

Marina Sbisà

University of Trieste

Slurs and speech acts

There are several different approaches to the analysis of slurs. This paper will not discuss which one should be adopted, but attempt to account for the properties of slurs in speech-act theoretical terms. The speech-act theoretical framework adopted is the one I have developed on the basis of Austin's outline of speech act theory and considers illocutionary acts as bringing about changes in the deontic status of the participants in the speech situation. I will discuss how slurs relate to illocution and will do so in two main (but complementary) respects: (i) which illocutionary acts are performed in producing utterances that contain a slur? (ii) can slurs be considered as illocutionary indicators? In replying to question (i), three main cases will be distinguished: those in which the slurring word is used as a vocative and thus as an insult directed at the addressee, those in which it is used in a declarative sentence in the second person, and those in which it is used in a third person sentence, whether declarative or not, to refer to the individual or group of individuals who is spoken about. In these three cases, the arising of the negative impact of the slur is to be accounted for in slightly different, but interconnected ways. As to question (ii), it will be discussed in what sense or to what extent slurs can be assimilated to illocutionary indicators. Indeed, an utterance containing a slur usually performs an illocutionary act other than the one that might be taken to be indicated by the slur itself. At the same time, however, there is a clear sense that such an illocutionary act is made available by the slur and is, so to say, at hand. This view of slurs will be compared with the presuppositional view and the view according to which they trigger conventional implicatures.