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The Semantics and Pragmatics of racial and ethnic language: towards a comprehensive radical contextual account

While racial and ethnic slurs are primarily used by bigots to derogate and/or offend individuals that they despise, they can also be used by members of a certain ethnicity group, for example, to communicate self-appropriated messages of camaraderie. While it is widely acknowledged that slurs can convey either deprecating or friendly messages in various contexts of utterance, the debate continues as to whether slurring meaning is to be pinned down either in semantic (sentence-based) or in pragmatic (context-based) terms.

In my search for a cognitively real theory of slurring natural language, I identify context-specific and context-free aspects of slurring meaning, look for a comprehensive theory which can account for slurring language in use, and construct a theoretical representation of slurring language processing. I argue, by extending the scope of application of Jaszczolt's (2005, 2010, 2016) Default Semantics, that speakers' main intended and successfully communicated messages (primary meanings) are to constitute the object of study of a psychologically real account of slurring language interpretation, and I propose, based on the claim that slurs comprise a descriptive race, ethnicity and/or nationality-determined aspect of meaning and a flexible (but default) derogatory and/or offensive layer of expressiveness, that both descriptiveness and expressiveness are apt to contribute to primary meanings, the extent of such a contribution varying from context to context.

The shift from an analysis of lexical items or fully contextually determined understandings to an analysis of the meanings that speakers intend to communicate and that hearers actually recover yields an account of slurring language in which the semantic/pragmatic distinction loses its now long-standing predominance. It is a balanced interaction between language and context that leads to slurring primary meanings.