

*Bad Words*  
*Remarks on Mark Richard "Epithets and Attitudes"*

Robert May  
University of California, Irvine

*Presented at the*  
USC WORKSHOP IN THE LINGUISTICS/PHILOSOPHY INTERFACE:  
*Syntax and Semantics with Attitude*  
18 April 2005

"Choose your words wisely," my mother used to say, "because you never know who's listening." Oddly, this is something about which my dear mother and Mark Richard apparently would agree. They both seem to think that the words you use say something about who you are, and if you use bad words, then you are a bad person. About this, I have no doubt that they are right - those who use slurs, at least in the context of many assertive utterances, are surely racists, anti-Semites or whatever. But MR in his paper points out that matters go further than this, for our conversational interactions with slur words can show us to be of such dubious moral status even if we don't utter them; just our normal practices of accepting the utterances of others would be sufficient for this result. But something is surely amiss here; no doubt we can know the meaning of slur-words, and so comprehend the utterances of others, without impugning our moral stature in any way.

MR sets up the issue by posing a puzzle. Suppose a speaker, an anti-Semite, makes an utterance containing a slur word; he says:

(K) Kikes are in the building.

A hearer who accepts (*K*) as true forms a belief, the belief that kikes are in the building. But then the hearer believes what the speaker believes; that is, he has an anti-Semitic belief. And this, MR points out, makes the hearer complicit with the speaker's anti-Semitic attitude, and, to an extent, anti-Semitic himself.

I think MR is right about this. I also think he is right in his general diagnosis, that a speaker may comprehend slur-sentences like (*K*) without accepting them as true. (*K*) is an unacceptable way of saying something about Jews, according to MR, because slurred thoughts - the sort of thoughts associated with sentences like (*K*) - are neither true thoughts nor false thoughts. As such, (*K*), at least as far as the hearer is concerned, is itself neither true nor false, and so a speaker who comprehends it - i.e. comes to have a slurred thought - is not committed, in virtue of that comprehension, to any dubious moral beliefs. And this, according to MR, justifies the idea that there is "a realm of discourse whose sentences are used (literally) to make assertions and express beliefs, but whose sentences do not say things which are true, false, or even apt for truth or falsity." (fn. 2) Slurs, it would seem, tell us something important about what it means to comprehend an utterance.

For MR, then, the burden is to make good on the claim that (*K*) is neither true nor false, and in his paper he takes on this task with considerable gusto. MR's central idea, if I understand him rightly, is that a thought can be a true thought only if it properly represents what it is about. ("To say that your thought is true is to endorse *as* representing the world correctly." (16)) Slurs, however, inherently involve a *misrepresentation*, and so slurred thoughts, which contain such misrepresentations, can be neither true nor false. Hence (*K*), which expresses such a thought, is neither true nor false.

We can flesh out MR's position a little more in the following way. By the use of language, speakers undertake linguistic acts to express attitudes about the things they are talking about. In the

case of slurs, speakers use slur-words to undertake acts of slurring in order to express negative attitudes. Using “kike” is a way of talking about Jews that signals the speaker’s attitude towards Jews, that the speaker is anti-Semitic. As MR emphasizes, people slur by their use of words. Particular words are slur-words because they are conventionally used in this way - “a third person use gives vent to a malevolent attitude, its second person use insults or denigrates,” (13) MR tells us. A person who slurs does so to linguistically act out a slurred thought. A person who uses the word “kike” does so because he thinks about Jews in a certain way because they are Jewish. But, and here is MR’s point, such thoughts inherently misrepresent their targets, “because it involves a way of thinking of Jews that is just not a way that one can think of them.” (17) More elaborately, MR says:

When the anti-Semite thinks of someone in his anti-Semitic way, he thinks in a way that expresses, vents his negative attitude towards Jews, and thereby show contempt for denigrates them. To *do* these things is to misrepresent Jews. It is to misrepresent them not because one is using a word that means something like *contemptible because Jewish*. Rather, it is to misrepresent Jews because one is doing certain things - e.g., expressing negative attitudes and contempt elicited by religion - the doing of which is one way to represent Jews as worthy of contempt. To have or display contempt for someone, to think badly of them by having such contempt, *is* to think of them, to represent them, as worthy of contempt. (18)

Any thought that contains a slur can be neither a true thought nor a false thought, since “To think of someone as the anti-Semite does *is* to misrepresent them in a way that deprives what is said of truth.” (18). (*K*), and any other sentence containing the word “kike,” is therefore neither true nor false.

MR’s account makes out slurs as kissing cousins to empty terms like “unicorn.” So for him, John’s seeking unicorns and John’s seeking kikes are both chimeral; MR is denying the intuition that while the former will never be successful, the latter could be. They are only cousins, however, because the cause of their emptiness is not the same. “Unicorn” is an empty term because unicorns don’t exist,

not because it conventionally incorporates a misrepresentation of something that does exist. There are, however, Jews, but “kike” is nevertheless an empty term because of just such a misrepresentation.

Now, it is significant for MR’s view that thinking of someone in a certain way is a complex, inclusive of “the evaluations, conatus, and feelings we and others have towards objects and activities.” (22) In the case of slurs, the evaluative component is in some way negative or hostile. The information that constitutes this complex, however, should not be thought of as discrete packets; rather, it is “a vast jumble, not necessarily sorted in terms of importance or likelihood of accuracy.” Our representations are put together in an unstructured, loosey-goosey sort of way. “There are few, perhaps no, connections among ‘pieces of representation’”, MR tells us, “which would make this aspect of a representation of an individual connect analytically with that aspect.” (21) It is because of this *ad hoc* characteristic of the organization of our representations that terms can thicken up or thin down. Sometimes this is a change in convention - “Negro” has fattened up considerably, and even “Afro-American” has been developing love handles, while “Gay” has become downright slim, and “Queer” is on a low-carb diet - but variance in girth can even show up between contexts, as speakers try to evaluate the utterances of their interlocutors.

MR, it seems to me, is no doubt right about the lability of our representation. But I think that perhaps he goes too far when he suggests that there are *no* analytic connections rather than a few. Indeed, one case where arguably there are such connections is with slurs. It puts no strain on credulity to say that “kike” is explicitly *defined* in terms of “Jew” - “kike” is a word used to express contempt for or hatred of Jews would be a likely candidate for Webster’s, one would think. In fact, my *New International* does just that; it reads: “*Derogatory*. A Jew; Yid.” - the italicization indicates, according to Webster, a “usage label.” That kikes are Jews is a necessary part of anyone’s representations; if one doesn’t know that all kikes are Jews, then one simply doesn’t know the meaning of “kike.”

This, however, is something that MR cannot concede. For if the relation between “kike” and “Jew” is definitional, then  $(A)$  is analytic:

$(A)$  Kikes are Jews.

And if  $(A)$  is analytic, then  $(K)$  must be true if  $(J)$  is.

$(J)$  Jews are in the building

But if  $(K)$  is true, we have not escaped the maws of the original conundrum. At this point, MR, coming from a well-known lineage of skepticism about definition and analyticity, will presumably just bite the bullet, and maintain that  $(A)$ , *just like any other sentence containing a slur-word*, is neither true nor false, and so is not analytic, since it is not even true. So be it.

Now, the italicization in the previous sentence is meant to emphasize an implication of MR’s view, *viz.* that the misrepresentational aspect of slurs is global, and shines through regardless of the linguistic context in which a slur-word occurs. “Their use,” MR says, “is insulting and denigrating even when they are embedded.” (8-9). This sentiment accords, with respect to a “logic of slurs,” to a weak Kleene system. Such a system is nicely described in a way that I think MR would find congenial by saying that “in the weak Kleene system the underlying intuition is that [neither true nor false] is Nonsense. . . . The intuition behind Nonsense is that it is a *disease* . . . when one part of a formula is infected, the whole formula is. The truth-tables of weak Kleene are built up in such a way that when a subformula is Nonsense, the entire formula is Nonsense.” (Krahmer (1995))

---

Note that  $(A)$  is an identity, so “Jews are kikes” is analytic, if  $(A)$  is. Care is needed, however, to guard against the d

*Weak Kleene Truth-Tables*

$\wedge$	T	F	N
T	T	F	N
F	F	F	N
N	N	N	N

$\vee$	T	F	N
T	T	T	N
F	T	F	N
N	N	N	N

$\supset$	T	F	N
T	T	F	N
F	T	T	N
N	N	N	N

$\neg$	
T	F
F	T
N	N

If a weak Kleene system is being assumed, then compound sentences that contain component sentences with slur-words are neither true nor false. But this doesn't seem right. So, consider (C):

(C) If kikes are in the building, then people are in the building

(C), it seems to me, may be true. Moreover, (D), it seems to me, is true, if Jews are in the building:

(D) Kikes are in the building, or Jews are in the building

These judgments about (C) and (D) obviously do not comport with the weak Kleene truth-tables, on which they are neither true nor false. Rather, they comport with the strong Kleene system:

*Strong Kleene Truth-Tables*

$\wedge$	T	F	N
T	T	F	N
F	F	F	F
N	N	F	N

$\vee$	T	F	N
T	T	T	T
F	T	F	N
N	T	N	N

$\supset$	T	F	N
T	T	F	N
F	T	T	T
N	T	N	N

$\neg$	
T	F
F	T
N	N

If we assume that the first clauses in (C) and (D) are neither true nor false, then given that the second clause is true, it follows on the strong Kleene tables that both (C) and (D) are true. But this gives up the notion that slurs are infectious, and that any sentence, no matter how complex, in which a slur-word occurs is neither true nor false. The perverse effect of slurs is limited, at best, to elementary atomic sentences; apparently their effect is local, not global.

Regardless of how we adjudicate whether slur-sentences are Kleene weak or strong, it would seem to leave unaffected the claim about (A), that it is neither true nor false. But consider its negation:

(N) Kikes aren't Jews

The one place where weak and strong Kleene systems agree is on the truth-table for negation, and by this table, (N) is neither true nor false. But this clearly just isn't right. (N) is unquestionably false. But if (N) is false, then (A) is true, and then so too is (K).

On MR's view, it is a necessary property of slurs that they misrepresent, and he ties the putative status of thoughts that contain them as neither true nor false to this misrepresentation. But is misrepresentation really required for a slur? I'm not so sure.

Suppose the Nazis were right; it is a genetic property of Jews that they are despicable - sort of like Tay-Sachs disease, but more genetically ubiquitous. Because it is genetic, being Jewish causes despicability. But then, to think of Jews this way, to represent them as despicable, would *not* be to misrepresent them, and so the Nazi's thoughts would be true. On the other hand, anyone who thinks of Jews as non-despicable would now be the ones that misrepresent Jews, and accordingly would entertain thoughts about them that are neither true nor false. Nevertheless, a Nazi using "Kike" would still slur Jews, and his corresponding thoughts would still be contemptible, and the non-Nazi would still not slur Jews, nor have contemptible thoughts about them.

What this shows is that slurring usage is independent of the truth-value of the thoughts in which slurs occur. Slurs *can* occur in true thoughts; perhaps this is clearer if we look at bad words that aren't slurs per se. Consider "shit," used to mean fecal matter and malodorous because of it. When someone walking around Paris says "There is a lot of shit on the street," they say something that is true, there is no misrepresentation. Still, they have done so using a bad word - a word that, even in an appropriate context, can not be used on network TV, and which I admonish my children for using.

Up to now, we have been using MR's original puzzle as our focal point. But there are other cases that don't seem to work the same way, contexts in which it seems perfectly possible for "kike" to be used without tarring anyone as an anti-Semite. This seems patently so of the following questions, as Chris Hom points out:

Do you believe that Jews are kikes?  
 Do anti-Semites commonly believe that Jews are kikes?  
 What is it to believe that Jews are kikes?

Or suppose there is someone who believes for whatever reason that kikes aren't Jews. A speaker wishes to disabuse him of this belief, and so says to him: "Kikes are Jews." The hearer accordingly revises his beliefs. It seems to me that we have no grounds for inferring, on the basis of this linguistic interaction, that there is any anti-Semitism at play here. Certainly one can tell someone that kikes are Jews without being an anti-Semite, and just as certainly come to the belief that kikes are Jews without becoming complicit in anti-Semitism. This seems to me so even if we assume that the speaker utters a truth, and that the hearer accepts it as such. Indeed to assume this seems natural in the context, just as it is natural to assume that neither has any misapprehension about "kike" being a slur word.

On MR's view, the pairing of a core concept with a derogatory component is not essential to slur; they may be detached. "It is determined "in the context of the observer"," MR says, "whether the

evaluative attitude annexed to the racist's use of a slur is a "part of" the concept expressed by the slur," where whether there is annexation being controlled by "facts about our interests and relations." (24). If there is no annexation, then, a sentence containing a slur work may be true, (and questions have true answers), and it may be used without any black marks on anyone's character. But this response doesn't seem to strike the right note, at least for the case just mentioned. The person who says "Kikes are Jews" as above may do this in a context in which it is known to the speaker and hearer that it is a derogatory term. What is at issue is the target of the derogation; this is, if you will, a case of attachment, not detachment. Moreover, if the derogatory aspect is not part of the content, then "Kikes are Jews" *would* mean the same thing as "Jews are Jews," and we would be at something of a loss to explain why the former sentence could be informative.

MR's view seems rather more dissonant when we consider a case due to Chris Hom. He observes that we might very well use sentences such as:

People who think that Jews are kikes are anti-Semitic  
 If you believe that Jews are kikes, then you are anti-Semitic  
 One common feature of anti-Semites is that they think that Jews are kikes

in order to discuss anti-Semitism, and explain what it is, as an aspect of understanding anti-Semitism, so as to combat it. It is very hard to see how we could do this without the presence of the derogatory content - what would be the lesson? But it seems obvious that we can teach a valuable lesson, and that we can do so without implying that any participant in the discussion is anti-Semitic.

That slurs are used derogatorily is very much part of how we understand these sorts of cases. It is also, I think, part of cases in which targets of a slur appropriate it for self-referential use. A Jew that calls himself a kike does so knowing full well the conventional meaning of the word, and assumes that his interlocutors do as well. His use gains its rhetorical effect from the implicatures that arise. As MR

nicely puts it, “implicature occurs, so to speak, because it solves a problem posed by someone’s utterance” (30), and reflexive use of slurs sure creates a problem. So, in this context, use of slurs might implicate that the speaker is self-hating, or that he wishes to speak with a degree of irony, or even his wish that as a societal norm the term not be used in a derogatory manner, but neutrally, a wish that sometimes is granted, (e.g. “gay”).

Now it seems to me that if you know what the word “kike” means, then regardless of whether you are an anti-Semite or not, you believe that kikes are Jews. (Comparably, if you know what “bachelor” means, you believe that bachelors are unmarried men, even if you thought “bachelor” somewhat thick, e.g. as an unmarried man and a wominzer because of it.) But it seems obvious that it doesn’t follow from someone believing that kikes are Jews that they have any further thoughts or beliefs that they would frame in terms of the concept *kike*. Indeed, someone who is not an anti-Semite would have no thoughts characterized in this way. However, because the non-anti-Semite nevertheless knows what “kike” means, he knows what it is to have anti-Semitic thoughts; he can be in an empathetic relation to kike-like thoughts. Moreover, the non-anti-Semite can believe that others have anti-Semitic beliefs and thoughts, and understand the content of their beliefs. This however does not commit the non-anti-Semite in any way to having anti-Semitic thoughts.

Let me elaborate a bit on this. It seems to me key here to observe that we may have beliefs about beliefs of others without subscribing to their beliefs ourselves. I can believe that Priestly believed that phlogiston was emitted by combustion without *my* believing that phlogiston is emitted by combustion. Indeed, what I believe about phlogiston is quite immaterial; it is something about which I may remain completely non-committal. This non-transference is a general property of second-order belief, and holds just as much for our beliefs about language. My belief that Priestly believed that “Phlogiston is emitted

by combustion” is true does not commit *me* one way or the other to the belief that “Phlogiston is emitted by combustion” is true. In fact, I may hold the contrary belief, that “Phlogiston is emitted by combustion” is false, to the highest levels of scientific certainty, and this would not change by one iota my belief about Priestly.

This latter observation plays an important role in the context of the dynamics of conversation, for while we can accept an uttered sentence “*S*” as true, and so come to the belief that “*S*” is true, we need not take this attitude. Rather, we may opt for a second-order belief, the belief that the speaker (or more generally someone other than oneself) believes that “*S*” is true. And although believing this does not commit *us* one way or the other to the truth of “*S*,” it also does not leave us clueless as to what the other person believes. We can know what it is for a sentence or proposition to be true, and know the implications to which someone who held it to be so would be committed, without thereby being committing ourselves to any of those implications. (For further elaboration of this point, see Fiengo and my forthcoming book *De Lingua Belief*.)

This aspect of linguistic comprehension, I want to stress, is a perfectly common aspect of our everyday communicative interactions. For virtually every sentence we comprehend, we come to have a second-order communicative belief of the sort just described. In most cases, this is because they are implied by first-order beliefs; normally, if I come to believe that “*S*” is true because of *a*’s assertion of “*S*,” I will also believe that *a* believes that “*S*” is true, since normally people believe what they assert. If Priestly assertively utters “Phlogiston is emitted by combustion” and I, accepting his utterance as true, form the belief that “Phlogiston is emitted by combustion” is true, I will also believe that Priestly believes that “Phlogiston is emitted by combustion” is true. Having a corresponding first-order belief, however, is not a requirement for having a second-order belief; any member of a conversation can opt-

out, and there are various sorts of contexts in which the latter is all we entertain. Use of slurs in conversations is, I think, a perfect example. When the anti-Semite utters (*K*) - “Kikes are in the building” - we are not compelled to take a first-order attitude towards it. No doubt none of us would be prepared to accept it as true. But our reticence about this is not matched by any reticence in coming to believe that the anti-Semite believes that kikes are in the building, and that belief in no way make us complicit in his anti-Semitism. This, it seems to me, is how to resolve MR’s puzzle.

Before closing, we might think for a moment about what Frege might have said about these matters. There are two possibilities. The first is that “Jew” and “kike” express the same sense, the difference between them being just a matter of “coloring,” the sort of difference Frege attributes to “nag” and “steed.” Accordingly, there would be no difference in the thought expressed depending upon whether “kike” or “Jew” is employed. But this doesn’t seem right; we have already seen that “Kikes are Jews” *can* be informative, which it would not be if it expressed the same thought as “Jews are Jews.” So, let’s consider Frege’s other option, which is to say that “kike” and “Jew” have different senses, but the same reference, and hence that “Kikes are Jews” and “Jews are Jews” express different thoughts. In turn, this would imply, on Frege’s view, that slur-thoughts are *real* thoughts, thoughts about which judgements can be rendered, and not “mock”-thoughts, like those containing fictional names. A fireman who comprehends an utterance of “Kikes are in the building” is going to enter the burning building to save them, for judging a thought to be a true thought is grounds for action. He would not ponder what to do, thinking himself faced with a non-judgeable thought, one that can be neither true nor false.

In this last remark I have assumed that slur-thoughts can be true thoughts. But this is not so clear, it might be objected, for suppose that the sense of “kike” is something like *Jewish and despicable because of it*. Then the reference of “kike” would be the empty concept - since there is nothing that satis-

fies the aforementioned mode of presentation, nothing would fall under the concept. Consequently, slur-thoughts would all be *false* thoughts. But why should we take the sense as described? If “kike,” as proposed above, is defined as *Jewish and used to refer to Jews with hatred or hostility*, then anyone who grasps the sense of “kike” thereby grasps the sense of the definiens. If we take the sense this way, then while any mention of the cause of this hatred or hostility would be left out of the “semantics,” (indeed, there may be no single attitude or single cluster of attitudes that is *the* cause for the use of a slur), it does now follow that slur-thoughts can be true thoughts, with slurs imbued with a certain indexicality that befits them.

Can a sentence containing a slur be true, and contain as part of its thought content a pejorative aspect, yet not commit speakers to low moral standards? On MR’s view, the answer is no. For him, our recognizing that a slurred thought is neither a true thought nor a false thought is part of our *rejection* of this way of thinking. As he says: “we should reject the very way of thinking the thinker used in his thought.” (3) I would, I suppose, subscribe to a slightly different standard; rather we should *not accept* this way of thinking. That we need not, and yet can still comprehend the utterances of those who, for better or for worse, do, arises, at least in part, from our general ability to form second-order, as well as first-order, conversational beliefs. Surely there is a difference between knowing what a sentence, and its constituent words, mean, and hence knowing what it would be for that sentence to be true, and in fact believing it to be true.