

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

What Bigots Do Say: A Reply to DiFranco

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Neutral Counterpart Theories of slurs hold that the truth-conditional contribution of a slur is the same as the truth-conditional contribution of its neutral counterpart. In (2015), DiFranco argues that these theories, even if plausible for single-word slurs like ‘kike’ and ‘nigger’, are not suitable for complex slurs such as ‘slanty-eyed’ and ‘curry muncher’, figurative slurs like ‘Jewish American Princess’, or iconic slurring expressions like ‘ching chong’. In this paper, we argue that these expressions do not amount to genuine counterexamples to neutral counterpart theories of slurs. We provide a positive characterization of DiFranco’s examples that doesn’t deviate from the core of those theories.

Keywords slurs; pejoratives; derogative words; semantics; pragmatics

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1 Preliminaries

Neutral Counterpart Theories of slurs (NC theories, for short) hold that slurs have neutral counterparts—that is, for each slur there is a term with the same extension but without the slur’s derogatory potential—, and that the truth-conditional contribution of a slur is the same as the truth-conditional contribution of its neutral counterpart. In (2015), DiFranco argues that these theses, even if plausible for single-word slurs like ‘kike’ and ‘nigger’, are not suitable for complex slurs such as ‘slanty-eyed’ and ‘curry muncher’, figurative slurs like ‘Jewish American Princess’, or iconic slurring expressions which do not seem to encode any truth-conditional content at all, like ‘ching chong’. In this paper, we argue that, *pace* DiFranco, these expressions do not amount to genuine counterexamples to NC theories. We provide a positive theory for DiFranco’s examples that doesn’t deviate from the core of NC theories.

2 The core of NC theories

NC theories come in different flavors, but all of them agree on two substantive theses concerning slurs, which constitute the core of these proposals:

(NC) For every slur s , there is a neutral counterpart n with the same extension.

(SC) The contribution made by a slur s to the truth-conditional content of a sentence S in which it occurs is the same as the contribution made by its neutral counterpart n to $S^{[n/s]}$,

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where $S^{[n/s]}$ is the sentence that results from S by substituting n for s in S one or more times. (SC) is the central semantic content of NC theories, while (NC) is clearly required if NC theories are to be applicable to all slurs.

Paradigmatic examples of expressions to which (NC) and (SC) apply are 'kike' and 'nigger'. They are, respectively, slurs for Jews and African Americans, and they have, as neutral counterparts, 'Jew' and 'African American'. It is a consequence of NC theories that the a and b sentences below are treated as semantically equivalent:

- (1) *a.* That building is full of kikes.
b. That building is full of Jews.
- (2) *a.* My daughter married a nigger.
b. My daughter married an African American.

NC theories would then explain the derogatory potential of the a sentences by non truth-conditional mechanisms like conventional implicature (McCready (2010); Williamson (2009); Whiting (2013)), an expressive dimension (Jeshion, 2013), slurs being taboo words (Anderson and Lepore, 2013), conversational implicature (Bolinger, 2015) or presupposition (Schlenker, 2007).

3 New problems for NC theories

In (2015), DiFranco poses a new problem for NC theories: his contention is that they cannot handle the semantic analysis of a number of expressions that should fall under the scope of (NC) and (SC) but that, were they to do so, would turn into counterexamples to those same theses. Thus, NC theories would be, at best, only partial and, at worst, wrong-headed theories of slurs.

The expressions DiFranco has in mind are seemingly complex slurs like 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher', figurative slurs like 'Jewish American Princess' and 'knuckle-dragging gorilla', and slurring expressions that do not seem to encode any truth-conditional content at all, like 'ching chong'. We'll start by reviewing the linguistic data DiFranco holds against NC theories, as well as the arguments supporting his conclusion that NC theories cannot account for this novel data.

3.1 Complex slurs

Let's start with complex slurs. Assume, with DiFranco, that 'East Asian' is a neutral counterpart of 'slanty-eyed', and that 'South Asian' is a neutral counterpart of 'curry muncher'. Then, if 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' were to fall under the scope of (NC) and (SC), the a sentences would have to be truth-conditionally equivalent to their corresponding b sentences:

- (3) *a.* Mark is slanty-eyed.
b. Mark is East Asian.
- (4) *a.* Mira is a curry muncher.
b. Mira is a South Asian.

DiFranco's contention against NC is that they are not. And, since they differ only in the occurrence of the slur and its neutral counterpart, we should conclude that (SC) doesn't hold for these pairs of expressions.

In order to show that NC fails for these slurs, DiFranco asks us to focus on sentences like:

(5) Mark once was slanty-eyed, but he got plastic surgery to change that.

(6) Mira used to be a curry muncher, but hasn't been one since she changed her diet.

DiFranco argues that, were 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' to make the same truth-conditional contribution as 'East Asian' and 'South Asian', respectively, then these sentences should be absurd (you simply cannot change ethnicity by means of plastic surgery or dietary adjustments). Since they are not, these complex slurs cannot make the same truth-conditional contribution as their alleged neutral counterparts.

3.2 Figurative slurs

The second threat to NC theories comes from figurative slurs like 'Jewish American Princess' and 'knuckle-dragging gorilla'. DiFranco asks us to assume that they have as neutral counterparts, respectively, 'Jewish American woman' and 'African American'. It is clear, though, that the *a* sentences cannot have the same truth-conditional content as the corresponding *b* sentences:

(7) *a.* Alex is a Jewish American Princess.

b. Alex is a Jewish American woman.

(8) *a.* Joe is a knuckle-dragging gorilla.

b. Joe is an African American.

And it is indeed clear that the *a* sentences cannot literally mean the same as the *b* sentences: while (7a) asserts that Alex is the daughter of a monarch, (7b) does no such thing; and while (8a) asserts that Joe is a gorilla, (8b) doesn't assert that at all. Thus, the *a* sentences and the *b* sentences have different truth-conditional contents. Hence, DiFranco concludes, (SC) is false of figurative slurs like 'Jewish American Princess' and 'knuckle-dragging gorilla': even though they are used metaphorically to refer to the targeted groups, they cannot be taken literally to refer to them — hence, they cannot have the same truth-conditional content as their neutral counterparts.

3.3 Iconic slurring

The last group of expressions that DiFranco considers is that of expressions that can be used to slur due to their iconicity, like 'ching chong'. These expressions lack any truth-conditional content, so hardly they could have the same truth-conditional content as any alleged neutral counterpart. He asks us to consider two utterances:

(9) Ching chong!

(10) You are a chink!

Imagine (9) being yelled at a Chinese person while passing by, in contrast with (10) being yelled at that same person. While we may claim that, by means of (10), the bigot is asserting something, there is no point in holding that, by means of (9), he is asserting something as well. On the contrary, it appears that (9) is not a case of assertion at all, but a case of slurring that doesn't come by any sort of constative speech act.¹

4 What bigots do say

In this section, we answer DiFranco's worries by sketching a theory of what the NC theorist *should* say about the novel linguistic data.

4.1 Complex slurs

The first thing to notice is that DiFranco's argument stemming from complex slurs exhibits a clear gap. For in order to move from the existence of a compositional reading of 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' in (5) and (6) to the claim that 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' cannot make the same truth-conditional contribution as 'East Asian' and 'South Asian' in (3a) and (4a), DiFranco would have to argue that 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' have a compositionally determined meaning in (3a) and (4a)—and he does not.

This leaves open the possibility of arguing that, in (3a) and (4a), 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' have idiomatic, non-compositionally determined meanings that make them semantically equivalent to 'East Asian' and 'South Asian', respectively, while in (5) and (6) they occur non-idiomatically, hence with a compositional meaning that allows for the non-absurd reading DiFranco points out.² Then, there would be no obstacle in claiming that (NC) and (SC) hold good of complex slurs like 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' *whenever these expressions occur as idioms*. And there would be no pressure to align the non-idiomatic occurrences of 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' in (5) and (6) with (NC) and (SC). In either case, the contention would be that complex slurs pose no real problem for NC theories.

This is, we think, what the NC theorist should argue. Now, in order to defend this position, the NC theorist has to argue that complex slurs occur with an idiomatic, non-compositional reading in (3a) and (4a). Additionally, an explanation should be provided for the seeming slurring character of (5) and (6): where does their slurring potential come from?

The first order of business, then, is to show that the occurrences of 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' in (3a) and (4a) are idiomatic. In order to do that, it would be desirable to have a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for class membership. However, the variable syntactic and semantic behavior of idioms makes it hard to come up with a clear-cut definition (cf. Egan (2008); Langlotz (2006); Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994)). Instead, we will offer some prototypical examples of idioms and will point to a set of typical or characteristic features.

Typical idioms are expressions like 'kick the bucket', 'spill the beans', 'tip of the iceberg', 'Achilles heel', and 'apple of discord'. There is a series of features typically ascribed to

idioms such as conventionality, figuration, proverbiality, informality, and affect (Nunberg, Sag and Wasow, 1994). Not all idioms possess all of these characteristics, but they provide a useful test for an expression's degree of idiomaticity.

One way of determining whether the occurrences of 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' in sentences such as (3a) and (4a) are idiomatic is to check whether they exhibit the abovementioned features. Consider conventionality first. Idioms are said to be conventional in the sense that the meaning of a complete idiomatic expression cannot be *entirely* predicted by a speaker just on the basis of her knowledge of the independent conventions that govern the meaning of its constituents when they occur in isolation plus the rules of semantic composition. Now, it appears that even a speaker fully aware of the literal meaning of 'slanty' and 'eyed' as they appear in isolation cannot entirely predict what 'slanty-eyed' means in (3a), or use it competently to slur East Asians, without further knowledge of the conventions governing the whole phrase (*mutatis mutandis* for 'curry muncher' in (4a)).³ Second, there is figuration. In effect, the expressions under examination seem to involve some sort of metonymy: the place of origin or ethnicity which determines the target group of the slur is replaced by one salient property present in the stereotype. Affect and informality are also present: no doubt 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' express an evaluative stance on the part of the speaker and are typically associated with a colloquial register. So, besides proverbiality, these expressions exhibit all the characteristic traits of idioms.⁴

DiFranco considers this possibility and replies that even if expressions such as 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' were in fact idioms, it wouldn't follow that they are non-compositional, for some idioms, viz. *idiomatically combining expressions*, have a compositional meaning (cf. Nunberg, Sag and Wasow, 1994). Now, this observation only helps DiFranco's case against (NC) and (SC), if complex slurs are in fact idiomatically combining expressions in their idiomatic occurrences (e.g., in (3a) and (4a)). And they are not.

According to Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994), idioms are idiomatically combining expressions whenever the conventional mapping from literal to idiomatic interpretation is homomorphic with respect to certain properties of the interpretation of the idiom's components. This is the case for idioms like 'spill the beans': the idiomatic meaning of the whole expression (*divulge the information*) is distributed over the idiomatic meaning of its parts, 'spill' (*divulge*) and 'beans' (*information*), which combine in order to yield the idiomatic meaning of the compound. This doesn't mean, of course, that you can apprehend the conventions governing the idiomatic interpretation of the parts *ex ante*, without being familiar with the use of the whole expression: it only means that, once you are familiar with the idiom, you can work your way down to the idiomatic meaning of its constituents. However, this isn't the case with complex slurs like 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher'. Indeed, it's hard to see how the idiomatic meanings of, for example, 'slanty' and 'eyed' in (3a), could be *East* and *Asian*, and how these expressions' purported idiomatic meanings could combine to form the idiomatic meaning of the complete phrase, *East Asian*. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for 'curry muncher'.

Another way of seeing that the complex slurs being discussed are non-compositional is by looking at the several tests for semantic composition put forth by Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994), such as the possibility of modification, quantification, and anaphora over *parts* of an idiom:

(11) She has left no *legal* stone unturned. (Modification)

(12) We could pull *yet more* strings. (Quantification)

(13) I was worried that [the beans_i] might be spilled, but [they_i] weren't. (Anaphora)

(11)–(13) provide clear cases of idiomatic occurrences in which several operations can be applied to some parts of the idiomatic expression, thus showing that the constituents of the idioms carry idiomatic meaning, which is combined to get the complete meaning of the expression. Now, these tests suggest that the idiomatic occurrences of complex slurs under discussion are not compositional:

(14) *Mira is a green curry muncher (Modification) (it means she munches green curry, the idiomatic reading is lost)

(15) *Mark is somewhat slanty-eyed (Quantification) (either 'slanty-eyed' has lost its idiomatic reading as *East Asian*, or it has been transformed from a non-gradable adjective to a gradable one; moreover, the quantification is not over a *part* of the expression)

(16) *Mark is slanty-[eyed_i], but [they_i] are beautiful. (Anaphora)

So, in (3a) and (4a), 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher' do not behave like idiomatically combining expressions. To the extent that they are idiomatic, they are non-compositional idioms.⁵

The second job of the NC theorist is to provide an alternative explanation of the slurring character of the non-idiomatic occurrences of complex slurs such as (5) and (6). We think that this slurring potential can be explained in terms of a conversational implicature. Basically, there is a non-ambiguous expression, 'epicanthic folds', which the speaker could use to express the same thing as (5). Now, using an expression which risks being interpreted as a racial slur when having a safer way of conveying the same thought makes the speaker's choice of words look suspicious: the audience might infer that the speaker is intentionally relying on that ambiguity in order to evoke negative racial stereotypes and getting away with it. A similar kind of story can be expressed in the case of (6). Since there are available non-ambiguous ways of conveying that Mira used to eat a lot of curry but then changed her dietary habits, the audience is entitled to infer that the speaker is purposely trading on the aforementioned ambiguity to get away with the slurring.⁶

4.2 Figurative slurs

DiFranco's argument from figurative slurs exhibits the following shortcoming: figurative slurs are *figurative*, that is, they slur because of their 'figurative meaning' and not because

of their literal content. So, the NC theorist might contend, to the extent that they have a neutral counterpart, it should be a counterpart to their *figurative* use, not to their literal meaning. But if the *locus* of the slurring content of figurative slurs is their figurative content, there is no reason to expect (NC) and (SC) to apply to figurative slurs at all, for they are theses about literal content.

So, there is some room for resisting DiFranco's argument. We think that the NC theorist should hold precisely this: that the key is that figurative slurs are *figurative* and *metaphorical*. That is, these expressions are not idioms that are used conventionally to slur (as was the case with 'slanty-eyed' and 'curry muncher'), but expressions whose truth-conditional content is determined compositionally, and are *used* to slur, not in virtue of their literal contents, but in virtue of a pragmatic mechanism of metaphor or, more generally, indirectness. Thus, the slurring potential of figurative slurs should be explained in terms of the general, pragmatic mechanisms that account for indirectness in speech.

We could essay a pragmatic explanation along the following Gricean lines. Suppose someone utters:

(7) a. Alex is a Jewish American Princess.

We have to interpret this utterance, so as to get what the speaker is trying to convey. Assume, then, that Alex is not literally a princess. So we know that the speaker is not trying to convey the proposition *that Alex is a Jewish American daughter of a monarch*. We have to search for an alternative interpretation of (7a), so as to render it compatible with the presumption that the speaker is making a cooperative, relevant conversational contribution. Since it's a stereotypical trait of princesses to be spoiled, self-centered, etc., we may, assuming that the speaker has sufficiently signaled that she's not being kind to Alex, infer that she's trying to get by the proposition *that Alex is a self-centered, spoiled, Jewish American woman*.⁷ (Animalization being such a typical insult mechanism, we could very well essay a parallel pragmatic derivation for the slurring content of (8a) as well.)

Regardless of the actual story about how to derive indirect readings *via* pragmatic mechanisms, the clear possibility of doing so by way of some mechanism or other avoids the NC theorist the need to align DiFranco's examples of figurative slurs with (NC) and (SC): they can be comfortably exported to pragmatics. After all, slurring is something speakers do. They can use conventional means to do that or, as is the case with other uses of language, the speaker can exploit conversational norms or pragmatic regularities in order to slur by means of expressions that are not conventionally used to do that.

4.3 Iconic slurs

Finally, the argument stemming from iconic slurring expressions like 'ching chong' also exhibits a gap: these expressions do not have any descriptive, truth-conditional content at all, so why should we feel any temptation to render them under the scope of (NC) and (SC)? At this point, we think that the NC theorist may very well treat iconic slurring

expressions like ‘ching chong’ as cases of vocal impersonation. DiFranco considers this possibility, but summarily dismisses it as off-limits for the NC theorist, on the count of giving into *ad hoc* lexical gerrymandering.

However, it is not clear why treating utterances of ‘Ching chong!’ as impersonations would be an *ad hoc* move. After all, such utterances achieve their slurring effect by way of mockery: they are used to show disrespect toward Chinese people by mocking the way Chinese allegedly sounds to English speakers. This is how uncontentious vocal impersonations, like:

(17) Min yang, wah, ah soh!

(18) The Chinese pelson want to eat flied lice?

achieve *their* slurring effect—just imagine (17) or (18) being directed at a Chinese person, with a mocking tone.

Now, unless we are ready to grant that nonce impersonations like (17), or consonant substitutions like the ones in (18), should receive a semantic analysis according to which they are equivalent to expressions with truth-conditional content, we see no reason to expect more widespread impersonations like ‘ching chong’ to receive such an analysis. Thus, it is hard to see why we should expect (NC) and (SC) to cover iconic slurs in general, since they are expressions used to slur due precisely to their iconicity.⁸

5 Conclusion

We’ve sketched a defense of NC theories of slurs by showing how the NC theorist might explain DiFranco’s novel data. In doing so, we’ve appealed to considerations of different kinds: with regard to complex slurs, we distinguished between idiomatic and non-idiomatic readings, claiming that (NC) and (SC) hold good of the former, but not of the latter; figurative slurs were deemed cases of indirection and thus pragmatic in nature; and iconic slurs were dealt in terms of vocal impersonations, hence in terms of a speech act altogether different from assertion. And, in explaining the slurring effects of non-idiomatic complex slurs, figurative slurs and iconic slurs, we’ve tacitly relied on a distinction between slur words and acts of slurring: these expressions are not to be seen as conventional slurring words, but as expressions that are used to slur in virtue of a non-conventional, general mechanism.

DiFranco mounts a final, methodological consideration against this kind of strategy: even though it is true that we may distinguish between slur words and acts of slurring, in providing an answer to his arguments, the NC theorist must be sure that she’s not giving into *ad hoc* lexical gerrymandering. First of all, the NC theorist shouldn’t simply claim that the examples offered by DiFranco are not cases of slurring words because they violate (SC), for then (SC) would be a definitional thesis about slurs, and not a substantive one, as the NC theorist purports it to be. Second, she must provide good and independent theoretical reasons for thinking that those cases are not examples of conventional slurring expressions—reasons not to be grounded upon the claim that slurs obey (NC) and (SC).

Of course, the last part is true: if that were the case, then (NC) and (SC) would be trivial, definitional theses, not substantive theses about a class of expressions. However, it would be gerrymandering only if we had reason to suppose that all expressions that are used to slur should function in the same way—but there is good reason to expect them not to: the case for treating ‘slanty-eyed’ and ‘curry muncher’ as idiomatic expressions in (3) and (4), and as non-idiomatic in (5) and (6), is a well-motivated one; saying that, in using a figurative slur, the speaker slurs by pragmatic means is far from *ad hoc*, for the slurring content is not literal, but figurative, and there is nothing *ad hoc* in saying that the slurring is effected by pragmatic, not by conventional means; finally, there is a strong case for treating ‘ching chong’ as a vocal impersonation, hence as not falling under the scope of (NC) and (SC). So, all in all, it seems that the NC theorist *can* provide an answer to DiFranco’s data that is both well-motivated and respectful of the main semantical tenets of NC theories of slurs.

Notes

- 1 Note that if DiFranco is right, figurative and iconic slurs might also pose a problem for some non-NC theories. Consider Hom’s position (2012), *Combinatorial Externalism*. *Combinatorial Externalism* holds that the semantic value of a slur is a complex, normative property of the form: *ought to be subject to such-and-such discriminatory practices for having such-and-such stereotypical properties all because of belonging to such-and-such group*. Now, if some slurs slur by virtue of their figurative interpretation, they do not slur by virtue of their literal semantic content, as *Combinatorial Externalism* claims. Likewise, if iconic slurs slur due to their iconicity, they do not slur by expressing this kind of normative property.
- 2 This phenomenon is not new or uncommon. Barkema (1996) points out that many idiomatic expressions have counterfeit forms, that is, forms which have the same syntactic form and contain the same lexical expressions, but that, because of the way in which they are used, have a meaning that is the combinatorial result of the meanings of the lexical items in the construction (e.g., ‘the helicopter circled round the tip of the iceberg’).
- 3 According to Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994), compositionality and conventionality should not be confused. On the one hand there is conventionality, the idea that the speaker cannot learn the meaning of the entire phrase just by virtue of her knowledge of the meaning of the parts as they occur in isolation; on the other hand there is compositionality, the idea that the meaning of the whole is determined by a combination of the meaning of the parts.
- 4 What about proverbiality, then? Proverbiality is the idea that idioms are typically used to describe and explain a recurrent situation of social interest in terms of concrete, daily things (Nunberg, Sag and Wasow, 1994, p. 493). Admittedly, this doesn’t seem to be the case with ‘curry muncher’ and ‘slanty-eyed’, though one might argue that the existence of racial slurs indirectly signals social issues concerning the arrival or visibility of people of a different culture within a community of speakers.
- 5 DiFranco also discusses some examples which allegedly demonstrate that complex slurs have a compositional meaning, since they can be extended and modified: (A) He’s half-Chinese, so his eyes are somewhat slanted. (B) Those camel jockeys have traveled a long way, so their rides must be thirsty. What about them? We think that they fall short of showing that idiomatic occurrences of ‘slanty-eyed’ and ‘curry muncher’ can be modified. Regarding (A),

we think all it shows is that the non-idiomatic reading of ‘slanty-eyed’ can be modified. With respect to (B), it can be either felicitously interpreted as a slur, substitutable by ‘Arab’ (the continuation of the sentence being sarcastic) or in a compositional way, generating at most a zeugma effect, typical of homophonic pun: the phrase ‘camel jockeys’ exhibits both its idiomatic and its non-idiomatic reading at the same time. The same would happen if (B) is directed at a camel jockey of Arab origin: the phrase would be used with its idiomatic and its non-idiomatic reading at the same time.

- 6 A potential problem for this strategy is that the derogatory potential of (5) and (6) does not seem to be cancelable, whereas conversational implicatures usually are. It should be noted, however, that cancelability may not be a bullet-proof test for pragmatically implicated content (see Weiner 2006). However, should an explanation in terms of conversational implicature fail, we are prepared to retreat to a position in which the seeming derogatory potential of sentences like (5) and (6) is explained in terms of their potential to *offend*, rather than derogate, due to their similarity with the corresponding slurs (which may be seen as a less extreme case than that of ‘niggardly’, which may offend regardless of the fact that it has nothing to do with the most common racial slur for African Americans). Thanks to an anonymous referee for *Thought* for drawing our attention toward this potential problem.
- 7 On behalf of our pragmatic explanation of the slurring potential of (7), it should be noted that any derogatory content (7) can be explicitly canceled: just imagine a person who utters (7) and then adds, “and I don’t mean to suggest that Alex is self-centered or spoiled, she *really* is the daughter of a monarch”. In this case, there is no slurring at all. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for pointing this out.
- 8 A comparison with insults may be illustrative at this point. Just imagine an insensitive person that sees an overweighted woman and yells “Moooh!” at her—he’s certainly insulting her, but why think he’s doing the same thing as when he utters “You are a cow”?

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