The silence of the slurs:
inferences about prejudice under ellipsis

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Different types of content under ellipsis

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      (i) $\rightarrow$ Pam used to smoke.
      (ii) $\rightarrow$ Kim used to smoke.
   b. Lea regrets leaving, {but Mia doesn't / and Mia does, too / and so does Mia}.
      (i) $\rightarrow$ Lea left.
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      (i) → Lea left.
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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.

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

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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).

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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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(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 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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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'

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

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

    a. Nouns: 'Nonslur' < 'Bare'/'VPE' < 'One' < 'Slur' — full match

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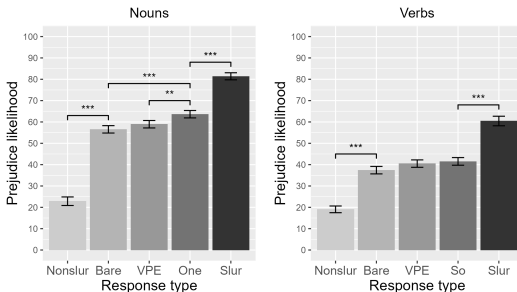   b. Verbs: 'Nonslur' < 'Bare'/'VPE'/'So' < 'Slur' — partial match

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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  - 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.

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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).

Shameless plug: PerForum

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/

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