The silence of the slurs: inferences about prejudice under ellipsis

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Different types of content under ellipsis

Different types of content behave differently under ellipsis (see Esipova 2019 for an overview and references therein):

(1) Presuppositions of some items (predicates denoting stages of events, factives, etc.)

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.

b. Lea regrets leaving, {but Mia doesn't / and Mia does, too / and so does Mia}.

(i) → Lea left.

(ii) → Mia left.

(2) Expressive component of items like 'fucking', 'damn', etc.

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 not experiencing strong emotions.
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   (i) $\rightarrow$ Pam used to smoke.
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(2) *Expressive component of items like ‘fucking’, ‘damn’, etc.*
   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.
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:
Focus of today’s talk: slurs under ellipsis

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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: different types of content under ellipsis

2. Question: what affects the presence/strength of the prejudice inference in different types of responses to antecedents with slurs?

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 performative (unlike presuppositions), but not exclusively performative (unlike expressives), so it requires a hybrid analysis

7. Conclusion: limitations of the present study and moving forward
More on different types of content under ellipsis

Let’s zoom in on the relevant differences between presuppositions of items like *stop* and the expressive component of items like *fucking* in (5):
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1 *Stop* in (4) is the head of the recovered VP, but *fucking* in (5) is an adjunct (??) inside an NP that is in turn inside the recovered VP or targeted by *one* (??). (Cf. non-restricting modifiers under ellipsis: Esipova 2019, 2021b; Sailor & Colasanti 2020)
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2 The presupposition of *stop* is a precondition for the at-issue content to make sense, but that’s not the case for the contribution of *fucking*.

3 Acts of producing expressives like *fucking* in (5) are performative: the speaker achieves their expressive goal by producing a given form (use via mention) and can’t do so w/o performing this act (no use w/o mention).
So, what about slurs?

Slurs are a more complex case, however:

1. A slur can be the head of the antecedent constituent targeted by different types of ellipsis/anaphora (like *stop*, unlike *fucking*).
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*).
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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(6) 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’)
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(7) 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 tusked 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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2. The prejudice likelihood is lowest when the witness tacitly corrects the detective by using the neutral term instead (‘Nonslur’), thus, neither mentioning nor using the slur and, furthermore, indirectly challenging the detective on their use of the slur in an attempt to minimize complicity (see, e.g., Cepollaro 2020 and references therein on unchallenged slurs).
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3. The prejudice component of slurs is not exclusively performative (allows for use w/o mention). So, when the slur is obligatorily recovered in ellipsis/anaphora resolution, the prejudice likelihood is higher than when it isn’t. Assumption: strict lexical identity only required for heads of target constituents (nouns in ‘One’; verbs in ‘VPE’ and ‘So’).
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(8) *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.
Testing the hypothesis: inference judgement task

- 10 conditions (2 parts of speech, w/5 response types for each)
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- Items similar to (6) and (7) (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’
- Participants were recruited on Prolific (final $N = 128$) and paid £1.25 for completing the task
Typical trial

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 stuntied 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

(9) *Predicted prejudice likelihood ratings*

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

b. Verbs: ‘Nonslur’ < ‘Bare’ < ‘VPE’/‘So’ < ‘Slur’
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(10) Statistically significant contrasts in prejudice likelihood ratings
   a. Nouns: ‘Nonslur’ < ‘Bare’/‘VPE’ < ‘One’ < ‘Slur’ — full match
   b. Verbs: ‘Nonslur’ < ‘Bare’/‘VPE’/‘So’ < ‘Slur’ — partial match
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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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The results for noun slurs corroborate all parts of the original hypothesis. Implications:

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  - in the absence of perfect English counterparts, verb slurs were harder to intuit about, so the data were more noisy;
  - due to that and the less direct link between the meaning of the slur and the targeted group, the contrasts were overall less pronounced;
  - the identity requirements for verbs in VPE and *do so*-replacement are less clear than for nouns in *one*-replacement.
Limitations of the present study and moving forward

- Pretty charged context (by choice), seemingly making the contrasts b/n challenged vs. unchallenged slurs more salient. Could be changed in follow-ups.
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- Quality of data from Prolific workers? Lots of attention check failures, but these are controversial.
- Other potential follow-ups: more syntactic configurations (e.g., slurs in definite descriptions); pronoun inferences (mismatch vs. misgendering); other languages (e.g., Russian derogatory roots vs. suffixes).
I am organizing PerForum, a one-day interdisciplinary workshop on performative expression of meaning in language and beyond:

- June 3, 2022; University of Oslo (hopefully, hybrid)

- 5 invited speakers:
  - Lea Allouche (University of Oslo): performativity in poetry
  - Victor Carranza Pinedo (École Normale Supérieure and University of Milan): expressives in language
  - Raphaela Heesen (Durham University): communication of emotion in non-human primates
  - Mihaela Popa-Wyatt (University of Manchester): topic TBA
  - Jonna Vuoskoski (University of Oslo): social dimension of music-evoked emotions

- Poster session + lightning talks. Abstract submission deadline: March 1.

- For more: https://perforum.github.io/


