People use slurs to put others down. The slang word ‘diss’ aptly evokes the range of attitudes people use slurs to express, such as disrespect and disgust, and the range of things speakers use slurs to do, like disparage and dismiss. I’ll be discussing the meaning of terms used to slur people on the basis of such things as race, ethnicity, nationality, class, religion, ideology, gender, and sexual orientation.

There are many mean and nasty things to say about mean and nasty talk, but I don’t plan on saying any of them. There’s a specific problem about slurring words that I want to address. This is a semantic problem. It’s not very important compared to the real-world problems presented by bigotry, racism, discrimination, and worse. It’s important only to linguistics and the philosophy of language.

A solution to this semantic problem needs to identify what, as a matter of linguistic meaning, is added by referring to someone with a slurring word rather than its neutral counterpart, for example with ‘kike’ rather than ‘Jew.’ And why does using the slur have the effect it has? Is it because using ‘kike’ violates a norm against not using it, because using it is offensive, because it has an additional expressive meaning, or because it has some additional descriptive content lacking in its neutral counterpart? According to the solution I’m inclined to endorse, it does indeed have extra descriptive content. Any other way of explaining how ‘kike’ differs from ‘Jew’ is anti-semantic.

Some Stipulations and Observations
Before proceeding, let’s make a couple of terminological stipulations. First of all, for efficiency’s sake I will use noun ‘slur’, rather than ‘slurring word’, for words used to slur rather than for acts of using them. Also, let’s distinguish group slurs from personal slurs, for example ‘kike’ and ‘Commie’ from ‘asshole’ (the subject of two recent books) and ‘charlatan’. Since the emphasis will be on group slurs, I will often use the word ‘slur’ to mean group slurs in particular (it should be clear in the context). Finally, I will say that a
group slur applies or is applied to members of the relevant group, that is, to people denoted by the slur’s neutral counterpart term. I do this in order to leave open the question of whether the term is or is not true of the group’s members. In this way, I won’t prejudice the discussion for or against views that say, or imply, that a group slur is true of whoever its neutral counterpart is true of. I will also say that people to whom such terms are applied are the term’s target, again leaving open whether the term is true of any of its targets. Interestingly, whereas group slurs all seem to have neutral counterparts, it seems that many personal slurs, like ‘jerk’, ‘dweeb’, and ‘punk’, do not. Some are even hard to find neutral paraphrases for.¹

Now for a few observations about slurs. First, group slurs are usually slang words. (For that reason alone, slurs tend not to be used in polite company, even among bigots of “good breeding.”) But not all slang terms for particular groups are slurs. Some are merely nicknames. A given word can become more or less derogatory and offensive over time (linguists call these processes pejoration and melioration). Also, for what it’s worth, it seems that group slurs generally don’t have adjectival forms. For example, there’s ‘Jewish’, but not ‘kikish’.

Group slurs are applied to particular individuals on the basis of group membership rather than anything special about the person in particular. They are applied across the board, indiscriminately, to members of the group in question, generally by nonmembers. It seems that the widespread use of slurs is based on stereotyping and built on prejudice. Using slurs serves to focus attention on, and to discourage emotional responsiveness to features beyond, the target’s putative generic features, which are treated as highly explanatory of stereotypical character and behavior.

The fact that slurs are slang words is enough to make their use offensive to some people. But obviously this is not the only reason using a slur is generally offensive, either to its target or, for a different reason, to those who do not share the attitudes of the person using the slur. People don’t like to be insulted or spoken ill of, and people don’t like to be

¹ Speaking of neutral counterparts of slurs, they too can be used pejoratively, when uttered with a certain contemptuous intonation or when used with certain adjectives, like ‘dirty’ and ‘stupid’, or with expressive intensifiers like ‘goddam’ and ‘fuckin’. However, a group slur differs in meaning from that of an expletive-modified neutral counterpart, since the latter can be applied selectively, to only some members of the group.
presumed to endorse such talk and whatever prejudices and practices lurk behind it. And, as is often observed, even mentioning (as opposed to using) certain slurs can be offensive. With the so-called N-word, a particularly toxic example, discussions of the term’s use and quotations of particular utterances of it may employ euphemisms rather than mention the word itself. And there is one other aspect to the offensiveness of slurs, given their history: the very existence of a slurring word for a given group is itself offensive. After all, not every group is so honored. When a group is accorded with a proprietary slur, whatever is built into the meaning of that slur is presumed by its users to express something real. And the practice of using it is presumed to be justified by the supposed negative significance of membership in the slurred group.

One way to begin to think about the main semantic question about slurs is to mull over this non-semantic question. Sticking with our illustrative example, what’s the difference, if any, between being a Jew and being a kike? That has several possible answers. One answer is that a kike is a contemptible Jew (or something to that effect), in which case, presumably, only some Jews are kikes (or, if all Jews are, that’s just an unfortunate coincidence). Here’s another answer: no Jews are kikes. If that’s right, then calling a Jew a kike is a “misdenomer,” to borrow a term from the World’s Foremost Authority, Professor Irwin Corey. Here’s a third answer: all Jews are kikes. This suggests that there’s no difference between being a Jew and being a kike. That could be either because all Jews have whatever it takes to be a kike, or because there’s nothing more to being a kike than being a Jew. On the latter view, Jews are kikes, but that proposition is vacuous and innocuous; ‘Jew’ and ‘kike’ semantically express the same properties all right, but that isn’t really objectionable if the only relevant difference is that between calling certain people kikes and calling them Jews. In that case the difference is arguably merely pragmatic, not semantic.

Now, rather than go through all the available views on the semantics of slurs, I will go directly to the view I’d like to defend.

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2 A distinct question for later (and perhaps more to the point) is this: what’s the difference, if any, between believing that someone is a Jew and believing that they’re a kike?
3 Professor Irwin Corey is a 99-yr. old Jewish comedian: http://classicshowbiz.blogspot.com/2013/09/an-interview-with-professor-irwin-corey.html
**Loaded Descriptivism**

Group slurs are applied to, whether or not they are true of, the same individuals that their neutral counterparts are applied to, thus playing the same categorizing role. But that’s not all they do. According to “loaded descriptivism,” the view I’ll defend, they have an additional descriptive content. The meaning of a group slur includes not only the descriptive content of its neutral counterpart but also a generic editorial comment. But exactly what is this extra element?

One suggestion is that it specifies the stereotype associated with the target group. The stereotype may play a role in some people’s uses of some slurs, but not all groups labeled with slurs have stereotypes associated with them. Besides, speakers can use and understand slurs perfectly well without knowing the prevailing stereotype, if indeed there is one, or without agreeing on what it is. Having unorthodox reasons for thinking ill of people of a certain group does not betray misunderstanding or misuse of the word (see Jeshion 2013b, “Slurs and Stereotypes”).

So, it seems to me, the extra descriptive content built into the meaning of a slurring word should take a minimal form, something like ‘and is contemptible in virtue of being a K’, where K is the kind in question. Even being contemptible is too specific, as Liz Camp (2013: 339) points out. She notes also that “different degrees of feeling” can be associated with different slurs. Our take on the negative attitude should be non-specific enough to be compatible with the property of being any of the following (insofar as these are all distinct from one another): abominable, despicable, detestable, disgusting, inferior, loathsome, offensive, repugnant, subhuman, or vile.⁴ I will use ‘contemptible’ for purposes of illustration, but I don’t take the second part of the meaning of a slur to be that specific. This component is conveniently nonspecific as to the negative attribute being ascribed and the corresponding attitude expressed with the use of the slur. Nor is any specific justification or rationale built into this component, none, that is, other than group membership.

Take the slur ‘kike’ as an example. To describe a particular person as a kike, or to

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⁴ So I would not endorse characterizations anywhere near as specific as the moral properties suggested by Hom and May, such as those given by ‘ought to be the object of negative moral evaluation’ (2013: 295) or ‘ought to be treated negatively’ (2013: 300). Indeed, the loosely specified extra evaluative property does not have to be specifically moral in character.
directly call someone a kike, imputes two properties to that person. Only one of these properties serves to categorize the person, in this case that of being Jewish. The other amounts to an editorial comment on Jews in general, and by implication on that person in particular. So, loaded descriptivism is the view that the meaning of a slur has two components, a categorizing part and an evaluative part, which is a function of the categorization. For example, the meaning of ‘kike’ includes the property of being Jewish and the property of being contemptible in virtue of being Jewish. To put it simply, to be a kike is to be a Jew, hence contemptible.

Notice that just for the purpose of categorizing someone, using a slur does no more than using its neutral counterpart. To that extent the slur is “useless” (to use Jennifer Hornsby’s (2001) term). If you want to put someone in a certain ethnic category, its neutral counterpart will do just fine – using the word ‘kike’ has no additional classificatory value. However, including the editorial comment contained in the slur does have, at least according to the anti-Semite, a useful explanatory value. It points to why those people are the way they are.

This is but the beginning of an explanation, of course. As irrational as anti-Semitism and other kinds of bigotry are, they do have a kind of inner coherence. That’s because, as the anti-Semite sees it, there’s something about Jews that makes them the way they are, that explains their unsavory character and objectionable behavior. They are contemptible by nature. The anti-Semite doesn’t need a real theory here; he’s content with a locus and focus of explanation.

Indeed, his skeleton of a theory can be a bit tolerant. For despite his opinion of Jews in general, an anti-Semite can make exceptions. He can even deny that he’s really anti-Semitic by insisting that some of his best friends are Jews. However, his unwillingness to call them kikes does not mean that they aren’t kikes. Rather, the anti-Semite is giving them a pass. He thinks they have special qualities, overriding being Jewish, that exempt them from the way that kikes normally should be regarded and treated.

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I include evaluative content in descriptive content because I don’t think semantics should mark the difference, which strikes me as metaphysical, between that and non-evaluative content. If you’re not willing to include evaluative content in descriptive content, say for anti-realist or non-cognitivist reasons, use ‘predicative’, say, for both of the components of content that loaded descriptivism attributes to slurs. That is, when I write ‘descriptive’ you read ‘predicative’.

These familiar facts about the psychology of bigotry fit in nicely with our earlier observation that no particular basis for attributing contemptibility is built into the meaning of a word like ‘kike’. The word itself does not mean different things to anti-Semites who harbor different stereotypes of Jews. Besides, those who are not anti-Semitic and don’t use the word are still perfectly capable of understanding anti-Semites’ uses of it.

Notice that loaded descriptivism does not say that a group slur semantically expresses two unrelated properties, e.g., being Jewish and being contemptible. That wouldn’t capture the connection between the two. The property of being a kike is not the compound property of being Jewish and contemptible. It is not the property possessed only by contemptible Jews, even given the anti-Semitic claim that this includes all Jews. It is the complex property of being Jewish and therefore contemptible.

With meanings like this, group slurs have a curious feature: the second part of the term’s meaning entails the first. So, for example, being contemptible in virtue of being Jewish entails being Jewish. Only Jews can be contemptible for that reason (not that, of course, Jews are contemptible, for that or any other reason). Even though the second part of a slur’s meaning entails the first, the first part of its meaning is still there. To be a kike is not, as is sometimes suggested, to be contemptible for being Jewish; rather, it is to be a Jew and therefore contemptible.

This formulation makes perspicuous the really distinctive character of group slurs. They express the property of belonging to the group designated by the term’s neutral counterpart and, in addition, the property of being contemptible (or whatever) by virtue of being in that group. This feature is captured by specifying the second property as ‘therefore contemptible’. Think of that phrase as a functional predicate, expressing the property of being contemptible by virtue of being of the kind in question, whatever that kind is. This feature is what slurs have in common and why they comprise a distinct semantic category.

**Loaded Descriptivism Contrasted with Hybrid Expressivism**

The main rival to loaded descriptivism is hybrid expressivism, so-called because it views the second component of the meaning a slur is expressive rather than descriptive. So,
according to hybrid expressivism, slurs have the same descriptive contents as their neutral counterparts, and what distinguishes them is an expressive component: to call someone a kike is to call him a Jew and to express contempt for him (and perhaps for Jews generally) for being Jewish. This view may seem plausible at first, but it has its problems. For one thing, at least according to loaded descriptivism, it gets the order of explanation backwards. Using a slur expresses contempt (or some such attitude) not as a matter of meaning but because it imputes contemptibility to members of the target group. Yes, there is a big difference between calling someone a Jew and calling them a kike, but the difference consists in what is imputed (contemptibility) and only derivatively in what (contempt) is thereby expressed.

Even so, it might seem that expressing contempt, not imputing contemptibility, on account of membership in the target group, is what makes the act of using a slur offensive, and that this is better explained by hybrid expressivism. I’m not sure how this story is supposed to go, and it seems to me that imputing contemptibility by virtue of being in a certain group is itself offensive, as well as explanatory of the speaker’s expression of contempt. Also, using a slur isn’t offensive to people who share contempt for the target group and find the expression of such contempt perfectly acceptable. Here we need to distinguish the act of expressing contempt, whether by using a slur or in some other way, from the contempt being expressed, for the act of expressing contempt can be rude, insensitive, or presumptuous in its own right, independently of the contempt itself. That’s a social psychological fact, not a matter of semantics. And it’s a matter of pragmatics, not semantics, when offensiveness is explained by the fact of using one mode of linguistic expression rather than another to express the same thing. For that matter, sometimes contempt is warranted and so is its expression. That’s because assholes, pimps, and shysters are contemptible and in some contexts deserve to be described or even addressed in a way that implies that, sometimes even with a slur.

The biggest problem with hybrid expressivism is its trouble in accounting for the fact that using a slur can contribute to giving an accurate indirect quotation and making an accurate belief or other attitude attribution. One is not expressing contempt in such a case, one is attributing an ascription of contemptibility. Hybrid expressivism, since it predicts that expressiveness scopes out of embedded contexts, is not equipped to account
for what one is attributing, and cannot accommodate the apparent fact that there’s a
difference (indeed a big one) between believing that someone is a Jew and believing that
someone is a kike. To be sure, using a slur in a speech or belief report, even if one is not
expressing contempt, can still be offensive. One is using the slur literally without
expressing contempt (or any such attitude).

What Loaded Descriptivism Doesn’t Do
Before getting to what I take to be the main objections to loaded descriptivism, I’d like
briefly to take up several possible objections each of which requires loaded descriptivism
to do something that it does need or purport to do. Responding to them should help
clarify what it does do.

One such objection is that loaded descriptivism provides no role for the stereotype
associated with a given slur. I consider this a virtue. For one thing, not all slurs have
stereotypes associated with them. Moreover, even when there is an associated slur, a
speaker’s failing to be familiar with that stereotype does not betray inadequate
understanding of the term. It merely shows lack of understanding of the rationale, such as
it is, underlying the use of the term. You don’t have to be familiar with the bigoted
pretext that rationalizes the existence and use of the term in order to understand it.

By the same token, it is no objection that loaded descriptivism does not explain
various other things which, though characteristic of the use of slurs (and in some cases of
practices, personal or even institutional, underlying their use), are not due to their
meaning. For example, loaded descriptivism doesn’t explain why applying a slur to
someone is offensive. But why should it? Never mind that such talk is not offensive to
fellow bigots. Insofar as it is offensive, i.e. to the rest of us, this is not because
offensiveness is somehow built into the meaning of the slur. The use of the slur, as well
as whatever bigoted attitudes, discriminatory practices, and unseemly history underlie
that use, are what are offensive. These ought to offend, but not as a matter of semantics.

There are two other aspects of the use of slurs that recently have been insightfully
identified and articulated. Liz Camp (2013) explains how the contemptuous attitude

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6 Here we should distinguish the slur’s role in the report from the effect of its mere utterance. Also, a speaker can eliminate or at least reduce the offensiveness of a reporting use by offering a disclaimer in advance: “I don’t mean to offend anyone – I am just trying to report accurately”.

associated with a slur reflects a certain broad cognitive perspective on the target group. But that doesn’t show that this perspective is built into the meaning of the slur. Even so, Camp claims that “slurs conventionally signal a speaker’s allegiance to a derogating perspective on the group identified by the slur’s extension-determining core” (2013: 331). In a somewhat similar vein, Robin Jeshion proposes that a use of a slur “does not simply ascribe a property to the target, here [with the word ‘faggot’], that of being gay. It classifies the target in a way that aims to be identifying” (2013a: 318). That seems right, but I don’t see why she proceeds to claim that this is “a matter of the semantics of the slurring term,” that it “semantically encodes that [this property] is the, or a, defining feature of the target’s identity.” It seems to me that if merely belonging to a certain group is enough to make one contemptible (or whatever), that’s going to be definitive of the target’s identity, at least from the bigot’s perspective.

*Objections: Loaded Descriptivism and Truth*

Slurs are often said, especially by dictionaries, to be disparaging terms “for,” or “used to refer to,” people of a certain group. However, that doesn’t mean that the slur itself refers to those people. Recall the distinction drawn earlier between a term being applied to an individual and its being true of that individual. This distinction will come in handy for answering what I take to be the main objections to loaded descriptivism. That’s because loaded descriptivism does not entail that a slur refers to, or is true of, the people its neutral counterpart refers to and is true of. Hybrid expressivism does entail this, although I do not consider that a fatal objection, since proponents of that view can argue that even though a slur is true of its targets, using the slur is not how one should refer to its targets.

One objection to loaded descriptivism is that it implies that slurs inherently misrepresent their targets. That is, so the objection goes, they represent their targets as contemptible (or something of the sort) when in fact their targets are not contemptible. However, loaded descriptivism is neutral on this point. It does not entail that slurs are true of their targets. Nor does it entail that slurs are not true of their targets. In fact, it correctly allows that some slurs can be, and indeed are, true of their targets. For example, an asshole, in virtue of what makes him qualify as such, really is contemptible. Calling him an asshole may be rude or crude, but you don’t misrepresent him by calling him that.
What makes an asshole an asshole makes him contemptible. Nothing makes a Jew a kike, regardless of what anti-Semites may think. Recall here the distinction between group slurs from personal slurs. Most group slurs are not true of their targets, whereas many personal slurs are.\(^7\)

Another objection to loaded descriptivism is based on the observation that it is difficult to directly deny the loaded component of a statement containing a slur. A denial is taken to reject the categorization, not the aspersion. For example, to deny that someone is a kike is naturally taken to deny that he is Jewish. If someone claims that Mick Jagger is a kike and you reply, “No, he isn’t” (or “That’s not true”), you are understood to be denying that Jagger is Jewish, and you’d be right. But suppose you are told that Leonard Cohen is a kike. If you reply, “No, he isn’t” or “That’s not true,” you are understood to be denying that Cohen is Jewish, even if, knowing that he is Jewish, your intention is to deny that being Jewish makes him a kike. Similarly, if you’re Jewish and someone asks you if you are a kike, you can’t say “No” without being taken to deny that you’re Jewish. You’d have to say a lot more to make clear what it is that you’re denying (never mind what you think of the question).

It is hard to deny that a Jewish person called a kike is a kike by simply saying, “No he isn’t,” for you are taken to be denying that he is Jewish rather than that he is contemptible for being Jewish. It seems that the loaded descriptivist view has a much tougher time explaining this than the hybrid expressivist view. But loaded descriptivism has an explanation. The reason is that the speaker calling Leonard Cohen a kike (or the person asking you if you’re a kike), by the very use of the word, is presupposing that Jews are inherently contemptible. He is not specifically asserting that Cohen is contemptible in virtue of being Jewish. Since in the speaker’s view one can’t be Jewish without being a kike, when he describes Cohen as a kike the only new information he’s adding about Cohen is that Cohen is a Jew.

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\(^7\) We can also distinguish, among group-related slurs, *inclusive* slurs from *selective* slurs. Inclusive slurs, like ‘kike’ and ‘faggot’, are applied wholesale to members of a kind, whereas selective ones, like ‘Shylock’ and ‘pansy’, apply to only subclasses, typically to those who display a certain stereotypical characteristic of that kind. Also, inclusive slurring words are occasionally used selectively. In that case, they are applied only to those who (the speaker thinks) exemplify some central stereotypical characteristic.
In general, the contemptibility component of the content of a group slur projects over negation, interrogatives, and modals, and sometimes embeddings in content clauses. In this respect it behaves in the way that presuppositions generally do. Even so, I’m reluctant to concede that semantically it is a presupposition. It’s really a supplement, much like a nonrestrictive relative clause or appositive. If someone says, “Buffalo Bill, who was actually born in Buffalo, was a great showman,” you can’t say “That’s not true” and expect to be taken to deny that Buffalo Bill was born in Buffalo. The nonrestrictive relative clause expresses a proposition all right, but this proposition is, so to speak, the secondary content of the whole sentence (‘secondary’ here does not mean unimportant). The two propositions expressed by the entire sentence can be true or false independently of each other, but ordinarily “That’s not true” can only be used to deny the main proposition that is expressed.

The case of slurs is similar but not quite. Loaded descriptivism allows that sentences containing slurs also have a secondary propositional content, but in this case that secondary content is not given separate linguistic expression – it’s loaded into the slur. This makes it even harder to deny directly than the content of supplement, such as a nonrestrictive relative clause. In any case, there are two separate things that have to be true for a statement containing a group slur to be true. The first is that the basic descriptive component be true, i.e. the component that would be expressed with the slur replaced by its neutral counterpart. The second is that the therefore-contemptible component be true, which with most group slurs it is not. Judgments that such statements are true or false tend to focus on the first component and tend to be resisted upon consideration of the second component. This second component is something like a presupposition, and according to loaded descriptivism, its truth is obviously necessary for the truth of whole statement, which requires the truth of both components.

**Summing Up**

Loaded descriptivism is a semantic thesis about slurring words, not a pragmatic thesis about their uses, much less a general account of the psychological attitudes and social practices associated with them. In particular, an account of the meaning of such a term does not have to explain such things as why there should be a term with that meaning,
why people use it, or what social roles it plays. The semantics of slurs should comport with general facts and phenomena involving slurs, but what it needs to address is rather limited. Loaded descriptivism should be judged with that in mind.

Slurs are loaded words. With group slurs that’s because their meanings add the property of implied contemptibility to that of group membership. Considered in the abstract, this may seem like a weird thing to be found in the meaning of a word, but it well serves the purposes of racists and other bigots. However weird, this distinctive feature of slurs is characteristic of personal as well as group slurs. The difference with personal slurs is that, in some cases anyway, having the property expressed by the slur does warrant contempt (to decide for yourself which ones, check out the list of personal slurs in the Appendix). It may seem that in contrast to (some) personal slurs all group slurs are inherently defective terms, on the grounds that they can’t but misrepresent their targets. That may be so, but that’s a moral issue, not a semantic one. Even though certain words impute contemptibility by virtue of being a member of a certain group, it is not a semantic question whether being a member of a certain group is worthy of contempt. Racists and other bigots may irrationally believe this about their targets, as their use of racial and other slurs attests, but that’s not a semantic problem with the slurs themselves. Loaded descriptivism allows that some personal slurs don’t misrepresent at all, as when applied to sleezeballs, deadbeats, and brown-nosers. Not only can those slurs be applied to their targets, they can be true of their targets. So we shouldn’t hold a term’s semantics hostage to its moral status. Loaded descriptivism doesn’t.

You can accept loaded descriptivism about group slurs without endorsing the use or even the existence of such terms, many of which have a mean and nasty history. You can even appreciate that such words are far from useless, at least given the irrational rationale that underlies their use. Their users apply these terms to those belonging to groups membership in which they deem contemptible. That doesn’t make these terms true of their targets. For racists and other bigots, using such words comes in handy. For what it’s worth, loaded descriptivism helps the rest of us understand why.
Appendix: A Sampler of Slurs

Group > ethnic & racial
beaner, camel jockey, chink, coon, cracker, dago, frog, gook, goy, greaser, gringo, half-breed, haole, heeb, honky, hymie, injun, jap, jigaboo, kike, kraut, limey, macaca, mick, nigger, nip, paleface, pickaninny, polack, russki, sand nigger, shiksa, spic, wetback, whitey, wop, yankee, yid

Group > religious
bible thumper, Jesus freak, holy roller, mackerel snapper, kike, raghead, clamhead, heathen, infidel

Group > political
commie, radical, leftie, right winger, reactionary, tea bagger, fascist, Nazi, tree hugger, peacenik, gun nut, one-percenter

Personal > appearance
blimp, hippo, lardass, string bean, bean pole, shrimp, midget, dwarf, four-eyes, gimp, hag, slub, pig

Personal > life style
boor, yahoo, riffraff, hick, redneck, trailer trash, yokel, square, hippie, yuppy, twerp, dork, geek, nerd, dweeb, freak, weirdo, kook

Personal > intelligence/sanity, etc.
bozo, dope, doofus, nincompoop, airhead, meathead, nitwit, dolt, bimbo, sap, twit, retard, idiot, moron, creetin, dickhead, dumbass, dumbfuck, nut case, nut job, wacko, pervert, psycho, crackpot, maniac, egomaniac, dupe, patsy, pigeon, sucker, dabbler, dilletante, egghead, philistine, bigot

Personal > character
lazy: couch potato, jerk off, flake, quitter, slacker, struggler, freeloader, bum, putz

obsequious, gutless, etc.: ass-kisser, brown-noser, toady, chicken, mouse, weenie, wimp, wuss, nebbish, pussy, patsy, toady, lame ass, tight-ass, party pooper, stick in the mud, fuddy-duddy, old fogey

annoying: pain in the ass, kvetch, nag, brat, pest, snot, smart-ass, loudmouth, windbag, blowhard

worse than annoying: fart, dick, prick, cunt, louse, rat, snake, weasel, pig, swine, vermin, scum, bastard, jerk, asshole, shit, turd, douchebag, schmuck, bitch, bastard, dirtbag, scumbag, scuzzball, sleazeball, slimeball, stool pigeon, snitch, rat, fink, rat fink, punk, thug, barbarian, savage

Personal > sexual
lecher, rake, lothario, floozy, tart, tramp, slut, pansy, fairy, fag, queen, queer, lesbo, dyke

Personal > substance abuse
boozed, lush, wino, pot head, acid freak, crack head, dope fiend, junkie

Personal > financial
sponge, leech, deadbeat, tightwad, skinflint, shylock, money-grubber, gold digger, spendthrift

Professional
pig, fuzz, narc, quack, shrink, shyster, bankster, hack, pencil pusher, paper shuffler, bean counter, suit, empty suit, flunky, peon, scrub, drudge, scab, loan shark, hustler, hooker, whore, ho, gigolo, pimp, crook, hood, goon, thug, hatchet man, charlatan, con artist, grifter, huckster, demagogue

Related Terms
Expressive Intensifiers: blessed, blasted, darn, damn, goddam, effin’, freakin’, (mother-)fuckin’,

Exclamations: Shit! Dammit! Fuck! Goddam it! Oh crap! Holy shit!

Laudatives: angel, saint, hero, pro, ace, whiz, phenom, babe, hottie, knockout, hunk, stud

NOTE: Many of the above terms have multiple uses and could be put into more than one category. Also, some of these terms have become more derogatory or less derogatory over time.
Semantic problem: what, as a matter of linguistic meaning, is added by referring to someone with a (group) slur rather than its neutral counterpart, for example with ‘kike’ rather than ‘Jew’?

Some distinctions:
- group slurs vs. personal slurs, e.g. ‘kike’ from ‘asshole’
- applies to vs. is true of the group’s members
- a slur’s target vs. its extension

Some observations: Group slurs are usually slang words; can become more or less derogatory and offensive over time; are applied to particular individuals on the basis of group membership rather than anything special about the person in particular; use based on stereotyping and built on prejudice; various reasons for offensiveness, starting with the very existence of the slur. Using a slur serves to focus attention on and to limit emotional responsiveness to the target’s putative generic features, supposedly explanatory of stereotypical character and behavior.

Questions: Are all Jews kikes? Some? None? What’s the difference, if any, between being a Jew and being a kike? Is there any difference between believing that someone is a Jew and believing that they’re a kike? There’s obviously a difference between calling someone a Jew and calling them a kike, but what does it amount to?

Loaded Descriptivism: The meaning of a group slur includes not only the descriptive content of its neutral counterpart but also a generic editorial comment. But just what is this extra element? Not a stereotype or anything specific to the particular group. For any slur whose neutral counterpart is ‘K’, it’s something like ‘contemptible in virtue of being a K’. Even this is a bit too specific -- understand it as nonspecific as to the precise negative attribute being ascribed and corresponding attitude expressed with the use of the slur. Nor is any specific justification or rationale built into this component, none, that is, other than group membership. In brief, loaded descriptivism says that to be, e.g., a kike is to be a Jew, hence contemptible.

Hybrid Expressivism: Slurs have the same descriptive contents as their neutral counterparts; what distinguishes them is an expressive component. E.g., to call someone a kike is to call him a Jew and to express contempt for him (and perhaps for Jews generally) for being Jewish.

Hybrid expressivism gets the order of explanation backwards. Using a slur expresses contempt (or some such attitude) not as a matter of meaning but because it imputes contemptibility to members of the target group. Yes, there is a big difference between calling someone a Jew and calling them a kike, but the difference consists in what is imputed (contemptibility) and only derivatively in what attitude (contempt) is thereby expressed.

Hybrid expressivism has trouble accounting for the fact that using a slur can contribute to the accuracy of a speech or belief report, and do so without expressing contempt. This view cannot accommodate the apparent fact that there’s a difference (indeed a big one) between believing, e.g., that someone is a Jew and believing that someone is a kike.

Some Possible Shortcomings of Loaded Descriptivism
It doesn’t explain the role of the stereotype associated with a given slur, the offensiveness of using the slur, or the full depth of bigots’ attitudes to or cognitive perspective on members of the target group. That’s OK: as merely a semantic thesis, LD can only help explain these things.

LD doesn’t entail that group slurs inherently misrepresent their targets. It shouldn’t. That’s a moral issue, not a semantic one. Besides, many personal slurs do not misrepresent their targets.

LD can’t explain why it is difficult without elaboration to deny the loaded component of a statement containing a slur, e.g. by just saying “That’s not true.” But it can help explain this. The loaded component contributes a second proposition, much like what a nonrestrictive relative clause contributes. And so-called supplements like these are hard to deny without elaboration.
References


Nunberg, Geoffrey (ms), “Slurs aren’t Special,” https://www.academia.edu/4704933/Slurs_Arent_Special


