped to 0–100) from ‘Not at all likely’ to ‘Very likely’
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- The prejudice likelihood was assessed by dragging a slider on a pseudo-continuous scale (mapped to 0–100) from ‘Not at all likely’ to ‘Very likely’
- Participants were recruited on Prolific (final $N = 128$) and paid £1.25 for completing the task
**Typical trial**

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*Context:* 'Stunt' 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 stunt down the stairs?

**Witness:** Yes, he stuntied down the stairs.

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

![Progress](progress)

- **Not at all likely**  
- **Very likely**

[Confirm my answer]
Results

(10) *Predicted prejudice likelihood ratings*

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(11) *Statistically significant contrasts in prejudice likelihood ratings*

a. Nouns: ‘Nonslur’ < ‘Bare’/‘VPE’ < ‘One’ < ‘Slur’ — full match
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![Bar chart showing mean prejudice likelihood ratings](image)

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.
Discussion: noun slurs

The results for noun slurs corroborate all parts of the original hypothesis. Implications:
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- The prejudice component of slurs is partially performative (like the expressive component of *fucking*, unlike the presupposition of *stop*), but it is not exclusively performative (unlike the expressive component of *fucking*, like the presupposition of *stop*).
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Implications:

- The prejudice component of slurs is partially performative (like the expressive component of *fucking*, unlike the presupposition of *stop*), but it is not exclusively performative (unlike the expressive component of *fucking*, like the presupposition of *stop*).
- 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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  - Note: I am not talking about separating the denotational meaning of slurs from their attitudinal meaning, but about the attitudinal component itself being of a mixed nature.
  - Also, I am not talking about truth-conditionally referring to a performative act or inferred mental state (e.g., –Damn! / EYEROLL / *punches wall* –Same.)
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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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- Perhaps *tusky* as a verb is not assumed to be truly co-extensive with *crawl* (cf. *tusky* as a noun and *orc*).
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  Also, we can can situationally do things we are in general opposed to; cf.:

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      B: She’s doing fine, as far as I know, but can you please stop asking me about her, you know I don’t want to talk about her.
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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

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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.


