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# An interactionist approach to slurs: *Piefke* in Austrian German<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This paper investigates the use of the anti-German slur *Piefke* by speakers of Austrian German, especially concerning their identity management. It is argued that the Austrian autostereotype is constructed in opposition to the hostile German heterostereotype, embodied by the associations of *Piefke*. An interactionist account of the pragmatic effects of slurring is presented, couched in the framework of Schulz von Thun. I also present an account of the meaning of a slur inspired by Nunberg and Hess, combining the ideas of expressive commitment with a version of Nunberg’s ventriloquistic implicature, assuming with Whiting that slurs are *expressive of* a negative attitude, but do not *express* it.

**Keywords:** slur, *Piefke*, expressive meaning, Schulz von Thun, expressive commitment

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I will investigate the slur ‘*Piefke*’, used by speakers of Austrian German against Germans from the Federal Republic of Germany (and especially, inhabitants of the Northern realms of Germany). A sample interaction illustrating a (strengthened) version of the use of the slur can be seen in figure 1, translated in (1):

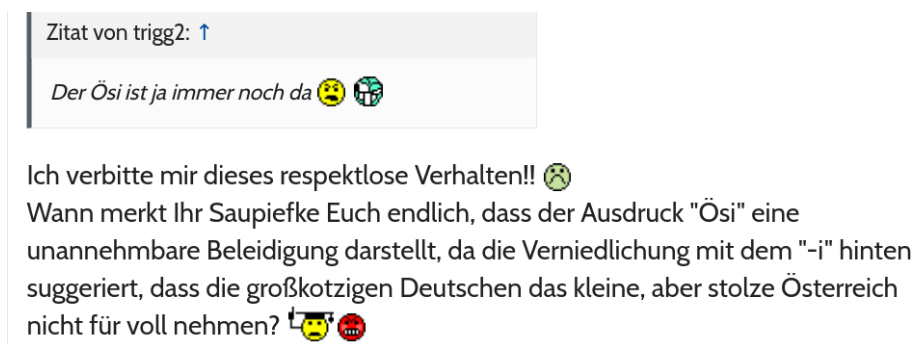


Figure 1: An Austrian interacts with Germans on a Gaming Forum

- (1) a. The Ösi ist still here.  
b. I won’t tolerate this lack of respect!!  
When will you Saupiefke finally realize that the expression “Ösi” is an intolerable insult, since the belittlement with the “-i” at the end suggests that the pretentious Germans do not respect the small, but proud Austria?

The interaction starts with a reference of some German to an Austrian as an ‘*Ösi*’,<sup>2</sup> which is interpreted by the Austrian as a sign of lack of respect. The Austrian’s reaction contains the

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the audience at *Sinn und Bedeutung* for their comments and suggestions for improvement. I am particularly indebted to Daniel Gutzmann and Todd Snider. All errors and omissions are mine alone.

<sup>2</sup>‘*Ösi*’ — as pointed out in the reaction by the Austrian — is transparently a hypocorism (an abbreviation of ‘*Österreicher*’, ‘Austrian’, just as ‘*Susi*’ wrt. ‘*Susanne*’). As far as I am aware, there are very few ethnonyms

slur ‘*Saupiefke*’ (literally, ‘pig-Piefke’), and he spells out one negative characteristics stereotypically associated with Germans in Austria, namely their pretentiousness.

Slurs may seem at first sight a rather frivolous object of linguistic enquiry. However, these terms have sparked many wide-ranging debates in linguistics and philosophy in recent years. One of the major dividing lines concerns the origin of the derogative component of the slur: ‘content-based approaches’ (cf., e.g., Gutzmann, 2019; Davis and McCready, 2020) situate this component within the semantics of the slur, whereas (broadly construed) *pragmatic* approaches assume that derogation arises from the avoidance of a more neutral linguistic form, as for instance Nunberg (2018); Bolinger (2020); Hess (2021). Bolinger (2020: 25f.) convincingly argues that content-based approaches to slurs require us to abandon individualistic approaches to language-individuation in the traditions of Chomsky and Davidson.

Second, it has been debated whether slurs are denotationally equivalent to their non-derogatory form. In a hybrid logic formalization inspired by Davis and McCready (2020: 65), the meaning of ‘*Piefke*’ could be stated as follows:

$$(2) \quad \llbracket \text{Piefke} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \text{german}(x) \blacklozenge \wp : \langle e, t \rangle^\alpha \times t^s$$

Accepting (2) entails that the derogative part (represented here as  $\wp$ ) is somehow part of the (lexical) semantics of the term, and also, that the extension of ‘*Piefke*’ is the same as the extension of ‘*German*’. This, however, is not obviously the case: To an Austrian, a *Lederhosen*-wearing and tobacco-snuffing Upper Bavarian with a tuft of chamois hair on his hat is at least a more marginal examples of a Piefke than some random person from Hannover. Similar observations with respect to other slurs have been made by Croom (2013); Burnett (2020), and these scholars have concluded that denotational equivalence does not obtain (at least, not in all cases).

Third, there is the issue of the basic function of slurring. The dominant position seems to be that slurs primarily serve to derogate the slurred group (cf., e.g. Meibauer, 2016). However, Technau (2016) argues that this simple picture needs to be amended, and Nunberg (2018) argues that the primary function of slurring concerns the identity-management of the slurring group.

Finally, one question that may be relevant is whether all slurs have the same properties with respect to the criteria named above. In principle, these criteria are logically independent, and different slurs might combine these criteria in different ways. In the current paper, I will mostly try to avoid any commitment to wide-ranging commitments; my main contribution will be to study how different contexts of use may contribute to the interpretation of a slur by the hearer, especially with respect to the endorsement of the negative stereotype associated with the slur by the hearer, and what kind of semantics could satisfy both cases of endorsement and non-endorsement.

Now, what exactly is a slur? Davis and McCready (2020) propose the following definition:

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that have hypochoresitic version of this type: there is ‘*Ami*’ (from ‘*Amerikaner*’, inhabitant of the United States of America), and ‘*Ossi*’ and ‘*Wessi*’ for East and West Germans, respectively. Other ethnic groups seem to lack such terms (e.g., there is nothing like ‘\**Franzis*’, ‘French’; ‘\**Englis*’, ‘English’; or ‘\**Polis*’, ‘Poles’).

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- (3) An expression *e* is a slur if
- a. *e* semantically invokes a complex which can be used to derogate a particular group
  - b. the derogation of that group functions to subordinate them within some structure of power relations supported by an actualized *flawed ideology*<sup>3</sup>
  - c. the group is defined by an intrinsic property (e.g., race / gender / sexuality /abledness)

The definition in (3) seems to be devised with slurs targeted toward minorities (e.g., ethnic or sexual) within a given society. (3b) only applies with difficulty to slurs against citizens of foreign countries not living in the same society (e.g., slurs against the French, Germans, Russians, etc.), and especially at times where there were no robust supranational organizations. One of the main claims of the present article is that there is no need to invoke such a condition, and that at least some slurs — like ‘Piefke’ — arose in contexts where it seems obvious to assume a loss of superiority in a power relation.

Nunberg (2018) assumes that slurs are part of a wider class of terms he calls prejudicials. According to him, slurs are derogative prejudicials that

- (4) [...] convey unwarranted contempt for the members of certain socially sensitive categories (typically race, ethnicity, class, nationality, sexual orientation, or religion)

I will use in this paper rather Nunberg’s definition, which avoids commitments as to the origin of derogation, and to power relations of the slurred vs. slurring group.

For the purposes of the current study, focussing on identity-management by slurring, the slur ‘Piefke’ has some advantages: First, slurring with *Piefke* is comparatively unpoliced in Austria. Second, it serves an important ideological function in Austria, since differentiation with respect to Germany (and Germans) is an important part of Austrian national identity (cf., e.g. Wodak et al., 2009; Godeysen, 2010; de Cillia et al., 2020). The demarcation against Germany may be (or have been) in part opportunistic — for instance, in the characterisation of Austria as the first victim of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich, rather than a willing accomplice — but is clearly strongly emotional for at least some Austrians. Media (both [tabloid] print and the Austrian national broadcaster ORF) often play with anti-German animosity (especially in the context of sports) — or at least did so in the past (see Godeysen, 2010: 135, 158). All this makes ‘Piefke’ a good candidate for studying the identity-management aspect of slurs.

## 2. Historical background

In order to understand the slur and its current use and function, we will need to have a look at the historical background of Austro-German relations. While Austria today is a political backwater outside of Germany proper, and its inhabitants do not see themselves as ethnic Germans, this has not always been so, and is in fact quite a recent development.

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<sup>3</sup>*Flawed ideology* is a notion taken from Stanley (2015); it corresponds to an ideology that stands in the way of seeing/knowing the truth.

## 2.1. Austro-German relations

Austria sees itself as the central successor state to the Habsburg Empire, with which it shares its capital, Vienna. The Habsburgs provided from 1273–1806 (with some minor interruptions) the Emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, and ruled over the single most powerful domain within the Holy Roman Empire. Even after the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, Austria remained a European great power until the end of WWI; first as the Austrian Empire (1804–1867),<sup>4</sup> and then as the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918).

After the Napoleonic Wars, the German Confederation (1815–1866) was still headed by Austria. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of (German) nationalism, there were two competing visions of how politically, German Unification should be achieved: i) the Great German solution (*‘großdeutsche Lösung’*), which corresponded to a unification including and under the direction of the Austrian Empire; and ii) the Little German solution (*‘kleindeutsche Lösung’*), which aimed at a unification excluding the Austrian Empire, and under Prussian leadership. The revolutionary Frankfurt Parliament of 1848 voted for the latter version, but the Prussian king refused to accept the crown, so this undertaking did not come to fruition.

The issue was definitively decided in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 (and the Battle of Königgrätz), where Austria was decisively defeated. This defeat led to the removal of Austria as a competitor of Prussia in German affairs, and to the creation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867. In 1871, the German Empire was declared, excluding Austria.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, German-speaking populations in the Habsburg monarchy generally saw themselves as ethnic Germans (if they did not identify with their regions, such as Styria, Tyrol, etc.), and after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, a majority of Austrians wanted to join Germany — which was however forbidden under the peace treaties of Versailles and Saint-Germain. In the beginning, the name of the newly declared republic was even *Republik Deutschösterreich* (litt., *Germano-Austria*).

The idea that Austrians form a nation different from Germans only gained popularity after WWII — during which Austria was for the first time politically united with Germany under the Nazi regime. It was only in the 1970s that a majority of Austrians identified as belonging to an Austrian nation (see Bruckmüller, 1994: 15). In 2007, 82% of Austrians saw themselves as belonging to an independent nation (cf. Bruckmüller and Diem, 2020: 81); this number has diminished since (merely 73% in 2019), but not as a consequence of a regression to a pangerman identity, but rather as a result of a growing identification with Europe (especially among urban dwellers and the age group between 26–39).

Summing up, Austrian identity split off from a common German identity, and it did so very recently. The political history of the Austrian state in the last centuries is one of steep decline (1867 and especially 1918), and the eviction from German hegemony was the result of repeated military defeats and subsequent settlements imposed from outside, rather than the consequence of internal political choice.

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<sup>4</sup>There is some overlap between the proclamation of the Austrian Empire in 1804, and the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. The creation of the Austrian Empire was a direct reaction to the proclamation of Napoleon as emperor of the French; the abdication of Francis II as Holy Roman Emperor followed the creation of the Confederation of the Rhine, which entailed *de facto* the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire.

## 2.2. The origin and history of the word *Piefke*

*Piefke* is a proper name, of Slavic origin, related to ‘*piwo*’ (beer) (see Godeysen, 2010: 22), and used to be especially common in Silesia — which ironically, as noted by Godeysen (2010: 23), used to be Austrian until the Prussian conquest by Frederick the Great.

A character named ‘*Piefke*’ rose to literary fame in the *Biedermeier*-period (1815-48), where the name designated most often a rebellious representative of the *petite bourgeoisie* — generally viewed negatively (Godeysen, 2010: 24ff.). This character was not particularly related to Prussia or linked to any particular German region, but was rather characterized by and looked down upon because of his social class. *Piefke* in this use was stereotypically associated with negative properties like vanity and smugness, and remnants of this still survive in the general German adjective *piefig* ( $\approx$  corny, petty-bourgeois, narrow-minded).

The Austrian slur *Piefke* is a distinctive and subsequent development from this common German base. The immediate trigger of the Austrian development is assumed to be the Prussian military musician Johann Gottfried Piefke (1815–1884). In 1866, he marched at the victory parade in the vicinity of Vienna at the head of his unit together with his brother Rudolf, who measured 1.90m. They seem to have made an impression upon the Viennese who, allegedly, welcomed them with the cry: *The Piefkes arrive!*<sup>5</sup>

## 3. Austrians on Germans and on themselves

If we want to understand how the slur *Piefke* participates in Austrian identity management, we need to have a look at the stereotypes (and especially, hostile stereotypes) Austrians entertain about Germans, and the (mainly positive) stereotypes they entertain about themselves. Jussim et al. (2016: 45) distinguish in the domain of stereotypes about groups *heterostereotypes* — that is, stereotypes about groups one does not belong to — from *autostereotypes* — that is, stereotypes about one’s own group. We should expect autostereotypes as in-group characterizations to be generally rather laudatory.

### 3.1. The German (hostile) heterostereotype in Austria

In order to assess what properties are associated with the slur *Piefke* in Austrian German, we need to find the hostile heterostereotype against Germans by Austrians. The properties in (5) have been collected from the descriptions associated with ‘*Piefke*’ in Godeysen (2010) and Koellen (2016) — in the order they appear in the texts.<sup>6</sup>

- (5) *arrogant* (G11), *herrisch* (bossy; G11), *plump* (ungraceful; G11), *schrill* (strident; G11), *rücksichtslos* (reckless; G11), *laut* (loud; G19) *selbstgefällig* (smug; G19), *angeberisch* (braggy; G19), *überheblich* (overbearing; G19), *erfolgreich* (successful; G19),

<sup>5</sup>See Godeysen (2010: 47ff.).

<sup>6</sup>These characterizations have only been retrieved if they correspond to a stereotypical property of Germans, and not to a property associated with the literary figure *Piefke* or individuals named *Piefke*. *G11* means that the characterization can be found in Godeysen (2010: 11); *K1* means that it can be found in Koellen (2016: 1).

*selbstgerecht* (self-righteous; G39), *siegesgewohnt* (habituated to victory; G39), *forsch* (brisk; G46), *anmaßend* (presumptuous; G46), *großmäulig* (loud-mouthed; G46), *spricht schnell* (speaks fast; G86), *großspurig* (highfalutin; G173), *profitgierig* (avid; G173), *herrsüchtig* (imperious; G173), *humorlos* (without humor; K1), *verbissen* (dogged; K1)

Together, these properties correspond to the German hostile heterostereotype in Austria. Notice that apart from four exceptions ('*laut*', '*successful*', '*habituated to victory*' and '*speaks fast*'), all these descriptions are evaluative words (also known as 'hybrid' or 'thick' terms, see Väyrynen, 2013), containing a negative evaluation.

### 3.2. The Austrian autostereotype (Reiterer 1988: 101ff.)

In order to assess the Austrian autostereotype, we can rely on more direct sources of enquiry, namely a study on what Austrians think that are typical properties of themselves. According to Reiterer (1988: 101ff.; cited from Bruckmüller 1994: 126), the following 23 properties characterize a 'typical Austrian' (in this order):<sup>7</sup>

- (6) 1. *gemütlich* (placid, comfortable, unhurried, jovial) 2. *lustig* (funny) 3. *musikalisch* (musically gifted) 4. *fleißig* (industrious) 5. *tüchtig* (efficient, competent) 6. *hilfsbereit* (helpful) 7. *friedfertig* (peaceful) 8. *höflich* (polite) 9. *intelligent* 10. *kompromißbereit* (ready to compromise) 11. *sportlich* (athletic) 12. *beredsam* (eloquent) 13. *konservativ* (conservative) 14. *mutig* (brave) 15. *mittelmäßig* (mediocre) 16. *genügsam* (frugal) 17. *schön* (beautiful) 18. *großzügig* (generous) 19. *risikobereit* (ready to assume a risk) 20. *schlampig* (sloppy) 21. *streitsüchtig* (quarrelsome) 22. *teilnahmslos* (apathetic, lethargic) 23. *grausam* (cruel)

As expected, the Austrian autostereotype regroups mostly positive characteristics, whereas the German heterostereotype is rather negative. Although this list is more than 30 years old, it probably still captures quite well the more positive sides of the Austrian national autostereotype.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.3. Relatedness Austrian autostereotype vs. *Piefke* heterostereotype

In the last two sections, we have seen that Austrians have a highly flattering opinion of themselves, whereas their vision of Germans is more critical. Beyond the simple finding of in-group

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<sup>7</sup>I have not found a more recent list of properties typical of Austrians; the subsequent questionnaires I am aware of did not ask such a question.

<sup>8</sup>A comment is in order with respect to some of the properties listed towards the end: a few properties are rather unexpected in their negativity (e.g., *quarrelsome*, etc.), whereas some characterizations strike me as rather peculiar, and maybe related to the time of inquiry (notably, *beautiful*). This list was published in 1988, and so, data has probably been collected in 1987 or 1988. It so happened that in 1987, an Austrian, namely Ulla Weigerstorfer, won the *Miss World* beauty pageant. The presence of *beautiful* in the list may thus be simply a case of basking in reflected glory. Similarly, the inquiry was conducted during the presidency of Kurt Waldheim, which prompted (at least on the left) some reevaluation of Austria's past during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich — which may be related to some of the less-than-favorable characterization towards the end.

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bias and out-group derogation, is there anything important going on here? The observation is the following: what Austrians appreciate in themselves, and what they object to in Germans, are very often intertwined. Therefore, the Austrian autostereotype is related (by opposition) to the hostile German heterostereotype. If we reorder some of the characterisations here, this becomes quite obvious:

	Austrian Autostereotype	Piefke Heterostereotype
(7)	gemütlich	dogged
	funny, humorous	without humor
	peaceful	imperious, habituated to victory
	ready to compromise	bossy
	polite	arrogant, loud-mouthed, brisk, strident, presumptuous, loud, overbearing

The way Austrians see themselves is thus in a clear relation with the German heterostereotype, and the slurring against *Piefkes* fulfills an important role in Austrian identity management. This can probably be explained historically, since we would expect that a new-found identity needs to be delimited against what it emerged and separated from (which is here a very negatively seen vision of the German national identity).

It is again striking that the majority of predicates (both on the left, as on the right side of the table) are thick terms (that is, intrinsically evaluative; positive on the left, negative on the right).

Notice also the similarity of this opposition with stereotypes of *old money* vs. *nouveau riche*, where the (declining) old money is associated with superior levels of cultural competence and good manners (see the central importance of politeness in the Austrian autostereotype), as opposed to the successful, but still unpolished new money. This is probably at least in part related to the political decline of Austria, as opposed to the political ascendance of Prussia/Germany.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.4. Slurring as identity management

One of the main ideas by Nunberg (2018: 253) on slurs on general (and also by (Croom, 2013: 190f.) on appropriated uses of the N-word) is that the central function of slurs is that they contribute to the identity management (cf. Goffman, 1990) of the slurring group:

[...] the focus on the offensiveness of slurs tend to obscure what is usually their primary *raison d'être*. [...]

If we want to know what a slur is *for*, we'll need to ask first what it conveys about the members of the group that it belongs to — its speakers, rather than those that it targets. Those people may use a slur in direct address to put someone it targets in their place,

<sup>9</sup>This is not the full explanation. Some parts of the autostereotype go back much further than the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The topos of the peaceful Austria (and Austrians) as opposed to more aggressive other powers goes back at least to the Barock age, as is attested by the following Latin distichon:

(i) bella gerant alii, tu felix Austria nube  
nam quae Mars aliis, dat tibi diva Venus  
'May others make war, you happy Austria wed; since what Mars gives to others, you obtain from Venus'  
Source: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix\\_Austria](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Austria)



it's true, but the words are far more often used for other reasons: to create solidarity in a common sense of resentment or superiority; to enjoy the complicit schoolyard-variety naughtiness in using forbidden words, particularly in the form of racial or homophobic humor; or to underscore the normative values of the group. [Nunberg 2018: 253]

If we take Nunberg's lead, the central question becomes: What does the slur *Piefke* tell us about Austrians, and their identity management? The main answer here is that an Austrian using *Piefke* highlights their Austrian-ness, in opposition to German-ness. In more technical terms, Germans are the (negative) value-expressive reference group (see Park and Lessig, 1977: 103) for Austrians — which is not the case in the other direction: Germans do not define their identity with respect to Austrians, and therefore, Austrians are simply irrelevant to the management of the contemporary German identity.

An important observation is that the use of this slur clearly contains strong elements of resentment, which tend to flair up particularly in contexts of zero-sum interaction like football, e.g., the so-called *Miracle of Córdoba*, a legendary, but pointless victory of Austria against Germany in the FIFA World Cup 1978, but also more recently during the UEFA Euro 2008.

We can reformulate the general pattern by abstracting away from this particular case: in using a slur about some group  $G$ , a speaker stresses the difference of  $G$  from their own in-group  $G'$ .

(8) Effect of Slurring on Identity Management

By using a term  $S$ , characterizing a group  $G$ , and which is associated stereotypically within a group  $G'$  with negative evaluative predicates  $\{\text{neg}_0, \dots, \text{neg}_k\}$ , a speaker belonging to  $G'$  intends to characterize themselves (and possibly the group  $G'$  they identify with) as having the opposite positive evaluative predicates  $\{\text{pos}_0, \dots, \text{pos}_k\}$ .

The effect formulated in (8) as such is not new: there is a well-known trope that anti-homosexual slurring in men serves to assert (and reassure themselves of) heterosexual virility (see, e.g., Pascoe, 2005; Nunberg, 2018). I will assume for the moment that this effect is pragmatic, and that a slur about  $G$  points indexically to stereotypical properties associated with members of  $G$ ; we will come back to this issue in section 5.

A few words are in order about the particular framing in (8). Group stereotypes generally contain positive *and* negative components (and negative components — stripped of their negative evaluative component — can point to something positive). If we strip away the negative evaluation of the Austrian *Piefke*-stereotype, one can take it to refer to a successful 'Get-Things-Done' type of person, even if this person does not respect social niceties as well as they probably should (at least, in the eye of the negatively predisposed observer).

If we talk about identity management in the slurring group, we need to make sure that these positive aspects of the slurged group do not enter the picture, and that they do not stain or obscure the positive properties of the autostereotype. For instance, we clearly want to avoid the consequence that by using *Piefke*, an Austrian could convey that Austrians are *feckless* or *lazy* or afflicted with other properties one could obtain by putting a negative spin on being *gemütlich* or *peaceful* or *ready to compromise*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Notice, however, that such a negative stereotype against Austrians seems to exist in Germany, as is attested by the occurrence of expressions such as *Ösi-Dösi* ( $\approx$  sleepy Austrian), as for instance in this article from the notorious German tabloid *Bild*.

#### 4. Identity management by slurring in Schulz von Thun's theory of communication

In this section, I will show how slurs can be approached in Schulz von Thun's theory of communication. Within this section, I will try to be as agnostic as possible with respect to the exact status of the meaning of the slur, and its mapping to any precise component of the message.

##### 4.1. Schulz von Thun's theory of communication

Friedemann Schulz von Thun (henceforth SvT; born 1944) is a German psychologist, and the creator of a theory of communication inspired by Bühler (1982) and Watzlawick et al. (1967). His principal work is *Miteinander Reden* ('Talking to One Another'; in 4 volumes); unfortunately, it has not been translated into English (or any other language, as far as I know). While SvT is rather prominent in Germany, his work has not been used in linguistics, as far as I am aware.

SvT's theory of communication is of interest for linguists (and potentially also philosophers) because it provides a rather intuitive way of exploring the interaction of meaning components that are often studied in isolation, but which can interact, and therefore their interaction should (at least in my mind) be explored. Firstly, it allows to integrate (3rd wave) sociolinguistics (see Eckert, 2012; Burnett, 2019) into a broadly pragmatic framework of communication, where the interaction of persona-based and content-based inferences can be explored. Second, it also allows to explore the interaction of persona-based inferences and "facework" (see, e.g., Samra-Fredericks, 2010; Croom, 2013) — which are ultimately based on Goffman (1990).

I will present here a slightly modified version of what SvT presents in Schulz von Thun (1981). My modifications are proposed in a spirit of clarification of his intent, and his original thinking.<sup>11</sup> In this paper, I will concentrate on his vision of a *message*, and will not be able to do justice to other aspects of his theory.

SvT assumes that *every* verbal message consists of 5 submessages, as is illustrated in figure 2. The submessages can be seen in a way integrating persona-based sociolinguistics as follows:

- (9) a. Factual content  $\approx$  (at issue) content
- b. Self-revelation: speaker persona<sup>12</sup>
- c. Other-projection: hearer persona
- d. Relation: the relation between speaker and hearer
- e. Call  $\approx$  Ducrot's argumentative goal

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<sup>11</sup>For a more extensive discussion of SvT and an English presentation of his theory of communication targeted at linguists, see Schaden (2021). The main difference between the presentation here and Schulz von Thun (1981) is that SvT depicts his messages as squares, and not as pentagons. However, he insists on the fact that his *relation*-side should be seen to contain a message about the hearer (the *you*-message), and a message about the relation with the speaker (a *we*-message; (see Schulz von Thun, 1981: 183)). My depiction of the message as a pentagon is only a graphical recognition of this idea.

<sup>12</sup>It is not necessary to interpret the Self-revelation component as a persona (nor the Other-projection). Schulz von Thun (1981) discusses several cases where the self-revelation does clearly not correspond to the expression of a persona, but rather to some much more transient state (for instance *I am tired*, *I am angry*, etc.). However, interpreting Self-revelation as allowing to include a persona makes it possible to integrate 3<sup>rd</sup>-wave sociolinguistics.

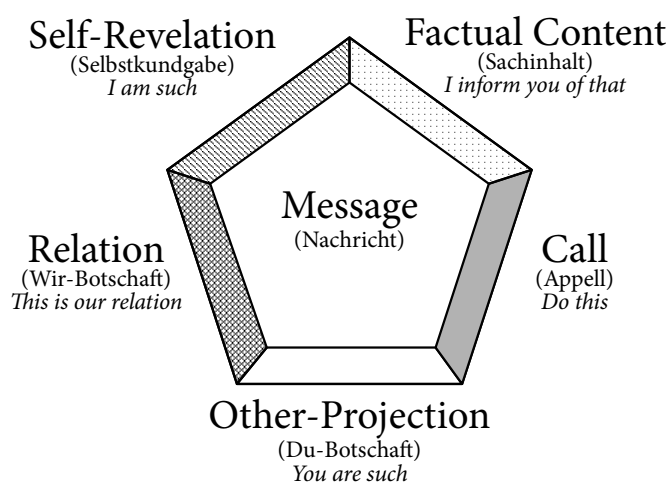


Figure 2: Schulz von Thun's Message Pentagon

In most cases, only the *factual content* is explicitly transmitted; the rest has to be inferred. In the process of inferring, it is important that the submessages end up forming a coherent whole: there must not be any contradiction in the resulting pentagon.

One major point on which Schulz von Thun (1981: 67ff.) insists upon is that the speaker-intended pentagon does not necessarily correspond to the pentagon inferred by the hearer (beyond the *factual content*), and that in a sense, the received message is a '*fabrication*' of the hearer.<sup>13</sup> In this, he joins Hess (2021: 278), who assumes for what he calls 'expressive commitments' of a speaker that they are attributed essentially by the hearer.

I will now apply this theory of communication to the interpretation of slurs.

#### 4.2. The pragmatics of slurs in SvT's framework

The idea I will pursue here — following Nunberg (2018) — is that slurring is about identity management of a speaker. Mostly, researchers assume that the usage of the slur tells us something about the attitude of the speaker with respect to the slurred group (something like contempt, as indicated in (2) above). For instance, Bolinger (2015: 439) writes:

When we use slurs, we communicate information about ourselves and our attitudes towards the targets.

If one applies the communication model of SvT, this simple picture is no longer sufficient: when we use slurs, we communicate information about ourselves, about (what/who/how we think is) the hearer, about (what we think is) our relation with the hearer, in addition to our attitudes towards the slurred group. Crucially, identity management necessarily involves the positioning of the speaker with respect to the hearer, and members of the slurred group may be no more than a vehicle to that effect (namely if the hearer does not belong to the slurred group, see also Nunberg 2018: 289f.). Group membership (or the will to be seen as belonging

<sup>13</sup>Schulz von Thun (1981: 67) literally speaks of the received message as a "*Machwerk des Empfängers*".

to some group) will thus turn out to be extremely important. In SvT's analytical framework, the component of the slur will mostly concern the submessages of *self-revelation*, *relation*, and *other-projection*.

In what follows, we will consider the following four cases, namely where i) speaker and hearer are both Austrians (or, more generally, members of the group who 'owns' the slur)<sup>14</sup>; ii) the speaker belongs to the group of slur owners, but the hearer is a member of slurred group; iii) the speaker is a member of the slurred group, and the hearer belongs to the slur owners; and finally iv) both speaker and hearer are members of slurred group (which corresponds to a context of appropriation). More marginal cases that I will not discuss here involve cases where either speaker or hearer belong neither to the group of slur owners nor the slurred group.

We will have now a look at these types of configuration one after the other.

#### 4.2.1. Case 1: Speaker and hearer are members of the slur-owning group

Let us assume that in a sentence, spoken by an Austrian to a fellow Austrian (where it is common knowledge that they are both Austrian), the word '*Piefke*' is used. In such a context, both the *factual content* of the utterance and the *call* could be pretty much anything, depending on the precise utterance. However, the three remaining sides of the message-pentagon will have to contain something like the following:

- (10) a. Self-revelation: I am an Austrian (and thus easy-going, humorous, polite, etc.)
- b. Other-projection: You are an Austrian (and thus easy-going, humorous, polite, etc.)
- c. Relation: You and I are equal, and we are united in our superiority to Germans

Thus, by using the slur '*Piefke*', a speaker self-reveals as an Austrian, and highlights the properties in the Austrian autostereotype which are in opposition to the hostile German heterostereotype. The most important element in this first configuration is that the speaker and the hearer both belong to the same group. Thus, any group-based appreciations and depreciation of the speaker will also carry over to the hearer. In this particular case, I will assume that the speaker attempts a boost to their face (see Terkourafi, 2016: 226), which is by their shared group identity also a boost to the face of the hearer. Therefore, there is in principle no direct and intrinsic reason why the hearer should not recognize the speaker's *self-revelation*, and refuse its uptake (see Terkourafi, 2016: 230) — at least in this setting: obviously, the hearer may still reject the utterance because of its hostility towards Germans.

This derives then how the use of the slur can prompt or aim at complicity (see Davis and McCready, 2020).

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<sup>14</sup>Following Nunberg (2018: 289f.), I will use the term 'slur owner' for the group in which the slur is endemic, that is, in case of *Piefke*, the slur owners are the group of Austrians, etc. I use the term of 'slurred group' to denote what Bolinger (2015) calls the 'target' of the slur, that is, the group denoted by the slur.

4.2.2. Case 2: Speaker is a member of the slur-owning group, and hearer is a member of the slurred group

We will operate here with the same idea as before: using ‘*Piefke*’ makes salient the Austrian autostereotype, by opposing it with the hostile German heterostereotype. This will thus lead to the ingredients of the message pentagon as follows:

- (11) a. Self-revelation: I am an Austrian (and thus easy-going, humorous, polite, etc.)
- b. Other-projection: You are a German (and thus arrogant, without humor, overbearing, etc.)
- c. Relation: I am superior to you (in character), I am better than you

The basic aim of the use of the slur, as far as the speaker is concerned, may simply be the same face boost as in the communicative interaction discussed in section 4.2.1, without *necessarily* being a conscious attempt at subordination, as proposed by Davis and McCready (2020). However, since the addressee is here a member of the slurred group, it will probably be taken as a face threat by the hearer – who will then most probably also refuse to take up the *self-revelation* and *relation* aimed at by the speaker. The *other-projection* attempted goes against the desire of a hearer to maintain a positive self-image (once aspect of which is to see themselves as being *benefactant*, that is, benevolent and effective, see Greenwald, 1980: 605). The received message pentagon (that is, the pentagon inferred by the hearer), will thus probably contain something along the following lines (assuming nationality still to be salient):

- (12) a. Self-revelation: I am an arrogant and obnoxious Austrian
- b. Other-projection: You are a German
- c. Relation: I am acting as if I were superior to you

This is one way of adjusting the hearer-inferred message pentagon in a way to preserve a positive self-image, but also coherence of the global message. However, other ways of adjusting the message pentagon are possible.

Assume a setting where speaker and hearer know each other well and are close friends. If the speaker is sufficiently confident of the friendship with the hearer, the *relation* submessage may be the anchor which will put the rest of the message in a more positive light. In this way, the use of ‘*Piefke*’ may then be attempted as a (risky) way of caricaturing Austrian attitudes towards Germans (and thereby distancing from these attitudes). Technau (2016: 194,215) mentions the use of a slur as an in-group marker, and thus, of a close relationship between speaker and hearer.<sup>15</sup>

Notice thus, that even in situations where a member of the slur-owning group interacts with a member with the slurred group, there is no necessity for the speaker to endorse the negative attitude, or for the hearer to interpret the speaker as endorsing the negative attitude. The framework of SvT provides a way of understanding this process as depending on what element of the message will be adjusted to obtain a globally coherent message.

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<sup>15</sup>Notice that in some circumstances, slurs have evolved to full-fledged discursive in-group markers, as for instance Mexican Spanish *güey*, as argued in Kleinknecht (2013).

4.2.3. Case 3: Speaker is a member of the slurred group and the hearer belongs to the slur owners

As was already the case in section 4.2.2, there may be different types of scenarios playing out in this particular kind of setting, depending on the existing relation between speaker and hearer. I will illustrate here two of them. What probably will be stable across different settings will be the submessages of *self-revelation* and *other-projection*, which should be as follows:

- (13) a. Self-revelation: I am a German (and I am aware of the Austrian Autostereotype and the hostile German heterostereotype)  
b. Other-projection: You are an Austrian (and thus aware of the Austrian autostereotype and the hostile German heterostereotype)

Notice that we do not want the *self-revelation* and the *other-projection* in the mind of the speaker to necessarily endorse the Austrian autostereotype and the hostile German heterostereotype:<sup>16</sup> However, the (competent) use of the slur requires at least some awareness of what these stereotypes are. Assume for the sake of the argument a context where a German engages in some activity that goes against the German hostile heterostereotype, such as telling a very dark and sarcastic joke in a context where an Austrian is present, and where the Austrian gives some kind of positive feedback on this. A possible reaction of the German could then be something like (14):

- (14) Nicht schlecht für 'nen Piefke, nicht?  
Not bad for a Piefke, TAG?  
'Not bad for a Piefke, isn't it?'

The German speaker of (14) clearly does not want to convey that Germans are arrogant and lack a sense of humor (they performatively demonstrated this to be false in this context), or that Austrians are polite and funny, etc. However, the use of '*Piefke*' only makes sense with respect to the background of these stereotypes.

Such contexts (like also the appropriation contexts dealt with in section 4.2.4 below) are *a priori* not obvious to treat in content-based approaches to slurs, but Ritchie (2017) developed a theory that can deal with it by positing ambiguity. I will come back in section 5 on whether such uses really require to postulate ambiguity, or how a semantically integrated meaning of contempt could be stated in a way as to avoid ambiguity. However, it seems obvious that pragmatic theories of slurs apply to such contexts in a much more straightforward way.

What differentiates different scenarios in this setting is then located on the level of *relation*. Assume that there is no preexisting relation of friendship or trust between speaker and hearer. In such a case, a *relation* like the following is a good candidate to be inferred by the speaker:

- (15) Relation 1: People like you (i.e., Austrians) have a history of smearing people like me (i.e., Germans)

This will possibly be associated with the *call*: "You should feel guilty/ashamed for that", and therefore, we will get the effect of *accusation* of the slur owner by the member of the slurred group, as stated in Davis and McCready (2020).

<sup>16</sup>We should not exclude the endorsement of the stereotypes by a speaker belonging to the slurred group either, but it certainly does not seem the most natural interpretation.

However, once again, if there is a preexisting relation of trust and/or friendship, the *relation*-submessage might be inferred as follows:

- (16) Relation 2: We are close friends, and I am not conforming to the hostile German heterostereotype by performing a very un-Piefke demonstration of sarcastic, stereotypically Austrian humor

Once again, this kind of interpretation assumes that the *relation*-side of the message is stable, and that other submessages will have to be altered in order to achieve a coherent message pentagon. This particular *relation* will also performatively demonstrate a self-revelation as a German who does not correspond to the hostile German heterostereotype, and to some degree, possesses or has taken up properties that are associated with the Austrian autostereotype.

#### 4.2.4. Case 4: Both speaker and hearer belong to the slurred group

Once again, this configuration might in principle play out in several different versions. *Appropriation* of the slur by the slurred group would fall into this category — however, at least as far as I am aware, *Piefke* has not been appropriated.

Let us first consider an example like (17) that could occur among Germans in Austria, without requiring a full-blown appropriation:

- (17) Die Ösis mögen ja die Piefke nicht.  
the Ösis like yes the Piefke not.  
'Austrians dislike the Piefke'

Assuming (17) to have been uttered by a German to a fellow German, in this case, *self-revelation* and *other-projection* could be something like the following:

- (18) a. Self-revelation: I am a German (and I am aware of the Austrian Autostereotype and the hostile German Heterostereotype)  
b. Other-projection: You are a German (and you are aware of the Austrian Autostereotype and the hostile German Heterostereotype)

Like above, we do not want to presuppose endorsement of the slurring component by a speaker belonging to the slurred group. A plausible *relation* might be the following:

- (19) Relation: We are fellow members of the embattled group of Germans

The complete message pentagon might then contain the *call*: “*we should help each other*”, and thus, constitute a plea for *solidarity*, as assumed in Davis and McCready (2020).

#### 4.3. Summing up: interaction, group membership and slurs

As we have seen in this section, a major challenge in accounting for slurs is that a speaker does not necessarily need to endorse the negative stereotype associated with the slur, even though this may be the case. Furthermore, the respective group associations or memberships of speaker and hearer, as well as their relationship status, are important with respect to the question of whether

the speaker will be interpreted to buy into the negative stereotype (see, e.g., Burnett, 2020). On the other hand, a speaker's intention is notorious as to not mattering much in the interpretation of a slur: even if a speaker asserts that 'I do not mean anything negative by using slur', this is not a good defense against accusations of bigotry against the slurred group. This has led to the observation that '*there are no idiolects*' with slurs (see Nunberg, 2018: 242). Thus, the negative stereotype seems to be somehow intrinsically associated with the slur, without, however, being always attributable to the speaker using it, and it does not seem to be possible to attribute it to the linguistic sign (see, e.g., the discussion in Bolinger, 2020). The question is: how can these seemingly contradictory requirements be integrated into a single account? In section 5, an attempt is made at satisfying these requirements.

### 5. Expressive commitments in slurring

In what follows, I will try to address the semantics of a 'mature' slur, by taking advantage of the difference between what a word *expresses*, as opposed to what it *is expressive of*. This distinction originates from the philosophy of aesthetics (see, e.g. Ridley, 2005), and holds that if something is *expressing* an emotion, it reveals the state of the person whose expression it is. However, if something is merely *expressive of* an emotion, it does not reveal the state of the person whose expression it is. Like Whiting (2013: 366), I will assume that slurs are *expressive of* a negative attitude towards the slurred group, but that they do not *express* a negative attitude. This intuition will be formalized by combining the idea of a *ventriloquistic implicature* by Nunberg (2018) with the idea of expressive commitments from Hess (2021), and cast this in a way inspired by Faller (2019).

The basic idea of Nunberg's ventriloquistic implicature is that slurs are sociolinguistically associated with speakers that are prejudiced against the slurred group. According to Nunberg, by using a slur, a speaker 'impersonates' such a prejudiced speaker, and thus, their attitudes. While agreeing with the basic approach, Hess (2021) criticizes the way Nunberg develops the idea, as being too similar to markedness implicatures. The problem Hess (2021: 269) sees with the idea of the slurring effect being the effect of a markedness implicature is that even for bigoted speakers, the slur must remain the marked choice in order to provoke any inferences, which is not obviously the case, since such speakers would use by default the slur rather than the neutral equivalent — which would then end up being the marked expression, and would give rise to implicatures. Thus, Hess proposes to replace the idea of a ventriloquistic implicature with the notion of expressive commitment, inspired by Brandom (1994). I take an expressive commitment to be a commitment of some person with respect to an attitude the person holds towards a set of objects, and technically, I take the expressive commitment to be a set of propositions.

According to Hess (2021: 273), expressive commitments are i) independent from assertoric commitments ii) always by default attributed to the utterer of the expression [which is not necessarily appropriate, as we have seen in section 4.2, or at least, requires working out exactly what one means by *default*] iii) ubiquitous. Concerning the last point, Hess (2021: 272) discusses the opposition between the words '*terrorist*' vs. '*freedom fighter*': these expressions may be denotationally equivalent in many contexts, but provide very different (moral) perspectives and associations on their denotata: negative for '*terrorist*'; positive for '*freedom fighter*'.



By using words entailing such perspectives and associations (which are not part of the at-issue content), a speaker incurs justificatory commitments: in other words, a speaker must be able to justify why they used this specific expression, rather than another one, if challenged by their interlocutor. In slurs, the justificatory commitments concern the question of how the use of the slur (here: ‘*Piefke*’) is justified as opposed to the more neutral descriptive term (here: ‘*German*’). I will adopt this way of thinking about the expressive content of slurs. However, one does not need to dispense with Nunberg’s idea of ‘speaking as if’.

The basic idea I will formalize below is the following: slurs do come with expressive commitments, but they are not attributed by default to the speaker, but to the (prototypical) slur owners (in this, the present idea is similar to Nunberg’s). However, by using a slur in a context where the descriptive counterpart would have been possible, a speaker acquires a justificatory commitment with respect to the appropriateness of the slur in this peculiar communicative situation. The endorsing of the negative stereotype is one way of satisfying this justificatory commitment, but not the only one.

More formally, I assume that using a slur triggers the discourse rule *present-slur* in (20), which is heavily inspired by the **present** operator by Faller (2019: 31). Informally, by using a slur, the speaker puts on the ‘communicative table’ the negative stereotype  $\Sigma$  associated with the slurred group.

(20) **present-slur**(slur,  $a$ ,  $K_i$ ) =  $K_{i+1}$  such that

- a.  $T_{i+1} = \text{push}(\Sigma, T_i)$
- b.  $EC_{p,i+1} = EC_{p,i} \cup \Sigma$
- c.  $JC_{a,i+1} = JC_{a,i} \cup \Sigma$

where  $K$  is a discourse structure,  $\Sigma$  is the set of propositions characterizing the negative heterostereotype associated with the slur (in our case: *Germans are arrogant, ...*),  $T_i$  is the conversation table at round  $i$ ;  $EC_x$  stands for an expressive commitment of  $x$ ,  $JC_x$  stands for a justificatory commitment of  $x$ .  $p$  is the principal;  $a$  is the animator.

(20) depends on some model of dialogue and interaction, such as for instance the dialogue gameboard model of Ginzburg (2012). It also requires a distinction between several different types of *speaker*, as operated by Goffman (1979: 17), where the *animator* is the person who produces the utterance, whereas the *principal* is the person whose beliefs are represented by the words that have been uttered. (20a) states that the negative stereotype  $\Sigma$  is pushed upon the table or dialogue gameboard (though not as at-issue content), and contains now  $\Sigma$  additionally to whatever were its contents before. (20b) states that the expressive commitments of the *principal* are updated with  $\Sigma$ ; (20c) states that the justificatory commitments of the *animator* are updated with  $\Sigma$ .

The basic idea here is that the expressive commitments brought about by a slur semantically concern the negative stereotype  $\Sigma$  associated with the slur. The important point here is that this expressive commitment is not attributed directly to the animator (that is, the one who utters the sentence containing the slur), but to some principal, possibly different from the animator. I suggest that the principal in case of a slur is the prototypical slur-owner (in our case, the prototypical Austrian). In principle, the animator merely inherits a justificatory commitment: they must be able to justify why they put the slur and its associated negative stereotypes on the table; however, it does not require the animator to endorse  $\Sigma$ . Of course, one of the justifications

to table  $\Sigma$  might very well be that the author in fact does endorse it, but this is not necessary. In this way, I have provided a formalization of the idea by Whiting (2013) that slurs are *expressive of* a negative attitude towards the slurged group, without necessarily directly *expressing* it.

(20) also incorporates the observation by Croom (2013) that slurs do not only express generic detestation and contempt towards some category of people, but are based on a set of prototypical properties - the negative stereotype  $\Sigma$ . In our specific case, by using the slur '*Piefke*', an Austrian does not express contempt against Germans *qua* their being Germans; the contempt concerns Germans because they correspond to  $\Sigma$ , that is, because they are arrogant, overbearing, without humor, etc.

This way of conceiving of the basic meaning component of slurs resolves the problem of their non-derogative uses (though probably not the cases of appropriation), without having to postulate ambiguity. It retains the basic 'quotative' flavor of Nunberg's analysis, but it is no longer associated with an implicature, and so, it is not susceptible to the arguments against it by Hess (2021).

The analysis proposed here nevertheless is still able to explain why an Austrian using the slur '*Piefke*' will probably still be inferred to endorse the negative German heterostereotype. The idea is the following: unless a hearer has knowledge of the speaker indicating that endorsement of the negative stereotype is unlikely or not the case, a very good explanation for the justificatory commitment of using the slur is that the speaker does indeed endorse the hostile heterostereotype. It also explains why slurring is a good way of identity management in the in-group (here: of Austrians): since the expressive commitment is attributed to the stereotypical member of the slur owners, endorsing the hostile heterostereotype entails presenting oneself as a stereotypical member of the slur owners, and signaling to other fellow members of the group that "*I am one of you*". The present analysis has also one interesting corollary, which is as far as I am aware rather at odds with most of the existing literature on slurs: the in-group signaling is predicted to be especially reliable and valuable if the slurged group is powerful (and especially, relatively more powerful than the speaker's in-group), since the social cost for the speaker rises with the (negative) power differential.<sup>17</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have provided a description of the Austrian German slur '*Piefke*', and of the stereotypes associated with its use: the hostile German heterostereotype and the Austrian autostereotype. The main descriptive point was that the Austrian autostereotype is related by opposition to the hostile German heterostereotype, and that this enables the slur to function as a device of identity management within Austria.

On the more theoretical side, I have provided an analysis in the framework of Schulz von Thun (1981) of the pragmatics of possible uses of the slur within different configurations of group affiliations of speaker and hearer. I also tried to show how one can provide a unified semantic

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<sup>17</sup>With respect to '*Piefke*', this was arguably the case during the period 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich. According to Godeysen (2010: 91ff.), accounts of the Gestapo report that in Vienna, Germans were often insulted (among others) as '*Saupiefke*', and several people were imprisoned for up to a year for insulting Germans as '*Piefke*'.

analysis of the slur, based upon an idea by Whiting (2013), and using elements of Nunberg (2018), Hess (2021) and Faller (2019).

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