Beyond Slurs: Communicating Evaluative Perspectives

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Abstract

Slurs have recently received a great deal of attention from philosophers of language. They are thought to be special in both their linguistic properties and their rhetorical effects—that is, in both what they mean and what they do. In this paper, drawing on the work of Elisabeth Camp and Rae Langton, I argue that a wide variety of speech shares the interesting features normally imputed to slurs.

In using a slur, Camp argues, a speaker signals allegiance to a derogating perspective. He does not indicate merely that he believes a certain proposition; he indicates that certain features of the world are salient for him and that he experiences them as having a particular kind of disvalue. In her work on hate speech, Langton has argued that speech can be successful not only in its appeal to believe something but also in its appeal to feel or desire something. By presupposing that a hearer feels a certain way, a speaker can make it the case that she feels that way.

But none of this is specific to slurs and hate speech. Non-evaluative terms can function in just the same way. When a speaker uses the expression “You’re skinny” as a compliment, for example, she presupposes a particular evaluative perspective. Because the perspective is communicated as part of the not-at-issue content of her utterance, it is especially difficult for her hearers to object. The perspective can thus become taken for granted in the conversation without having been explicitly proposed or argued for. This kind of utterance doesn’t merely change hearers’ beliefs; it can also change their conative attitudes. And, like uses of slurs and other thick terms, it can change what we have social permission to say and do.

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We usually assume that there is a good distinction to be made between evaluative and non-evaluative language. Evaluative terms include ‘thin’ terms like good, bad, right, ought, and should, as well as ‘thick’ terms like courageous, compassionate, chaste, lewd, and selfish, which seem to combine descriptive and evaluative content. And then there are all the other terms, which we take not to have any evaluative content: deciduous, yellow, rectangular, etc.

It’s rarely the case that in saying that something is deciduous or yellow or rectangular we are evaluating it. But many other terms we normally think of as non-evaluative are very often used to convey evaluations. Here are several examples:

1) At a baseball game, a man shouts to a pitcher, “You throw like a girl!”

2) Some seventh-grade girls are fighting. Their teacher arranges them in a circle and tells everyone to give a compliment to the person on her right. One girl says to another, “You’re skinny.”

3) As a way of insulting her, Tai says to Cher, “You’re a virgin who can’t drive.” (Clueless)

What unites these is that the evaluative aspect of the utterance doesn’t seem to be a matter of the meaning of any of the terms; each term denotes a non-evaluative property and isn’t pejorative or approbative. Most of these terms can be used in other circumstances to convey the opposite evaluation—skinny can be used derisively and virgin can be used as an honorific.¹ These cases are, of course, by no means unusual.

Several points it’s important to note:

¹ It’s harder to get a positive reading of “You throw like a girl”—more on this later.
A hearer who hasn’t understood the evaluative element of the speaker’s utterance is missing something. In all of these cases the speaker intends to convey an evaluation of someone, and s/he says what s/he does assuming that it will be sufficient for hearers to recognize that evaluation. So if a hearer interprets the utterance without the added evaluation—if the hearer doesn’t understand that the speaker is using the sentence in question to insult or to compliment—the communicative act has not been entirely successful.2

Second, each of these utterances communicates two evaluations. The primary evaluation is of the sentence’s subject: that he or she is somehow good or bad in virtue of having a particular property. The second is an evaluation of the property itself. To use the sentence “A is skinny” as a compliment is not only to evaluate A but to evaluate skinniness; it is to communicate something like, “We are in a context according to which it’s good to be skinny.”3 The two evaluative aspects of the utterance are, of course, connected. The reason the subject of the sentence is evaluated is that she instantiates the property that is evaluated. Note that the conversational status of the wider evaluation can vary: In some contexts, it will already be the case prior to the utterance that being skinny is accepted as good, but in others this kind of use of skinny will alter the context in such a way that being skinny becomes accepted as good. My interest in this paper will be on the second kind of evaluation, the evaluation of a group or property, and its conversational status.

2 Note that in some cases a person might refuse to interpret such an utterance as evaluative because she objects to the evaluation that is suggested. A: “Did you like your date?” B: “He was short.” A: “What does that have to do with anything?” But notice the difference between that and A: “Did you like your date?” B: “He was wearing a grey shirt.” B’s response in the second case but not the first is hard to read as offering evaluative information.

3 Where that sentence is read not as an observation about the context (in which case it doesn’t seem to be an evaluation of skinniness), but as an endorsement of skinniness, a performative utterance establishing the fact that the context has this feature. Just to be explicit about the other cases, to shout “You throw like a girl” at a pitcher is to convey both an evaluation of the pitcher and also an evaluation of girls’ throwing abilities, and when Tai says “You’re a virgin who can’t drive,” she is conveying an evaluation of Cher but also conveying some evaluative attitudes about being a virgin and being unable to drive.
The broader evaluation each utterance conveys is part of its not-at-issue content. An utterance’s at-issue content is the content that is primary, the content that we might characterize as the main point of the utterance. For example, consider:

4) Sarah, who was John’s roommate in college, is coming to visit this weekend.

✓ No, she’s not (coming next weekend)—you have your dates mixed up.

# No, she wasn’t (John’s roommate).

The at-issue content in (4) is that Sarah is coming to visit this weekend; the information that she was John’s roommate is not at-issue. At-issue content is that which is targeted by negation and anaphora. If a speaker responds, “Are you sure?” or “Oh, I didn’t know that,” she will be interpreted as asking about or remarking upon the at-issue content.

If B says “A is skinny” admiringly and C says “Not really…” or “That’s not true,” C is denying that A fulfills the relevant descriptive criterion, and thus denying that A is worthy of the positive evaluation that came with meeting it.\(^\text{4}\) C is clearly not, however, denying that skinniness is good; C may be denying that A is skinny in an attempt to keep the club of the skinny exclusive. Denials of the other two example utterances I gave also leave the broader evaluations standing. If B says “A throws like a girl!” and C says “No, he doesn’t,” the suggestion remains that it would be bad if he did. If someone tells Tai that she is mistaken, Cher is in fact now a driving nonvirgin, the remaining virgins who can’t drive won’t be comforted. In all these cases, to bring into question the broader evaluation would require a more effortful response—for example, “Why are you saying that like it’s a good thing?"

To question or deny content that is not-at-issue, an interlocutor has to take the conversation off course: She has to indicate to the speaker that she wants to give that information

\(^4\) This suggests that the primary evaluation, the evaluation of the subject, is a conversational implicature; A is evaluated as good because she’s skinny, so if she isn’t skinny, she’s not evaluated as good. This evaluation (of A, rather than of skinniness) seems to be part of the at-issue content of the utterance.
a different status from that which the speaker gave it. From the way that the speaker constructed (4), for example, we know that she wants her listeners to respond to the information that Sarah is visiting. If her primary goal had been to convey the information about Sarah’s relationship with John, she would instead have said, “Sarah, who’s visiting this weekend, was John’s roommate in college.” So, if in response to (4), someone were to say, “I thought Tom was John’s roommate,” she would clearly not be responding to the primary content of (4); she would be directing the conversation away from what the speaker indicated she wanted to discuss.

While hearers can certainly question or deny content that is not-at-issue, doing so is more difficult than responding to the at-issue content. This is especially clear in situations where there is a power imbalance between speakers: It can seem impolite for a lower-status speaker to stop the flow of conversation in order to question or deny information that the higher-status speaker took to be of secondary importance. In cases where the speaker expects complete deference, it can be risky in much more serious ways.

To reiterate, the three cases with which I began all communicate some broad evaluative claim—that it’s bad to throw like a girl, that it’s good to be skinny, and that it’s bad to be a virgin who can’t drive—as part of their not-at-issue content. But there are also, of course, important differences among the three cases. Nearly any use of “throws like a girl” will be interpreted as an insult, regardless of context; the associated evaluation is conventionalized enough that saying “You throw like a girl—and I mean that as a good thing!” seems disingenuous. In example (2), because of the teacher’s instructions, the speaker is in a context in

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5 If not disingenuous, then trying too hard: there is no wide understanding of the way girls throw such that someone would want to emulate it, and trying to use the words this way cannot change that fact. That’s not to say it could never be positive, but a lot of stage-setting would have to be done: “When we look at the way boys who are national champion Little League pitchers throw, we see that they tend to overextend in such a way that they can damage their wrists; the national champion girls we observed didn’t do this. Fortunately, your son Tom seems to throw more like a girl, so we don’t have to worry too much about this injury in the future.” But that’s a stretch. (A sexist father might well respond, “You’re saying my kid throws like a girl?!”)
which her hearers expect what she says to be a compliment, and thus are especially prepared to attach an evaluative aspect to it. And in (3), the evaluations are especially context-specific: We have to know very specific cultural information to see why the utterance is insulting.

With all that on the table, the questions I’m interested in are the following: First, how can we model the evaluative aspects of these kinds of utterances? Second, what’s their relationship to more obviously normative claims? And finally, how exactly do they perpetuate or enforce norms?

I begin by discussing slurs, terms whose associated evaluations are more stable across contexts. Like the examples I gave above, uses of slurs introduce two evaluations: an evaluation of the individual person who is slurred as well as a group she belongs to. The broader evaluation is part of the not-at-issue content of the utterance, and so is left standing even when the utterance is denied. Saying “No, Alex isn’t a slut,” for example, leaves standing the negative evaluation of women who are sexually promiscuous. So theories of slurs might be helpful for understanding utterances like (1)-(3).

One reason slurs have been of special interest is that they, like pornography—thought of as speech, since it is protected as such by US law—are especially good illustrations of the fact that speech can not only cause but constitute subordination and derogation, in virtue of having the illocutionary force of subordinating and derogating. Uses of slurs can dehumanize their targets in such a way that violence towards those targets can come to seem warranted. They thus seem to be of special political importance.

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6 But, of course, notice that not every observation a student could make about her peer would be interpreted as a compliment: if she said, “Your eyes are very close together,” that would be interpreted as disobedient and rude rather than complimentary.

7 That’s not necessarily to say that they are evaluative as a matter of semantics—see Väyrynen (2013).
Rae Langton has argued that hate speech, including uses of slurs, can change not only hearers’ belief-like attitudes but also their desire-like attitudes. This occurs via the process of presupposition accommodation: by presupposing that a hearer has a certain desire, a speaker can make it the case that the hearer has that desire. If we supplement Langton’s argument with Elisabeth Camp’s account of slurring perspectives, which I’ll explain below, we end up with a picture of how hateful ideology can spread and lead to violence. If, in using a slur, a speaker introduces a way of thinking into the conversation, then the conative attitudes that are part of that way of thinking can become shared among conversational partners and result in their being motivated to act accordingly.

But there is no reason to think that hate speech functions entirely differently from other, less obviously objectionable speech. The linguistic mechanisms that explain how hate speech can spread xenophobic attitudes are also, as I will argue, mechanisms that explain how more ordinary speech can spread more ordinary attitudes of valuing and disvaluing. So the recent philosophical interest in slurs is misplaced: Slurs do not form an isolable class of terms that function very differently from the others. A wide variety of expressions can do what slurs do, and we should pay more attention to the features of the context that allow different expressions to function (or not) as slurs. As I suggested above, even terms that we normally think of as descriptive can convey evaluative perspectives in such a way that hearers are pressured to accept them. And when our evaluative perspectives change, so do which sorts of action seem warranted and reasonable.

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8 ‘Presupposition accommodation’ is normally used just for when presupposed propositions are accommodated. But since in this case something that is presupposed is accommodated, I use the same term to refer to a broader phenomenon.

9 Jason Stanley makes a similar point in *How Propaganda Works*. He writes, “Expressions with the linguistic properties imputed to slurs are not special. … The distinctive danger of propaganda in a liberal democracy is that it goes unnoticed. … The problem is, rather, with words that function in discourse as slurs, but are not explicitly slurs” (150-151).
In brief, I’ll argue as follows: In using, for example, “You’re skinny” as a compliment, a speaker presupposes an evaluative perspective according to which it is good to be skinny. Her hearers may already share this perspective, but if they don’t, there will be conversational pressure to accommodate it. The evaluative perspective can thus become part of the common ground of the conversation without ever having been explicitly proposed or argued for.

Furthermore, in making such an utterance, a speaker performs an exercitive speech act: She gives some indication that certain ways of being are acceptable and others are not. She does all this while appearing just to be making a true observation.

I should make some caveats explicit here. Clearly, on some occasions a speaker uses a slur, no one objects, and yet the relevant slurring perspective does not gain any traction in the conversation. For example, the attitudes of the conversational participants may be firm enough that when a speaker uses the word *slut*, none of his hearers accommodate the relevant perspective; they just lower their opinion of him. In these cases, no one may have objected simply because it was suspected that the speaker had some perspective with which everyone else disagrees. Or the person who uses the slur may be an interloper, and everyone else in the conversation may avoid objecting in order to be able to exit the conversation quickly. Or the power imbalance in the conversation may be such that it would be very risky for a hearer to object. These are somewhat defective conversations, in which speakers do not meet on equal terms (though, of course, to say that they are defective is not to say that they are unusual). But in cooperative conversational contexts, where conversational participants take each other to be peers with respect to the topic of conversation, the perspectives speakers presuppose will become common ground when no one objects.
1. Perspectives

According to Camp, in using a slur a speaker signals allegiance to a derogating perspective. She writes,

[By employing a slur] the speaker signals a commitment to taking the property \textit{g} that determines the slur’s extension to be a highly \textit{central} feature in thinking about \textit{Gs}. The speaker thinks it is relevant to draw attention to \textit{g} because he takes \textit{g} to be highly diagnostic, or classificatorily useful. And typically, he thinks this because he takes being \textit{g} to explain a range of further properties (e.g., laziness, stupidity, greed, cunning, athletic and sexual prowess or debility), which are themselves prominent in his thinking and which he takes to warrant certain affective and evaluative responses.\(^{10}\)

In using a slur, Camp claims, a speaker “insert[s] a way of thinking about [the group] into the conversation.”\(^{11}\) That is, the speaker not only signals his own allegiance to a derogating perspective, but does so in such a way that some pressure is put on his conversational partners to share that derogating perspective. So to use a slur is to indicate that one sees members of the slurred group a certain way, and also to propose to others that they, too, see group members that way.

When a speaker uses the slur \textit{slut}, for example, he doesn’t just express some contempt towards particular women: He is applying this slur on the basis of some feature he takes to be salient, indicating that the feature ought to be evaluated in a particular way, and suggesting that an overall evaluation of the woman in question is appropriate given this feature. In this case he signals allegiance to a perspective according to which it is appropriate to group women on the basis of facts about their sexual activities, and according to which those facts are evaluatively significant: They warrant other judgments and certain kinds of responsive behavior. He may also, of course, be suggesting that the woman in question deserves whatever disrespectful or sexually violent treatment she got or is about to get.

\(^{10}\) Camp (2013) 338.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 340.
To understand Camp’s account we need to know what a perspective is. Consider the scenario from Iris Murdoch’s *The Idea of Perfection* in which a mother-in-law (M), who has always thought her son married below himself, comes to re-evaluate her daughter-in-law (D). M’s change in perspective towards D involves M’s re-classifying various things D has done and said; M comes to see D as “not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful…” If M were to have another chance to observe D, and if her perspective had entirely changed, we would expect certain aspects of D’s behavior to become more prominent for M and for other kinds of behavior to take on less importance, despite D herself not having changed at all.

A perspective can be thought of as an evaluative lens through which we experience the world. The lens illuminates some properties, downplays others, casts evaluative valences, and represents various explanatory relations. In Camp’s work on slurs, she emphasizes that having a perspective on a phenomenon or on an object involves taking certain features of it to be salient and explanatorily central. In other work, however, she characterizes perspectives more broadly:

...[A] perspective provides an intuitive, holistic principle for our thoughts about some topic. It organizes those thoughts by imposing a complex structure of relative prominence on them, so that some features stick out in our minds while others fade into the background, and by making some features especially central to explaining others. A perspective often also imposes certain evaluative attitudes and emotional valences on its constituent features.

She stresses that it is not a thought but a *tool for thought*, meaning that it:

helps us to *do* things with the thoughts we have: to make quick judgments based on what’s most important, to grasp intuitive connections, and to respond emotionally... It provides us with a “way to go on,” incorporating new thoughts about the focal topic and often about related topics as well.

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So two people who have different perspectives on the same phenomenon or entity will differ in which concepts they take to apply to the phenomenon, in which features they notice and attend to most, in which aspects of it they take to explain others, and in the evaluative and emotional valences that they experience various aspects of it as having.

Nancy Bauer’s remarks on what a change in perspective might be like are also helpful:

[A change in perspective] in some cases may take the form of a conversion experience that consists in our seeing things that we simply didn’t notice before, as though they had previously been cast into shadows. ... Then again, it may happen that as our worldview shifts, we see exactly the same phenomenon as before, only now transformed for us in its valence or significance. What used to strike you as funny—say, a man wearing a dress—now strikes you as a brave and dignified way of being in the world. ... It may be tempting to imagine that when a shift in perspective has occurred what has shifted is specifically (and only) the normative significance of the phenomena we saw all along. But it seems to me ... that phenomenologically, at least, a new worldview transforms the phenomena themselves, that is, transforms not only our valuation of the phenomena but also what they are to us.  

A perspective represents certain features of the world as highlighted or lowlighted and as imbued with various evaluative valences. The dispositions that compose a perspective, then, are dispositions to perceive or experience as salient certain features and properties, and to have evaluative responses towards them: to be attracted or repelled, to feel closer or more distant, to judge important, and so on. For my purposes, perspectives that vary in several ways will all count as such. They may vary in scope, in complexity, and in what I’ll call detachability.

First, some perspectives are broad enough to properly be called ‘worldviews,’ (take, for example, the ‘belief in a just world’). Others are much more localized, applying only to a single entity; Consider how our perspective on a person, or even a particular feature of theirs, like their physical attractiveness, can change. Somewhere in between are cases in which our perspective

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15 Bauer 28-29.

16 See Lerner and Miller (1978). Thanks to Brendan Dill for this example.
on a particular property changes. In judging, say, furniture, we can reevaluate the properties of
being delicate or expensive-looking; in judging other people we can reevaluate the properties of
being apologetic or ambitious.

In some cases our perspective on a person may change in virtue of our attributing
different properties to her ("not vulgar but refreshingly simple," as in Murdoch’s example), and
in other cases, in virtue of our changing perspectives on a property we see her as having all the
while ("she’s vulgar, sure, but that keeps things interesting"). What occurs most often is
probably a combination of these different kinds of perspectival shift.

Second, perspectives have a variety of degrees of representational content. In general,
perspectives of narrower scope will be simpler, though this need not always be true. Some
perspectives merely cast a positive valence on certain features of an entity. The perspective
according to which vegemite is delicious doesn’t represent a “complex structure of relative
prominence” or an explanatory relation. But, as Camp suggests, slurring perspectives often
represent someone’s membership in the slurred group as explaining other qualities—a sexist
perspective, for example, might represent Hillary Clinton’s gender as explaining why she in
unqualified to be president.

Third, and probably most contentiously, I want ‘perspective’ to refer to the kinds of
lenses I’ve described regardless of how consistently we wear them. Some perspectives are so
deeply lodged in our minds that we can’t imagine alternatives. But in the course of
communication we constantly try on others’ perspectives, or the perspectives their words invoke,
though these are not properly speaking ours.

If, for example, I think a child is charming and my friend thinks she is a terror, I can
consider her under that guise in order to see how warranted my friend’s assessment is. Then, if
my imaginative exercise goes well, certain aspects of her behavior which I had until now been ignoring will gain prominence, and others may change in valence: Perhaps I will be able to see what I had before thought of as boldness instead as haughtiness. I might be able to switch back completely to my prior view, or I might retain some of the new perspective. And, of course, the content of my prior perspective and the degree to which it is embedded may affect the degree to which I can experience my friend’s perspective.

(We can also sometimes have a full experience of another perspective: Although it bears little connection to our normal ways of seeing things, we have an experience powerful enough that it takes over for a while. Two examples: In *10:04*, Ben Lerner describes being in New York City before a hurricane and seeing a can of instant coffee on a shelf as the precious final product of an enormous commercial network. And someone once told me that after she read Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* she couldn’t look a man in the eye for several days.)

This idea of a perspective that we can try on without fully embodying figures in Camp’s analysis of metaphor. In interpreting metaphor, we frame things differently in order to grasp the content that is intended. We can understand the sentence “Man is the cancer of the world” perfectly well without sharing the perspective it expresses, but it forces us to consider—*consider*, rather than *adopt*—a perspective on humankind according to which we are a disease that metastasizes and kills. The metaphor causes us to having an experience of *seeing-as*. (This is related to metaphor’s purported power to produce complicity.)

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17 He writes, “I held the red plastic container, one of the last three on the shelf, held it like the marvel that it was: the seeds inside the purple fruits of coffee plants had been harvested on Andean slopes and roasted and ground and soaked and then dehydrated at a factory in Medellin and vacuum-sealed and flown to JFK and then driven upstate in bulk to Pearl River for repackaging and then transported back by truck to the store where I now stood reading the label. It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow within it as they were threatened, stirred inside their packaging, lending it a certain aura...” (19).
18 For more on this, see Camp (2015), especially section 5.
So, to repeat, perspectives may vary in scope, in complexity, and in detachability. A person can have a broad perspective on women and a narrow perspective on his mother. He can have complex perspectives that represent explanatory relations (a perspective on some historical event, for example) and simple perspectives that represent only features and pro and con valences. He can have some perspectives that are so entrenched that he may never recognize them as such—that is, he may never recognize that alternative representations are possible, and indeed are held by others—and some that he tries on when called to by others but never fully inhabits.

There are a slew of outstanding questions about perspectives. I'll briefly address two before turning back to slurs. First, if perspectives are dispositions to think and feel in certain patterns, what criteria are appropriate for evaluating them? Can they be accurate or inaccurate? Since some perspectives represent certain features of the world as standing in various explanatory relations to others, they can clearly be defective as representational tools—as, for example, slurring perspectives are. There may, nevertheless, be phenomena for which two competing perspectives are equally valid. Each may do the phenomenon a different kind of justice, by making different features of it salient. For some purposes it may be best to see a riot as part of a historical pattern, and so to focus on the features it shares with past riots; for other purposes, it may be best to see it only as a response to a contemporary situation. But there may be no purpose-independent fact about which of its features are most important, and thus which perspective represents most accurately. In other cases, the question of whether a perspective represents accurately seems nonsensical. Despite vegemite lovers’ insistence to the contrary, a perspective according to which vegemite is disgusting isn’t the kind of thing that can be accurate or inaccurate.
Next, what is the relationship between beliefs and perspectives? This varies dramatically from case to case. When someone believes that there’s beer in the fridge, she can’t be described as having a perspective according to which this is so; when someone believes that Donald Trump is an American hero, it makes sense to talk about the perspective that issues in or is partly constituted by that belief. In rare cases a simple perspective might be identical to a belief: To believe that vegemite is delicious might just be to experience it as having certain evaluative valences. More generally, the best way to identify or describe a perspective will often be to identify beliefs that are central to it. So, for example, there is a familiar perspective according to which America is a special country whose history gives it a unique right to intervene abroad. The relevant belief, that America is such a country, obviously will often go along with holding the perspective (though on some occasions, a person might claim not to have the belief while undeniably having the perspective). But holding the perspective involves much more: It is also a matter of thinking in certain patterns and having particular conative attitudes. It might involve, for example, thinking of some historical events as true expressions of the American character and of others as anomalous, or taking someone’s being American as reason to accord her a certain level of respect. Experiencing certain features of the world as prominent or as explanatory will involve seeing them as having some kind of value, and thus as calling for certain kinds of emotional and conative response.

In other cases there will be no belief that can be identified as central to a perspective. Let’s consider again slurring perspectives. People we might want (for a variety of reasons) to classify as similarly racist do not necessarily accept the same propositions and reject the same propositions. What they share is rather an orientation, or a looser set of relations, towards the targets of their contempt. That orientation imbues a wide variety of phenomena with particular
evaluative valences. The best way to pick out such perspectives might be with images, or perhaps even sounds—think of popular depictions of Native Americans, or the voice some men put on when imitating women. These can sometimes be translated into propositional language, but they represent ways of thinking on their own.

Perspectives are of special political interest for two reasons. First, though our beliefs may well affect the content of our future experiences, it is easier to see how a perspective could cause us to interpret new experiences in accordance with what we already believed. Second, perspectives also withstand counterexamples and counterevidence better than beliefs. In many cases it is relatively clear what would have to happen for someone to learn that one of her beliefs is false; much more would have to happen, and it’s not clear what, in order for her to determine that she has had a misleading or skewed perspective. A person may be much more committed, either knowingly or not, to a particular perspective than to any particular belief. Even if she is shown to be mistaken in specific cases, she can maintain her broader evaluative outlook. So our perspectives may be better indicators of our future behavior than our beliefs, and figuring out ways to dislodge perspectives might be the best way to achieve political change.

2. Slurs and Perspectival Terms

Let’s return to Camp’s account of slurs. Camp’s claim is that slurs are perspectival terms: In using a slur, a speaker signals allegiance to a derogating perspective. A speaker makes salient and endorses a way of thinking, rather than any particular thought, about the target of the slur and the group in question. As I’ll explain in more detail later, Camp’s account also helps explain the kind of effect that using a slur can have on the other participants in the conversation: It can seem to license additional hateful language and behavior.
A full defense of Camp’s account of slurs is outside the scope of this paper, but I’ll briefly survey other accounts. Nearly all accounts of slurs claim that one aspect of a slur’s meaning is an unobjectionable attribution of group membership—whatever the slur shares with its ‘neutral correlate.’ The motivation for this thought seems to be that slurs can be misused even among bigots. To say of a Frenchman that he is a Limey, for example, is to fail to understand some part of what ‘Limey’ means: That word is used to slur the British, not the French. The component of a slur’s meaning in virtue of which it attributes group membership needs no special explanation, since it is shared with commonplace, inoffensive terms. So the main question about slurs is how to characterize the rest of their meaning, the meaning in virtue of which they cause offense.

Dividing up slurs’ meaning into these two components may not be a good first move. I suspect that part of why slurs are objectionable is just that they reinforce the social significance of belonging to certain groups. So the assumption that there is a separable and unobjectionable attribution of group membership does not seem warranted. In some cases, there may not even be anything we can identify as a neutral correlate. As Lauren Ashwell points out, while we might initially think that the neutral correlate of *slut* is “woman who has sex with many men,” this phrase isn’t neutral except perhaps in medical contexts. In normal conversation we just may not be able to make mention of this property neutrally, since it often seems like a way of dancing around saying that someone is a slut. Description of a woman’s sexual habits can’t be mere description, given how deep-rooted and charged our cultural judgments are—in referring to this property we are implicating that it is of interest, and the main reason it tends to be of interest is that it is seen as a reason to ostracize or harass or otherwise mistreat the woman.

19 And perhaps even rarely then—many women describe experiences of being disrespected and shamed by their nurses and doctors for having many sexual partners. See, for example, <http://www.xojane.com/it-happened-to-me/it-happened-to-me-i-was-slut-shamed-by-my-doctor>.
Even for slurs that do have neutral correlates, there will be many uses of the neutral correlate that are just as hurtful and offensive. What is hurtful is the speaker's expression of her contempt and social dominance, or in less extreme cases just the indication that someone's membership in a group is noteworthy or relevant. 'Jew' and 'homosexual' are especially familiar examples of terms that are supposedly neutral correlates of slurs but are often used as slurs to the same effect. (I discuss these cases in more detail in section 3.)

Accepting for the moment that slurs' meaning can be divided in this way, the main question on which accounts of slurs diverge is whether the offensive and denigrating aspect of the slur is semantic or pragmatic. On semantic accounts, where S is a slur and N is its neutral correlate, “x is S” might mean “x is N and despicable because of it,” or “x ought to be subject to some mistreatment, because of having various properties that are explained by x's being N.” (These are analyses endorsed by Bach and Hom, respectively.) But these accounts fail to explain why saying “x isn't S” is likewise offensive—if all S means is “N and despicable because of it,” it should be perfectly acceptable to say of someone that she isn't S. On other semantic accounts, slurs both predicate group membership and express an attitude towards members of that group. But expressivist accounts are not able to explain our sense that uses of slurs misrepresent, as a use of “cur” would misrepresent a dog who had always behaved loyally.

Pragmatic accounts do a better job explaining the appearance that the two aspects of meaning differ in status. On one fairly well-accepted pragmatic account, slurs conventionally implicate their derogatory aspect. But these accounts are committed to the claim that sentences containing slurs are often strictly speaking true, though they trigger false and objectionable

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20 See, for example, Jeshion (2013).
21 See Williamson (2007).
conventional implicatures. That consequence might be tolerable only given the assumption that there are two components to slurs’ meaning.

Camp’s view is not intended to answer all of these questions about slurs. Her goal is to give a fuller explanation of, as she puts it, “what the ‘other’ component of slurs is,” rather than to argue that that component of meaning has a particular theoretical status. So her account should be compatible with a variety of other accounts of slurs.

Slurs form only a small subclass of the perspectival terms. Other examples include terms that indicate the speaker’s status in relation to the hearer (e.g., the French tu and vous), thick terms, and some slang terms. Since competent speakers know when terms are associated with particular perspectives (although not, perhaps, under that description), to use a perspectival term sincerely is to signal some allegiance to its corresponding perspective—it is to endorse, if only temporarily, having the dispositions that compose the perspective. The speaker indicates that she sees the world a certain way, and in asking her hearers to accept what she says as true, she asks them to see it similarly.

In using a perspectival term, I claim, the specific way that a speaker signals allegiance to a perspective is by presupposing it. Camp doesn’t use the term “presupposition” in her work on slurs, but in other work she suggests that perspectives can indeed be presupposed. Presupposing a perspective involves presupposing that, for some domain, things are for one’s hearers as they

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22 Camp (2013) 331.
23 These examples are from Camp (2013) 335. Most terms that have counterparts with similar or identical denotations but different connotations are perspectival (as, of course, are the counterparts). But I don’t mean to suggest that there is a hard and fast distinction between perspectival and non-perspectival terms; many terms are probably perspectival in some contexts and not in others where there are no salient alternative terms. That is, what is of great interest in some micro-culture, and thus warrants that culture’s having terms that allow speakers to make fine distinctions, may be of little interest in other micro-cultures. So terms that are in one context chosen advisedly are chosen in others because they are the only salient option.
24 On some occasions, a speaker might use a perspectival term without endorsing the relevant perspective to make a rhetorical point or a joke. That she is not intending to endorse the perspective the term signals may be clear from what we knew about her or from the context.
are for oneself: that the same features of the world are salient and that they are imbued with the
same evaluative valences. If that is not the case, the speaker’s very use of the term can, as Bauer
put it, “light up” the world in that way. When a speaker uses the word *chaste*, for example, she
implicitly pressures her hearers to adopt the attitudes, if they don’t already have them, that would
permit them to apply it to some people and not to others. Likewise, when a speaker uses a slur,
she causes the corresponding derogating perspective to have a special conversational status and
to color further remarks. As Camp writes, a use of a slur “insert[s] a way of thinking about [the
group] into the conversation.” Developing that thought, it seems that uses of perspectival terms
are often *exercitive*: they change what is permissible in the conversation. I will return to this
thought in section 4.

3. Descriptive Terms and Evaluative Perspectives

So far I have discussed how uses of slurs and thick terms can signal allegiance to a perspective.
In using a perspectival term, a speaker presupposes the relevant perspective, and thereby
endorses that way of seeing things. It is, however, possible to signal allegiance to a perspective
without using terms that are perspectival as a matter of semantics, as Camp’s examples of slurs,
slang terms, and thick terms are. To call an adult black man “boy” is clearly a slurring use
despite that term not itself counting as perspectival. As I suggested above, metaphor and other
nonliteral uses can also introduce perspectives—consider, for example, what happens when we
call someone a snake or a piece of meat. So, hateful perspectives can be signaled without using
terms that semantically encode perspectives: it is possible to do something very similar to what a
slur does without actually using the slur.
As Robin Jeshion points out, the following sentences ["where italics denote intonational stress, with the superscript giving the type of intonation, here “C” denoting contemptuousness"]25 all function to derogate just as their slurring counterparts do, despite using only words that are normally unobjectionable:

“Yao Ming is ChineseC.”

“Barbra Streisand is a JewC.”

“He is a homosexualC.”

In speaking this way, the speaker indicates that she takes having the property—being Chinese, or Jewish, or gay—to make the target worthy of contempt. And in showing her own contempt, she thereby seems to indicate that having the property merits contempt from others. (This seems to be a feature of contempt as opposed to, say, anger; we may be angry without representing the object of our anger as demanding anger from others.)

There are certainly important differences between speaking this way and using slurs. We may be more comfortable calling these utterances true: Of these, we might say, “It wasn’t what you said, but the way you said it,” and that certainly isn’t right of slurs. Regardless, these utterances convey, like slurs, that their targets are contemptible in virtue of being of the relevant group. And, as with slurs, the derogating element projects out of embedding; to say “He’s not a homosexualC,” or “If he were a homosexualC …” likewise clearly conveys that the speaker is homophobic. So, although the word “homosexual” does not itself encode a perspective, some uses of it certainly do—and can function as weapons just in the way slurs do, Jeshion argues.

In a paradigm case, then, the way that a speaker manages to signal that she is presupposing a perspective is just by using a perspectival term. In other cases, a speaker signals

that she is presupposing a perspective by using tone, gesture, and facial expression, as in Jeshion's examples above. But finally, as I will argue below, speakers can often signal allegiance to evaluative perspectives using descriptive terms—even without a contemptuous tone or facial expression. In certain contexts, or applied to certain objects, or more generally in the performance of particular speech acts, uses of descriptive terms can convey evaluations.

In Beyond Belief, Rae Langton argues that hate speech can affect the commonly held conative attitudes of conversational participants: Hate speech can cause people to have desires and emotions that they did not previously have. This can happen when the hate speech is direct—when something hateful is part of the at-issue content of the utterance. But desires and emotions might also be spread, Langton points out, by a mechanism akin to presupposition accommodation. Hearers accommodate presupposed content: They as a rule automatically accept the background propositions that are required to make a speaker's assertion meaningful. Similarly, Langton writes, "Just as a hearer's belief can spring into being, after the speaker presupposes that belief, so too a hearer's desire can spring into being, after the speaker presupposes the hearer's desire; and so too a hearer's hatred can spring into being, after the speaker presupposes that hatred." 26 Speech can be successful not only in its appeals to believe something but also in its appeals to desire something or feel something. So, Langton writes, "A speaker can invite someone into their desire-world by taking for granted that the hearer is already in the desire-world. A psychological accommodation then follows, as a causal effect of the attitudinal appeal." 27

26 Langton (2012) 86.
27 Ibid., 89.
The explanation I gave above of slurs and thick terms fits remarkably well with Langton’s picture. If Langton is right in claiming that conative attitudes can be spread via presupposition accommodation, just as cognitive attitudes often are, then the spreading of perspectives—which combine conative and cognitive attitudes—is not mysterious. If we easily accommodate presupposed perspectives, it is easy to see why hateful behavior is so often preceded by hateful language. As Lynne Tirrell has shown, for example, “the use of derogatory terms played a significant role in laying the social groundwork for the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda.”28 It is not a coincidence that nearly all hate crimes and nearly all forms of race and gender-based violence involve slurs: Slurs and other hate speech are so often part of the causal history of violent acts because they recommend ways of looking at the world that make aggression and violence seem warranted or appropriate. If an account of this kind is right, then altering language use may go further than we had previously thought in altering behavior.

Much more everyday speech also informs our evaluative attitudes, however. Such speech presents various qualities or facts in certain evaluative lights. So a far broader variety of speech than hate speech functions as Langton describes: It serves to change the conative attitudes of the conversational participants by presupposition rather than bald assertion. Hate speech is unusual in the degree to which it does this, not in the mechanism by which it does it.

How, then, can particular uses of descriptive terms presuppose evaluative perspectives? We can now return to the examples with which I began. In all of these cases, recall, the speaker presents the property in question as warranting some evaluation. Here they are again:

1) At a baseball game, a man shouts to a pitcher, “You throw like a girl!”

28 Tirrell (2012) 175.
2) Some seventh-grade girls are fighting. Their teacher arranges them in a circle and tells everyone to give a compliment to the person on her right. One girl says to another, “You’re skinny.”

3) As a way of insulting her, Tai says to Cher, “You’re a virgin who can’t drive.” *(Clueless)*

Theses cases differ in important ways, and the fact that an evaluative perspective is presupposed is not intended to be a full explanation of how they communicate what they do. But it does, I think, explain a particular kind of harm that they cause.

The negative evaluation conveyed by (1) seems much more conventional than the others. When someone says, “You throw like a girl,” that phrase is insulting as a default; we don’t need to know much about the speech situation to determine what the speaker is using those words to do. While, for example, “She dresses like a New Yorker” could in some speech situations convey a positive evaluation, in others a negative evaluation, and on some occasions convey only non-evaluative information, the meaning of “You throw like a girl” is fixed as negative. Furthermore, the evaluative aspect is not a pragmatic calculation that the hearer performs given his knowledge of how girls throw, as it might be in the case of, for example, “You write like a ten-year-old.” “Like a girl” means “weakly” or “ineptly” in a variety of different expressions: “runs like a girl,” “screams like a girl,” “kicks like a girl,” and so on. And yet, of course, it would most naturally be read as containing only descriptive terms.

Justin Khoo has argued convincingly that this utterance conventionally implicates that girls throw badly. It clearly also, however, indicates that the speaker has a particular evaluative perspective, namely one according to which “like a girl” and “poorly” are interchangeable. The speaker couldn’t expect that his utterance would be understood as an insult unless he
presupposed that his evaluation of girls’ throwing abilities was shared. Because this negative
meaning of “like a girl” is so conventionalized, “You throw like a girl” cannot be used neutrally.

Next, there are some contexts where it is made explicit that conversational partners are
engaging in evaluation. These are situations like (2), in which people ask for evaluations of
others (for a job, for friendship, for romantic compatibility, etc.). When conversational
participants remark on the subject of evaluation’s qualities in descriptive terms, those utterances
manage to convey praise or disparagement because the conversational partners tend to have
similar evaluative attitudes. If I am trying to hire someone, for example, it will tend to be
common ground that punctuality is good. When we agree about how to evaluate particular non-
evaluative qualities for particular purposes, remarks about having or lacking such a quality will
be sufficient to convey the corresponding evaluative information.

As for (2) in particular, skinny is obviously vague and context-dependent; let’s assume in
this context that it’s true (and saying it may make it so, since the utterance helps fix the context’s
standards). The student has asserted something with only descriptive content, but the fact that the
remark was made in order to serve as a compliment causes it to also introduce evaluative content
into the common ground. Just as uses of slurs and thick terms presuppose evaluative
perspectives, so does “You’re skinny” when used as a compliment: The speaker is presupposing
an evaluative perspective in just the same way she would be if skinny were a thick term.29

We can’t use the term skinny without carrying along the cultural baggage that is attached
to that property and to that word especially. In using “You’re skinny” as a compliment, a speaker
makes reference to a wide array of related attitudes. For example, it’s clear that in saying this, the
speaker is implicitly recommending a negative evaluation of people who aren’t skinny. But that

29 We might even argue that terms are thick relative to contexts; terms widely considered thick are just thick relative
to the widest contexts, whereas terms like skinny are thick relative to rather local contexts.
wouldn’t be so if all the speaker was communicating was that having the non-evaluative property denoted by *skinny* is good; there are plenty of other properties that we can congratulate people for having without suggesting anything negative about those who don’t (Consider: “You’re so Parisian!” or “You know a lot of a big words!” said admiringly). The reason that this utterance of “You’re skinny” communicates some ranking is that it is part of a cultural practice that the speaker brings to bear on this situation.

This isn’t, however, to be taken as an observation about the word *skinny* in particular. Everything I said above also applies to *thin*. Those terms are certainly descriptive terms, but particular uses of them indicate allegiance to incredibly powerful evaluative perspectives. These perspectives are widely shared and often deeply lodged. Because of how frequently the term and the perspective go together, it’s very difficult to use the term without indicating some allegiance to the perspective. And because of how frequently approval of thinness goes hand in hand with other attitudes about appearances, signaling allegiance to a perspective according to which thinness is good may also introduce other evaluative information: It might indicate that mainstream Western beauty standards are being applied across the board, for example.

We can see how this story will go in the final case. When Tai says “You’re a virgin who can’t drive” to Cher, she is saying true things about Cher using non-evaluative terms—but also insulting her, endorsing some evaluative perspectives on those qualities, and increasing the social pressure that imposes sanctions on people with those qualities. She is, to reiterate, presupposing an evaluative perspective that represents the world such that these qualities are ones to be ashamed of.

Again, let’s compare these examples with uses of thick terms. Pekka Väyrynen writes, 

Insofar as thick terms tend to get used only by those who endorse certain evaluations, those evaluations will normally not be “at issue” when such people discuss what falls
under [a given thick term]. It will be mutually agreed what sort of negative attitude is appropriate to adopt if someone is being selfish even if the conversational partners disagree over whether the person does fall into the extension of selfish. And it will be recognized without further ado that to deny that something is selfish is not to deny this general evaluation.  

In a disagreement about whether Tom is selfish, there is no dispute over whether being selfish is bad. The background evaluative attitude—a perspective according to which, as Vayrynen puts it, “preferring a contribution to one’s own interests over a greater contribution to the interests of others is bad in a certain sort of way”—is conveyed as part of the not-at-issue content of the utterances. So, no matter which position one takes, to engage in a dispute over whether someone is selfish is to lend support to an evaluative perspective. And surely part of the point of using the term is to enforce the distinction, to censure the selfish people and to give others reason to avoid behaving selfishly.

In any utterance where a speaker presents a non-evaluative property as warranting an evaluative response, she endorses the corresponding broader evaluative perspective. So, as before, to say “He’s Chinese” is to communicate not only some negative evaluation of the Chinese man in question because of his being such, but also to endorse an evaluative perspective on China and Chinese people in general. To say sneeringly, “You’re a virgin,” similarly endorses an evaluative perspective on virginity. Although no evaluative terms are used, evaluations are clearly conveyed. And, with the appropriate background attitudes in place, a speaker need not even say those words contemptuously for them to communicate a disparaging evaluation.

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30 Vayrynen (2013) 130.
4. Exercitives

I suggested earlier that uses of slurs and thick terms can be exercitive. By extension, I’ll argue, so can evaluative uses of descriptive terms. The fact that these utterances are exercitive helps explain why they can be so powerful in shaping behavior. I’ll now explain and defend that claim at more length.

In introducing exercitives in *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin had in mind those utterances that grant permissions explicitly: “You may now enter the building,” “From now on, bedtime is at 9pm,” and so on. He wrote, “[An exercitive’s] consequences may be that others are ‘compelled’ or ‘allowed’ or ‘not allowed’ to do certain acts.”\(^{31}\) These utterances seem to state the content of the permissibility facts that they enact or alter. When a speaker says, “Bedtime is at 9pm,” he makes it the case that his children are not permitted to stay up past 9pm. They require that the speaker have authority over the domain in question in order to be felicitous; a child who says the same words cannot thereby enact the rule, since her sister’s bedtime is not a domain over which she has authority. In making exercitive utterances, a speaker generally intends to be changing permissibility facts, and her hearer must recognize her intention in order for the exercitive to be effective.

As Mary Kate McGowan has argued, the kind of examples Austin gives do not exhaust the set of speech acts that change permissibility facts. She calls this broader class *conversational exercitives*: Unlike traditional Austinian exercitives, they “enact permissibility facts without expressing the content of those facts, without the speaker intending to be doing so, and without the hearer recognizing that it is so.”\(^{32}\)

\(^{31}\) Austin (1962) 155.
McGowan argues for such a class by way of introducing David Lewis's idea of a conversational score: A set of facts that evolves throughout a conversation and tracks, e.g., what is presupposed, what is salient, and to what various pronouns refer. On McGowan's account, any conversational contribution that changes the conversational score counts as a conversational exercitive. She writes, "When speech constitutes a move in a norm-governed activity, it has exercitive force in virtue of enacting new permissibility facts for the activity in which it is a move." Whenever a speaker utters a sentence, the information conveyed in her act of uttering (including, for example, the information that she uttered a sentence, though this is not part of the content of her utterance) changes what is presupposed in the conversation. In changing what is presupposed, she thereby alters the conversational score and alters what counts as conversational 'correct play.' Any such utterance—that is, any utterance—"although [it] does not wear its exercitive force on its sleeve ... nevertheless enacts permissibility facts for the conversation and is therefore exercitive."34

I disagree with McGowan on several points. To say that any move in a norm-governed activity is exercitive overstretches the class of exercitives.35 So we need to distinguish the various ways that a conversational contribution can be impermissible, or can count as 'incorrect

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34 Ibid.
35 McGowan also sometimes calls "conversationally impermissible" what would, in fact, be conversationally impossible. She writes, for example:

Suppose that, when discussing Mike's dog, I say "We had a hyperactive Irish setter named Finbar who stole undergarments from neighborhood clotheslines and so we had to get rid of the dog." By introducing Finbar into the conversation, I made Finbar the most salient dog and that is why I managed to refer to Finbar with the expression 'the dog.' Because of what I said, Mike cannot refer to his dog with the expression 'the dog' (until the salience facts change back again). My utterance changed the salience facts that are part of a conversational score and thereby changed the bounds of conversational permissibility. My utterance is an exercitive speech act even though it is not obviously so. (2003, p.173)

As McGowan writes, Mike cannot refer to his dog with the expression 'the dog'—it is, contra her analysis, not that he no longer has permission to, or that it would be conversationally improper to. If he says 'the dog,' intending to refer to his own dog, he just will not be able to communicate successfully; his hearers will take him to be referring to Finbar (depending on the sentence; as McGowan suggests, he may be able to change the salience facts quite easily).
play.' There are, obviously, a wide variety of norms that a conversational contribution can violate. Some are purely conversational norms, norms related to the smooth functioning of the process of communication. If, for example, I say, "My rent was a lot lower last year," and my conversational partner later says, "Did you rent last year?" she has violated such a conversational norm—she has failed to accommodate my presupposition.\(^{36}\) Or, for example, if a speaker uses without explanation very different standards of precision than were previously used, that might likewise count as a violation of a conversational norm. So the sense in which any utterance is exercitive, as McGowan claims, is just that it changes what can appropriately be said later in the conversation.

The sense in which I am claiming uses of descriptive terms can be exercitive is stricter than McGowan’s sense. While every utterance changes what speakers who want to follow the conversational rules can do, a smaller class of utterances changes what the conversational rules are. In particular, I am interested in those utterances that change what evaluative standards are in play. Exercitives by definition concern permission; the ones I am interested in concern specifically social permission. From an example from Erving Goffman, suppose a secretary and a manager generally are friendly and call each other by their first names. If a superior enters and the manager begins referring to the secretary as Ms. So-and-so, it is clearly impermissible in a different sense for her to continue calling him by his first name. It would also be odd, or incomprehensible that she missed this cue, but it would primarily be considered a sign of disrespect. Since in calling the secretary Ms. So-and-so the manager changed the permissibility

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\(^{36}\) It’s interesting that the tone in which the responder asks her question can make it acceptable—if, for example, she takes it to be surprising that the speaker rented last year, she can say, "Did you rent last year?" as a way of saying "I didn’t know you rented last year," or "You rented last year?"—i.e., "Do I understand you correctly?" The conversation might seamlessly continue—"Oh yes, I actually rent a small studio to work in." Or, that the hearer considered it surprising might itself be taken as offensive by the speaker—"Yes, and what of it?"
facts, his utterance was exercitive (depending on the situation, the superior’s entrance might itself be thought of as exercitive).

Or, to fill out an earlier example, consider a conversation among men who don’t know each other well about their female co-workers. One says, “Once she gets drunk she becomes such a little slut.” In saying this, the speaker presupposes a perspective on women and their sexuality. He also changes what is socially permissible in this context. If no one else objects, everyone in the conversation can carry on assuming that the perspective has been accommodated, or at least will continue to be tolerated. It is thereby established that other utterances from that perspective will be accepted.

From our location and people’s appearances and dress and mannerisms we gather all sorts of information about what they are likely to find socially acceptable: what they’ll find funny or charming and what they will find rude, obnoxious, insensitive, or unworthy of their time. What is an innocuous story in one context is an insensitive display of wealth in another. All sorts of information will go into our shared judgments about what is socially permissible in a given context—and thus what is socially permissible in a given context, given the way that social permission works.

It is enormously important to us that we pick up these cues. So utterances that enact social permissibility facts are of special interest to us. And slurs, thick terms, and descriptive terms used evaluatively are a special class of such utterances. They make new claims on the conversational context about what commitments various speakers have, and thus what they will respond well and poorly to. Someone who wants to fit in or make friends or merely have a pleasant interaction will do well to share terms and presuppose similar evaluative attitudes.37

37 I should briefly consider the question whether some of the instances I have in mind might better be thought of as verdictives. A classical verdictive is the sort of judgment that an umpire or a jury makes: that that ball was a foul, or
Consider, again, a use of the thick term *chaste*. The descriptive meaning associated with *chaste* is “abstaining from extramarital, or from all, sexual intercourse; not having any sexual nature or intention,” and it is an approbative term. It would not be linguistically appropriate for a speaker to use this term if she did not approve of abstention from sex. So in using this term, she presupposes that it is good to be nonsexual; without having that attitude, or at least accepting it for the purposes of the conversation, it would be misleading to choose that term. Note that there is an important difference between using the term *chaste* and saying, “She is nonsexual, which I think is a good thing.” The first way of speaking bundles together the act of description and the act of evaluation; the second decouples them. In speaking the second way, the speaker acknowledges that other people may think differently.

that this person is guilty. It is an authoritative construal of an event. There is clearly something to the question whether a ball was foul beyond the umpire’s judgment; an umpire can’t keep his job if he consistently calls certain balls foul. But in general it is the judgment, not the fact on which it is based, that determines how things will proceed. A verdictive is effective when its audience proceeds on the basis of it. To what degree people will tolerate and proceed on the basis of a judgment that diverges from their own depends on the power or epistemic authority that the judge has. Though the symptom may seem serious to me, I often proceed on the basis of the doctor’s judgment that it isn’t; though I may disagree with the police officer’s judgment that I resemble the suspect, I do as he says.

In some circumstances, we have an understanding of the fact at hand independent of the judge’s. But in many other cases, Nancy Bauer points out, “judgment and the fact of the matter may become hopelessly conflated, in which case the verdictive will have *created* the reality that the judge purports merely to describe. Judgment becomes *taken as fact*.” In some cases, a verdictive speech act will cause its content to become true. In response to her math teacher’s judgment that she isn’t any good at math, for example, a young girl may lose interest and enthusiasm for math and become no good at it. She will alter her behavior in response to her teacher’s verdict, so that the speech act brings about its own truth. In other cases, a verdictive speech act sets contextual standards, thereby making itself true in a different way. When someone says, “Liz is wealthy,” he sets the contextual standard for the term ‘wealthy’ and thereby makes it the case that his verdict is true, even though prior to his utterance there was no fact of the matter about whether Liz counted as wealthy.

In yet other cases, all it is for the verdictive to be true is for it to be said by someone with the right kind of authority. Take, for example, the popular kids’ judgments about what’s cool and what’s not, or the stylish person’s judgments about what’s in and what’s out. In the wealth case above, there is clearly some judgment-independent fact of the matter about Liz’s wealth; what the utterance does is fix the standard for the purposes of the conversation. But in these latter cases, there may not be any judgment-independent fact of the matter about what’s cool or what’s stylish. What it is for something to be stylish is for it to be judged such by a certain person.

When, for example, a socially powerful girl calls another girl a slut, that looks like both a verdictive and an exercitive speech act. She is “creating the reality she purports to describe,” as Bauer writes. A socially powerful person can make it the case that a thick term can be correctly applied.

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39 Setting aside mocking, sarcastic, and ironic uses—these seem to exploit the fact about appropriateness.
40 In particular, that the speaker thinks it’s a good thing is part of the at-issue content of the utterance—it is what would be targeted by the responses “Why?” and “I disagree.”
To use a thick term is to presuppose that one’s conversational partners share the evaluative perspective that makes the use of the term appropriate, or will at least be willing to accept it for the purposes of conversation. It is to presuppose that one’s hearers are willing to apply that word in some cases and withhold it in others. When a speaker uses a thick term and no one objects, the descriptive content associated with the term gets added to the common ground of the conversation as the at-issue content of the utterance, and the relevant background perspective gets added as content that is not-at-issue. If someone says, for example, “Tony is a snitch,” it is added to the common ground as part of the at-issue content that Tony spread some incriminating information, perhaps to an authority figure. But a negative evaluation of spreading incriminating information is also communicated, as part of the utterance’s not-at-issue content. If no one objects—“No, I think he did the right thing”—the conversational partners can carry on assuming that they all share that negative evaluation. Similarly, if a speaker uses the term chaste and no one objects, conversational participants can carry on assuming that everyone accepts such an evaluation of sexual abstinence, as the speaker presupposed in using the term.

Whether a use of a thick term or a slur is exercitive—that is, whether it changes what’s conversationally permissible—depends on the evaluative attitudes of the conversational participants prior to its use. Some uses of slurs do not “insert a way of thinking” into the common ground simply because that way of thinking was already accepted by all of the conversational participants. Similarly, it may be commonly believed among conversational participants that it is good to be nonsexual before the term chaste has been used. The circumstances in which uses of slurs and thick terms are exercitive are those in which conversational participants’ evaluative attitudes are less aligned, or at least not known to be.

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Note that, to convey the opposite evaluation, someone could say, “Tony is a whistleblower.” Imagine, for example, a conversation between a team and a coach, where Tony has reported a teammate’s misdeeds.
aligned. If no one objects, the speaker’s use of a thick term can be sufficient to make the corresponding perspective common ground. That does not mean that all conversational participants come to share the evaluative perspective, but it means that they are willing to allow the perspective to stand for the purposes of the conversation. In this way, the behavior that fits the evaluative perspective comes to be at least partially licensed. If my conversational partner has used the term *chaste* and no one has objected, I will take it to be socially permissible to remark upon, for example, Madonna’s lewdness. If my conversational partner has used the term *slut* and no one has objected, it will appear socially permissible for me to say something sexually objectifying about the woman in question.

When these utterances are exercitive, they are so in virtue of indicating to hearers what positions they have social permission to espouse. Since permission is involved, so is some idea of the consequences of noncompliance. A hearer who finds such a term objectionable has to either bite her tongue or raise her objection explicitly. She is thus faced with a choice of either allowing it to be inferred about her that she agrees with such an attitude or initiating some kind of confrontation, however minor, with the speaker. The cost of initiating the confrontation varies dramatically; sometimes a hearer will not see herself as having anything to lose by telling the initial speaker that she objects to that way of talking (take, for example, a parent’s questioning or correcting a child’s offensive language). But other times the circumstances will be such that the social cost of speaking up will be enormous. When a teenager has to decide how to react when a socially powerful peer uses the word *faggot*, for example, he may be deciding whether he is willing to be made a target of contempt and derision himself.
5. Conclusion

I began with the observation that we tend to distinguish between evaluative and non-evaluative terms. I hope to have provided reasons to be more skeptical about that distinction. Terms that we usually think of as non-evaluative can, in suitable contexts, function just as thick terms do. In using them, a speaker can presuppose an evaluative perspective and thereby introduce broader normative commitments into the common ground of a conversation. This can be done covertly, so that it is especially difficult for hearers to object. This kind of utterance, I’ve argued, is exercitive: It gives an evaluative perspective a particular status in the conversation, thus changing what is socially permissible in that context. Other speakers are thus socially licensed to speak and act in accordance with the perspective.

I also hope to have provided some reason to think that slurs are not quite as remarkable as we had assumed. Slurs function just as other thick terms do, with more consistent shock value. It is clearly much more common to spread evaluative attitudes using words that aren’t so taboo. So we should redirect our attention to the less conspicuous ways that we manage to manipulate language and alter one another’s attitudes.
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