



RACIAL EPITHETS, CHARACTERIZATIONS, AND SLURS

ADAM M. CROOM

University of Pennsylvania

adam.m.croom@gmail.com

ABSTRACT. Since at least 2008 linguists and philosophers of language have started paying more serious attention to issues concerning the meaning or use of racial epithets and slurs. In an influential article published in *The Journal of Philosophy*, for instance, Christopher Hom (2008) offered a semantic account of racial epithets called Combinatorial Externalism (CE) that advanced a novel argument for the exclusion of certain epithets from freedom of speech protection under the First Amendment (p. 435). Also in more recent work, “The Expressive Meaning of Racial Epithets: Towards A Non-Unitary Account of Expressive Meaning,” Diane Blakemore (2013) offered an alternative pragmatic account of racial epithets rooted in Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s (1986) relevance theory. Adam Croom (2008) has also discussed epithets before in prior work, through a consideration of a paradigmatic racial epithet directed towards Native Americans, but then moved on in subsequent work to focus on developing a more nuanced account of paradigmatic slurring terms instead (Croom 2010; Croom 2011; Croom 2012; Croom 2013; Croom 2014a; Croom 2014b; Croom under review). So the purpose of this article is to return to and extend the previous account of racial epithets provided by Croom (2008) through a consideration of another paradigmatic racial epithet, but this time one directed towards Asian Americans instead of Native Americans. Here I also offer a novel suggestion for how to differentiate between epithets and slurs, offering new insight into how epithets and slurs are both similar and different. A sample list of over 100 other racial epithets that can be accounted for by the kind of analysis presented here is provided in Croom (2008, p. 44-45).

Keywords: epithets, metaphors, slurs, characterizations, semantics, pragmatics

1. Introduction

Since at least 2008 linguists and philosophers of language have started paying more serious attention to issues concerning the meaning or use of racial epithets and slurs. In an influential article published in *The Journal*

of *Philosophy*, for instance, Christopher Hom (2008) offered a semantic account of racial epithets called Combinatorial Externalism (CE) that advanced a novel argument for the exclusion of certain epithets from freedom of speech protection under the First Amendment (p. 435). Also in more recent work, “The Expressive Meaning of Racial Epithets: Towards A Non-Unitary Account of Expressive Meaning,” Diane Blakemore (2013) offered an alternative pragmatic account of racial epithets rooted in Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s (1986) relevance theory. Adam Croom (2008) has also discussed epithets before in prior work, through a consideration of a paradigmatic racial epithet directed towards Native Americans, but then moved on in subsequent work to focus on developing a more nuanced account of paradigmatic slurring terms instead (Croom 2010; Croom 2011; Croom 2012; Croom 2013; Croom 2014a; Croom 2014b; Croom under review). So the purpose of this article is to return to and extend the previous account of racial epithets provided by Croom (2008) through a consideration of another paradigmatic racial epithet, but this time one directed towards Asian Americans instead of Native Americans. Here I also offer a novel suggestion for how to differentiate between epithets and slurs, offering new insight into how epithets and slurs are both similar and different. A sample list of 100 other racial epithets that can be accounted for by the kind of analysis presented here is provided in Croom (2008, p. 44-45).

It is perhaps worth noting here before pressing on that, although for the sake of clarity I have previously offered separate treatments of epithets (Croom 2008) and slurs (Croom 2010; Croom 2011; Croom 2012; Croom 2013; Croom 2014a; Croom 2014b; Croom under review), I do not deny that an overarching account for both epithets and slurs remains an open possibility (see for instance the discussion in Croom 2008, p. 43-44). However, since this article focuses its analysis primarily on a paradigmatic racial epithet directed towards Asian Americans, I will reserve undertaking the more comprehensive task of offering an overarching account for both epithets and slurs for another occasion.

2. Epithets and Characterizations

In order to gain a better understanding of racial epithets, characterizations, and slurs, our first task will be to clarify what epithets and characterizations are. Now, an *epithet* has typically been understood as “a term used to characterize a person or thing,” and a *racial epithet* has typically been understood as a term used to *characterize* a person in a way relevantly relating to their *race* (Croom 2008, p. 34). It is also commonly understood that speakers typically use racial epithets so as “to convey contempt and

hatred toward their targets” (Hom 2008, p. 416). So in order to properly understand how speakers are able to convey this towards their targets through race-pertaining characterizations, it seems evident that one must first properly understand what *characterizations* are.

In *Saying and Seeing-As: The Linguistic Uses and Cognitive Effects of Metaphor*, Liz Camp (2003) suggested that “characterizing an object involves more than merely attributing a set of properties to it [...] instead, those properties must be taken to “hang together” in a certain structure” (p. 11; Croom 2008, p. 34-35). So, if one were to characterize some target *x* as a *modern day Casanova* or as a *Stoic environmentalist*, for example, one would not thereby be simply attributing a list of “accidentally associated” properties to *x*. It is not as if in characterizing *x* as a *Stoic environmentalist*, for instance, one is suggesting that *x* possesses some contingent collection of accidental properties, such as that *x recycles on Wednesdays, is a descendent of Zeno, and is currently taking a course in Roman history*. Instead, characterizing *x* as a *Stoic environmentalist* suggests that certain properties of *x* are taken as “hanging together” in a certain kind of non-accidentally structured way (Croom 2008, p. 34-35). This *holistic composition* of non-accidental properties belonging to the *character* of the *Stoic environmentalist* makes it *fitting* for some further properties to be attributed while making other properties *unfitting*. It would, for example, be unfitting to the character of a *Stoic environmentalist* to flick a cigar out of the window of their Bugatti as they drive to work as CEO of BP. Yet it would be fitting to the character of a *Stoic environmentalist* to forsake a summer trip to Fort Lauderdale to spend more time on projects for Greenpeace. In general, the beliefs and affective attitudes one has towards the target of their characterization reconfigures ones orientation towards that target in such a way that some further features become fitting for them whereas others become unfitting (Croom 2008, p. 34).

It is important to note that the constituent features of a characterization can vary in terms of *centrality* and *prominence* (Camp 2003, p. 13 and Croom 2008, p. 34). A feature is considered *central* insofar as it is highly interconnected within other features and considered *prominent* insofar as it is (a) contrastive with other features and (b) diagnostic or useful for identifying the more global object or event to which it belongs. So for example, wearing bright green Greenpeace T-shirts may be prominent but not central to the character of the *Stoic environmentalist* whereas their anonymous monthly monetary contributions to Greenpeace may be central but not prominent (Croom 2008, p. 34). Note also that not *all* features – nor even *actually possessed* features – must *necessarily* be included in a characterization of an individual *x*. Given the features that one initially takes to be central and prominent in their characterization of *x*, one may

then thereby find other features to be *accidental* or *out of place*. If a *Stoic environmentalist* happens to absent-mindedly leave a napkin behind after their lunch in the park, for instance, one might reasonably dismiss that feature as being in conflict with other *more central* features of their character. In other words, one may simply reject that comparatively weaker feature as *uncharacteristic*.

Importantly, how one characterizes *x* may very well affect how one actually interacts with *x*, including what one expects from *x* and how one assigns praise and blame to *x* (Croom 2008, p. 35 and Camp 2003, p. 21). For instance, one might reasonably expect different kinds of gifts, mannerisms, and communicative behavior from *x* based on whether *x* is typically characterized as a *Stoic environmentalist* or as a *Wall Street bullfighter*. There are also comparatively better and worse ways to characterize individuals, in that *x* is most aptly characterized as a *Stoic environmentalist* insofar as that characterization best ties together the features *fitting* of the character of *x* (e.g., that *x makes monetary contributions to Greenpeace, forsakes vacation time to do volunteer work for Greenpeace, wears bright green Greenpeace T-shirts, and is committed to such activities*). So in this case, for instance, it may be *inapt* to apply the characterization of a *Mother Teresa* to *x* since this characterization is *not restrictive enough* to capture the character of *x* as being particularly involved with environmental issues. The goodness of *x* may not extend past environmental concerns. Yet in this case it may also be *inapt* to apply the characterization of an *environmental weekend warrior* to *x* since this characterization is *too restrictive* to capture the character of *x* as being regularly involved with environmental issues. The goodness of *x*, although particular, may be genuine and integral to their overall way of being-in-the-world. More generally, better characterizations maximize the interconnectedness of fitting features while filtering out unfitting features, resulting in a more tightly structured and more reasonably organized perspective of the object or event being characterized (Croom 2008, p. 35).

In order to clarify how characterizations work before turning to discuss their involvement with racial epithets more specifically, let us first briefly consider a paradigm example of a characterization from *Romeo and Juliet*: the example where Romeo characterizes Juliet as *the sun* with the metaphorical statement *Juliet is the sun*. Now, in this metaphorical statement *Juliet* is considered the *subject* of discussion and serves as the basis of comparison whereas *is the sun* is considered the *metaphorical phrase* that is applied as an *aspect* under which to *conceive of the subject*. Camp (2003) has previously proposed that an *aspect* works to reconfigure one characterization in terms of another (p. 21). So in applying the metaphorical phrase to the subject in the aforementioned case one can work

to reconfigure the characterization of the subject in terms of the metaphorical phrase, that is to say, one can attempt to reorganize their way of thinking about *Juliet* by thinking about *Juliet* under the aspect of *the sun*.

For although Romeo has explicitly stated that *Juliet is the sun*, one would have surely missed the point if one took him to strictly mean by this that Juliet *literally* (rather than *figuratively*) *is the sun*. For it is simply agreed on all sides that Juliet is a *person* rather than a *celestial body*, and what is more, it would be uncharitable or out of place for one to take Romeo to be discussing such celestial matters given this context of discourse anyways. Rather, Romeo's metaphorical statement *Juliet is the sun* can be more charitably taken to effectively mean that *Juliet is the warmth in his life*, that *his day begins and ends with her*, and so on. So in making use of the metaphorical statement *Juliet is the sun*, although Romeo does not *explicitly* state the features that he intends to attribute to *Juliet*, he can be reasonably taken to communicate the ascription of these to Juliet *by way* of what he explicitly says. That is to say, in a case like this there is still communicative success since in order to make sense of the metaphorical statement *Juliet is the sun*, one must charitably think about or search for the most prominent or central features of the characterization of *the sun* to see whether there are any potentially relevant matches to be found in the characterization of *Juliet*. In this case one might find that it is characteristic of the sun that *it provides warmth for life* and that it is characteristic of Juliet that *she provides warmth for Romeo's life*. One might further find that it is characteristic of the sun that *the day begins and ends with it* and that it is characteristic of Juliet that *the day begins and ends with her*.

From this it can be observed that one generally takes the characterization of the metaphorical phrase and the characterization of the subject and attempts to make the metaphorical characterization as fitting to the subject characterization as possible by searching for and finding features within the metaphorical characterization that optimally match those within the subject characterization (Croom 2008, p. 36). The aim of this is to reconfigure the characterization of the subject in terms of the characterization of the metaphorical phrase and thereby reorganize the structure of one's thoughts about *Juliet* under the aspect of *the sun*. By thinking of the subject under the aspect of the metaphor, certain features of the subject that most closely match those in the metaphorical phrase become highlighted, reconfiguring which features will also become *salient* in the characterization of the subject (Croom 2008, p. 36). Thinking about *Juliet* under the aspect of *the sun* thus downplays certain features of hers while highlighting others (such as her providing Romeo's life with warmth). Very roughly, those features of the metaphorical phrase that are most prominent or central and that aid in the organization of salient

features in the subject are typically the features that the speaker can reasonably be taken to attribute to the subject by making use of the metaphorical statement (Croom 2008, p. 36).

In the case of metaphor it is evident that the speaker is not committed primarily to what they explicitly state but instead to the metaphorical features that can be taken to be most plausibly predicated of the subject through the cultivation of the relevant aspect in thought (Croom 2008, p. 36). So properly speaking the reconfiguration of one characterization in terms of another through aspect-application is not something that gets expressed as the “semantic content” of a statement. Richard Moran (1989) can be read as nicely reinforcing this point in his article “Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force,” in which he considers the two metaphorical statements (a) *no man is an island* (a negative metaphorical statement) and (b) *every man is an island* (a positive metaphorical statement). It can be witnessed in both (a) and (b) that *man* is conceived of under the aspect of *an island* similarly to how *Juliet* was conceived of under the aspect of *the sun*. That is to say, making sense of (a) and (b) calls on one to charitably search for the most prominent or central features in the characterization of *islands* to see whether there are any matches to be found in the characterization of *man*. One might find that *being in isolation* is characteristic of islands and that often times *being in isolation* is characteristic of *man* as well. By thinking of *man* under the aspect of *an island* the feature *being in isolation* thus becomes highlighted in the characterization of *man* and thereby reconfigures which features are taken to be salient in that characterization. So the reconfiguration of the characterization of *man* under the aspect of *an island* is successfully accomplished in both (a) and (b) even though the statement is denied in the first case and affirmed in the latter. Or as Moran (2008) puts the point, both the affirmation and denial of the metaphorical statement “still retain[s] the effect of framing, of seeing one thing in terms of another” (p. 99-100). So the *reconfiguration* of the characterization of *man* under the aspect of *an island* cannot reasonably be taken as what is expressed as the *semantic content* of these metaphorical statements, for in that case the same semantic content would be expressed by both the affirmation and denial, which is evidently a logical implausibility.

Since the reconfiguration of one characterization in terms of another through aspect-application is not expressed as part of the “semantic content” of a statement, the full force of what is communicated by way of a metaphorical statement cannot be sufficiently countered by merely denying what that metaphorical statement semantically expresses. That is, one will typically not be able to completely neutralized the full force of the metaphor in saying, for instance, *Tom is a snake, but he isn't really sneaky*,

slippery, or untrustworthy. This is because one has still “framed” Tom as *a snake* even though one may have denied these other particular properties to Tom. As a result, the introduction of other relevant beliefs and ascription of other relevant properties regarding Tom that fit this frame may still result. So it will typically take more to reject all that gets communicated by a metaphorical statement than merely denying the semantic content of what is communicated. In addition to rejecting this one must also further deny the very *appropriateness* of the *framing* itself (Croom 2008, p. 37 and Camp 2003, p. 249).

3. Considering an Epithet that Targets Asian Americans

Having briefly reviewed epithets and characterizations more generally, we are now ready to discuss how characterizations are involved with racial epithets more specifically. So in this section we now turn our considerations towards the paradigmatic racial epithet *banana* that is typically directed towards Asian Americans. According to the *RSDB*, an extensive database on racially derogatory words, the racial epithet *banana* is a derogatory term typically used to characterize “An Asian American who has lost their heritage [...] Yellow on the outside, white on the inside” (2013). Since it is clear that in this case the racial epithet *banana* is being used to *characterize* a person (and is therefore an *epithet*) in a way relevantly relating to their *race* as Asian American (and is therefore *racial*), it is also clear that *banana* here is a racial epithet by definition (see also the discussion in Croom 2008, p. 45, fn. 4).

Now, when a speaker makes use of the racial epithet *banana* in statements like *Asian Americans are bananas*, or refers to Asian Americans *as bananas*, one would have surely missed the point if one took that speaker to strictly mean by this that Asian Americans *literally* (rather than *figuratively*) *are bananas*. For it is simply agreed on all sides that an Asian American is a kind of *person* rather than a kind of *fruit*, and what is more, it would be uncharitable or out of place for one to take the racially prejudice speaker in this case to be discussing such fruit-pertaining matters given this context of discourse anyways. Instead, when one makes a statement involving a racial epithet like *Asian Americans are bananas*, or refers to Asian Americans *as bananas*, one can typically be taken as attempting to reorganize the conception of *Asian Americans* by framing them under the aspect of *bananas* (as *Juliet* was framed under the aspect of *the sun* in the previous section). In this case, one may accordingly take the most prominent or central features of the characterization of *bananas* and find matches within the characterization of *Asian Americans*. By conceiving of *Asian Americans* under the aspect of *bananas*, certain

features of *Asian Americans* that most closely match those in *bananas* become highlighted and reconfigure which features become salient in that characterization. Very roughly, those features from the characterization of *bananas* that are most prominent or central and that aid in the reorganization of salient features in *Asian Americans* are typically the features that the speaker can reasonably be taken to attribute to Asian Americans by making use of that racial epithet. So the employment of the racial epithet *banana* does not commit a speaker primarily to the claim that *Asian Americans literally are bananas*, as that term is literally, non-figuratively, and non-derogatorily used. Instead, the speaker can more relevantly be taken to effectively attribute to Asian Americans that *they are yellow on the outside and white on the inside*, or alternatively, that *the Asian American being targeted has lost touch with their heritage* (for further discussion of other racial epithets see also Croom 2008, p. 38-40).

So given the characterization of *bananas* as involving certain features and the characterization of *Asian Americans* as involving certain features, when a speaker states that *Asian Americans are bananas*, or refers to *Asian Americans as bananas*, in order to make sense of what that speaker might most plausibly mean one must charitably take the appropriate mindful steps and search for the most prominent or central features of the characterization of *bananas* to see whether there are any matches to be found in the characterization of *Asian Americans*. One might find that *bananas* are characteristically *yellow on the outside* and that *Asian Americans* are characteristically stereotyped as being *yellow on the outside* also. One might further find that *bananas* are characteristically *white on the inside* and, as the racially prejudice speaker presumably intends to point out, that *Asian Americans* are sometimes stereotyped as being *white on the inside* as well. The features of *bananas* that are most prominent or central and that work to reorganize which features are taken as salient in *Asian Americans* – e.g., the features *being yellow on the outside* and *being white on the inside* – are typically the features that the speaker can reasonably be taken to attribute to *Asian Americans* by making use of that racial epithet.

Now, when the speaker under consideration *initially* thought of making use of the term *banana* as a racial epithet in a statement like *Asian Americans are bananas*, or in referring to Asian Americas *as bananas*, they have presumably already initiated the cultivation of a certain *perspective* towards *Asian Americans* that is structured in a way most relevantly related to their race. Such an *originating* racial prejudice may partly consist in a certain set of interrelated, race-based generalizations about Asian Americans, for example, that *Asian Americans have lost touch with their heritage* – i.e., are “*Yellow on the outside, white on the inside*” – and *perhaps also as a result of this are unfaithful and have flexible values*, and

so on. Maybe the racially prejudice person in this case holds other negative beliefs about Asian Americans also, but insofar as they conceive of *these kind of features* as belonging to *Asian Americans* in a holistically structured way (maybe they think that it is because Asian Americans possess one particularly prominent or central feature that the other features follow), and insofar as they intend to communicate *these kind of structured thoughts* about *Asian Americans*, the racially prejudice person will in a sense be mindfully situated to notice this kind of organization of features as matching an analogous organization of features in the characterization of another familiar object or event. The characterization of *bananas* might readily afford this match. So in coming to conceive of features characteristic of *bananas* as closely matching features characteristic of *Asian Americans*, the racially prejudice person in this case comes to conceive of *Asian Americans* under the aspect of *bananas*. By then making use of the epithet *banana* in racially relevant statements like *Asian Americans are bananas*, or in referring to Asian Americans *as bananas*, although the speaker does not semantically express or explicitly state the features that they aim to attribute to *Asian Americans*, typically they can be reasonably taken to communicate these *by way* of their racially relevant statement. This accounts for the *original aptness* of the racial epithet *banana* applied towards *Asian Americans*, that is to say, why the racial epithet *banana* was *originally apt to target Asian Americans rather than* (e.g.) *African Americans, or those belonging to other racial groups* (Croom 2008, p. 42-43; see also Croom 2014a, p. 235 for discussion of *target aptness* and *lexical aptness*).

Surely harmful effects that can result from racially characterizing Asian Americans in this way, since how one characterizes *x* will affect how one interacts with *x*. Conceiving of *Asian Americans* under the aspect of *bananas* – to conceive of *Asian Americans as yellow on the outside and white on the inside*, or alternatively, *as having lost touch with their heritage* – will likely affect the expectations one has towards Asian American individuals as well as how one will assign them praise and blame (Croom 2008, p. 39). Once one comes to think of Asian Americans *as yellow on the outside and white on the inside*, or alternatively, *as having lost touch with their heritage*, how one comes to interact with *Asian Americans* will very likely be altered. By conceiving of *Asian Americans* in this way, one might further find it fitting to think of them as also *being unfaithful and having flexible values*, and so on. Given the adoption of these beliefs, one's interaction with *Asian American* individuals is likely to be permeated by these beliefs, which can result not only in a superficial layer of disconnected racist acts towards those targets but further in the more global adoption of a way of facing them and organizing one's orientation towards

them that is morally bankrupt. And insofar as one faces others and organizes their thoughts and feelings about them in these racially prejudiced ways, one has thereby stopped treating them as common members of humanity and has instead started treating them on the basis of features that they may or may not in fact have based on beliefs about their race that may or may not in fact be true. This is not how a person deserves to be treated. So in at least paradigmatic racist cases, stating that *Asian Americans are bananas*, and referring to *Asian Americans as bananas*, are often considered linguistic actions that can be used to harm the people that they typically target (Croom 2008, p. 39; see also Kilgannon 2007).

Moreover, given the features that one takes to be central to and prominent in *Asian Americans* under the aspect of *bananas*, one might now come to find other features to be inapt or out of place for their character. By now considering Asian Americans as perhaps unfaithful, having flexible values, and so on, one may now come to find other potentially *positive* features *unfitting* with these negative features. Insofar as one grants these negative features to Asian Americans, one may now find it *unfitting*, for example, for an Asian American to also have the confidence to run a Fortune 500 company, the loyalty to work for a Marine Corp Intelligence Department, or to have a genuine concern for establishing new cultural activities within their community. As a result, an *Asian American* may thereby be thought unfit for certain corporate and government positions, as well as funding for establishing cultural clubs and events within their communities and universities (Croom 2008, p. 39).

What is more, not only are racial epithets often *harmful* to the members that they typically target, but they are also in general *bad* characterizations of the people that they attempt to characterize (Croom 2008, p. 39-40). We reviewed earlier how better characterizations maximize the interconnectedness of fitting features while filtering out unfitting features, resulting in a more tightly structured and reasonably organized perspective of the object being characterized. Yet it seems implausible that, for any *Asian American* individual that might be considered, most of the constituent features that make up the structured constellation of their character will find as their most central interconnecting component *being yellow on the outside* or *being white on the inside*. In most cases, these features will not speak to the roles that that individual occupies in their family, professional, and extracurricular life. In terms of the features that make an individual the particular individual that they are, skin color or relations to the white community may play little or no role in expressing who they are as a person. In many cases, therefore, racial epithets are both *harmful* to the people that they target as well as *inaccurate* with respect to the people that they attempt to characterize (Croom 2008, p. 39-40).

4. Derogatory Variation and Evolution

Before concluding our discussion of racial epithets, characterizations, and slurs, it is perhaps useful to say a few words about their derogatory variation and evolution. For one, it has been pointed out in prior work on epithets that different racial epithets differ from one another in their derogatory force (see Hom 2008, p. 426 and also Croom 2014a, p. 238) and that their meaning or use is not fixed once and for all but is instead capable of change or evolution (see Hom 2008, p. 427-428, Croom 2008, p. 37-38 and Croom 2014a, p. 238). To better understand derogatory variation and evolution, let us first consider once again the metaphorical statement *Juliet is the sun*. The statement is quite poetic and invites one to explore which metaphorical features might plausibly be attributed to Juliet by considering *Juliet* under the aspect of *the sun*. The metaphor is *poetic* in (at least) the sense that it grants one the liberty to search out in a certain open-ended way the possible metaphorical features that might plausibly be attributed to Juliet, as well as the attitudes one might adopt in response (Croom 2008, p. 37-38). Is Juliet the center of Romeo's social milieu and larger worldview? She must mean everything to him. Is she so beautiful in Romeo's eyes that he is almost blinded by the very sight of her? She must be breathtaking. Does everything else have meaning and life only by virtue of being supported by the warmth of her presence? She must be quite the charmer. Poetic metaphors nudge us to richly reflect over such possibilities and try on new attitudes and emotions in response (Croom 2008, p. 37-38).

But then there are also more garden-variety metaphors that are less poetic and more conventional. For instance, the metaphorical statement *Tom is a snake* is not very poetic since it does not take much mindful exploration to figure out which metaphorical features might plausibly be attributed to Tom. Tom is very likely a sneaky, slippery, and untrustworthy guy. The increasingly conventional use of this metaphor has in a sense removed (or made unnecessary) a great deal of the exploratory freedom one initially might have had in searching for which metaphorical features might plausibly be attributed to the target subject (Croom 2008, p. 38).

Finally, there are also the has-been (or dead) metaphors that at one point were metaphorical but have subsequently become used so straightforwardly that this application is now understood as the literal or conventional meaning of the term. One typical example to consider is *the mouth of a bottle*. At one point this may have been metaphorical – perhaps even poetically so – but now there is little if any mindful exploration required to figure out what is being predicated of the bottle in this case. So in cases such as these where there is no longer any “aspectual work” to be

done mindfully, one simply has a new literal meaning of the term *mouth* as applied to the openings of bottles. As Croom (2008) has previously suggested in “Racial Epithets,” “One thing we notice from cases like these is that the semantic content of terms like “mouth” are often determined by the features conventionally meant to be predicated of a subject through aspect-application in its originating metaphorical ancestor” (p. 38; see also Aldridge, Thompson & Winston 2001; Blackwell 2004).

Now, in this article I have for the most part focused on more poetic racial epithets like *banana* and *antique farm equipment* whereas in other work I have for the most part focused on less poetic racial slurs like *chink* and *nigger*. However, since the terms *epithet* and *slur* (as well as *pejorative*) are often conflated and used interchangeably in the literature (see for example Hom 2008, Hom 2010, and RSDB 2013) one might find some motivation to aspire toward a unified overarching account of *both* poetic and non-poetic varieties of these paradigmatically derogatory terms. One possibility that has previously been suggested, for example, is that the more poetic cases still involve active and open-ended exploratory activity in order to arrive at the appropriate features to be attributed to the subject whereas the less poetic cases have become so straightforwardly applied in this way that they no longer involve such active and open-ended exploratory activity to arrive at the features to be appropriately attributed (e.g., the term *mouth* is now literally applied to the openings of bottles and thus requires little mindful exploration, cf. Croom 2008, p. 43-44).

But notice that there are also *differences* between racial epithets like *banana* and *antique farm equipment* and racial slurs like *chink* and *nigger*. For one, the epithets *banana* and *antique farm equipment* are currently used primarily or paradigmatically as non-derogatory terms applied to non-humans whereas the slurs *chink* and *nigger* are currently used primarily or paradigmatically as derogatory terms applied to humans. So if at a dinner party one overheard someone else talking about a *banana* or *antique farm equipment* out of context, for example, one might reasonably assume that what they overheard had *little to do* with racial prejudice. Yet on the other hand, if at a dinner party one overheard someone else talking about a *chink* or *nigger* out of context, one might reasonably assume that what they overheard had *lots to do* with racial prejudice. Perhaps this can be seen as motivating comparatively more mindful exploration on the part of the charitable listener in order for them to adequately understand what their speaker is trying to communicate to them by their use of the racial epithet as opposed to the racial slur, and this might be at least one way of differentiating between epithets and slurs. However, as I have stated at the outset, I will reserve undertaking the more comprehensive task of offering an overarching account for both epithets and slurs for another occasion.

Nonetheless, I hope to have still offered here new insight into how epithets and slurs are both similar and different.

5. Conclusion

Since at least 2008 linguists and philosophers of language have started paying more serious attention to issues concerning the meaning or use of racial epithets and slurs. In prior work Croom (2008) offered a discussion of racial epithets through a consideration of a paradigmatic racial epithet directed towards Native Americans, but then moved on in subsequent work to focus on developing a more nuanced account of paradigmatic slurring terms instead (Croom 2010; Croom 2011; Croom 2012; Croom 2013; Croom 2014a; Croom 2014b; Croom under review). So the purpose of this article was to return to and extend the previous account of racial epithets provided by Croom (2008) through a consideration of another paradigmatic racial epithet, but this time one directed towards Asian Americans instead of Native Americans. Here I also offered a novel suggestion for how to differentiate between epithets and slurs, offering new insight into how epithets and slurs are both similar and different. A sample list of 100 other racial epithets that can be accounted for by the kind of analysis presented here is provided in Croom (2008, p. 44-45).

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