

# Prejudice and performativity: can slurs be used without being mentioned?

Maria Esipova

University of Oslo → University of Konstanz

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E.g., if you want to let out your frustration by swearing, you have to actually swear; if you want to build rapport w/addressee by using rising intonation on declaratives, you have to actually use it; etc.

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Fundamental architectural differences b/n performative(ly expressed) and truth-conditional content pertaining to compositionality (see, e.g., Esipova 2021) and—crucially for today's talk—ellipsis/anaphora resolution

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E.g., purely expressive content:

(3) 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.

{ $\rightarrow$  A /  $\nrightarrow$  B} is experiencing strong emotions.



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- (4) a. Pam stopped smoking, {but Kim didn't / and Kim did, too / and so did Kim}.
- { $\rightarrow$  Pam /  $\rightarrow$  Kim} used to smoke. (modulo local accommodation: presupposition not ignored, but at-issue)
- b. Lea regrets leaving, {but Mia doesn't / and Mia does, too / and so does Mia}.
- { $\rightarrow$  Lea left. /  $\rightarrow$  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)
- { $\rightarrow$  Zoe /  $\rightarrow$  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.)

## Different types of content under ellipsis/anaphora

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

### Point of departure

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

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

# Outline of the talk

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Hypothesis: the prejudice component of slurs is partially, but not entirely performative
- 3 Methods: inference judgement task
- 4 Results: full corroboration of the hypothesis for noun slurs, partial corroboration for verb slurs
- 5 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 → hybrid analysis of the prejudice component needed
- 6 Conclusion: limitations of the present study and moving forward



## Paradigms of interest

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(5) *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') /  
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(6) *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
    - For noun slurs, we only require root identity in *one*-replacement, but not in *VPE* or bare particle responses
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      - 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
- (7) *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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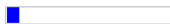
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- Participants were recruited on Prolific (final  $N = 128$ ) and paid £1.25 for completing the task

# 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

(8) *Predicted prejudice likelihood ratings*

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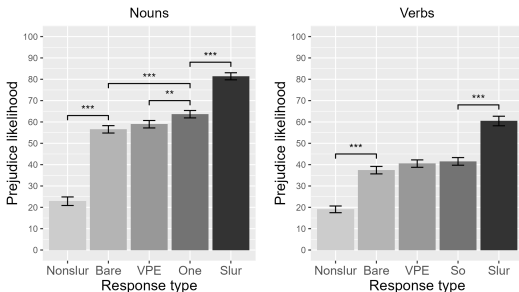


Fig. 1: Mean prejudice likelihood ratings of different types of responses to antecedent utterances with noun and verb slurs. Crucial significant contrasts are indicated. Error bars show standard error.

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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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  - 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 2021)

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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
  - 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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- 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?*  
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- Other types of content, e.g., stylistic variants (see, e.g., Saab 2020 for Spanish *morfar* vs. *comer*), but again, the concerns about true co-extensiveness apply

## (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.*)
- Other types of content, e.g., stylistic variants (see, e.g., Saab 2020 for Spanish *morfar* vs. *comer*), but again, the concerns about true co-extensiveness apply
- 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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- 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
- 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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