

Slurs as Signal and Symptom

Trevor Bloomfield

In this essay I try to link Derek Hook's interpretation of Žižek's reading of Lacan of racial resentment as a kind of *jouissance* or enjoyment to what Christian Fuchs terms an ideology of hate. In my view, slurs are instances of subordinating speech partially to dehumanize targets but primarily function to signal and deploy ideology. The enjoyment racists derive from using a slurring term from a key feature of the offensiveness of a slurring term.

My objective is two-fold. I intend to (1) outline and argue for the enjoyment account of subordinating speech as an improvement upon prohibitionist accounts of slurring terms offensive content and (2) illustrate how slurs function in a libidinal system to reproduce and reinforce ideology. An enjoyment account of subordinating speech depends upon an interpretation of Lacanian concept of *jouissance* and symptom, supplemented by Hook's libidinal object.

Challenges to this endeavor are many. Both *jouissance* and ideology appear to be simultaneously empty and opaque, but I will illustrate these are features that will prove useful to us later. There is the risk of collapsing into an individual psychologism, though the model may prove useful in illuminating future accounts of subordinating speech.

The enjoyment account of subordinating speech enjoys many benefits to previous theories, namely in correctly identifying racial resentment in instances in contested acts of slurring and acknowledging the subjectivity of speakers of slurs.

INTRODUCTION

Where some theorists have agreed that the use of slurs is prohibited in virtue of being on a list of banned words, I claim a presuppositional account of slurs locates their origin in prohibitions as presuppositions regarding a subject's relation to the other. Niza Yanay makes a parallel claim in *The Ideology of Hatred*, placing prohibitions as the integral feature of subject formation. Based on Freud's notion of the unconscious, Yanay posits the *political unconscious* as the region of "speech that denies itself" which form the kernel of the site of oppositions that constitute the subject (53). These oppositions are animated by power structures of the dominating ideology, founded upon the law of repression. What is repressed is the unthought demand for love refused by a prior prohibition. These prohibitions are the bigoted subject's unrecognized and veiled desire for the Other that emerge from the unthinkable question of which national discourse revolves - "What if I become like the Other?" (33). I claim these presupposed prohibitions form the basis of the fear of annihilation reaction implicit in the messaging of hate speech.

ENJOYMENT ACCOUNT OF SUBORDINATING SPEECH

What is *jouissance*? While a particular definition would necessarily fill a shelf and then some, for our purposes we shall use the condensed formulation offered by Hook. *Jouissance* is a painful arousal of the "erotic appeal of overstepping boundaries". It is excess, or more precisely, "the appeal of excess matched only by the thrill of doing what we shouldn't" (Hook, 10).

What makes *jouissance* an effective/affective mark in locating the offensiveness of slurs? The excessive nature or 'guilty pleasures' of *jouissance* separate it from mere gratification. Indeed, as Hook notes, "The deliberate transgression of polite social norms entails a kind of reflexive appreciation of its own offensiveness" (13) which is seen in the delight of racists. *Delight*, under free association, recalls a *loss* of illumination, or a *blinding*. Similarly, Yanay notes, "Laughter is one way to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy" (45). Slurs are not unlike very distinct laughs in that they represent a relation to the structure of enjoyment, in that for one to 'enjoy' the joke, one must be 'in' on the joke. In the same way, to understand a slur is to understand what make it offensive.

While laughter is undirected, language has divided laughter in a way that it is always oriented towards an object. One need to look no further than the common question “what are you laughing *at*?” To laugh *for* one’s enjoyment invites curiosity from the subject, especially a subject unacquainted with the yelps, guffaws, and chuckles of the other. However, in situations where a subject hears this ‘non-sense laughter of the other’ is interpreted by the subject as not only undeserved enjoyment but stolen, specifically, the other has stolen the enjoyment of the subject (Hook, 2). One easily finds examples of bigots complaining about the sound, tone, accent, and so on of an other. It is a moving target because it is not about any of those features in particular, but “something in them that isn’t them” (Hook, 16). That ‘thing’ is the enjoyment of the other, the reified libidinal object of the subject.

THE LIBIDINAL OBJECT

Hook makes use of a mode of jouissance, the libidinal object, which structures the enjoyment of the subject around the protection of the most sacred ideal. What is the libidinal object? For Hook, it takes many forms but represents the highest ideal for an individual within a community. reproduced in list form below:

1. It is an emblem of potency and value
2. Constituted by signifiers of desire and desirability
3. A source of narcissistic pleasure
4. In danger of being snatched away

To a sufficiently bigoted subject, the language they speak qualifies as an example (and, in fact, English is the one that Hook uses) of 1-4. The tools of communication of the protection of a shared idea, of which slurs fit in virtue of their service to an ideology, become reified as commodities to be deployed in the reproduction and maintenance of the subject’s fear of annihilation or loss. The imagined loss is made real by explicit prohibition of the words that *signify the other*.

As Hook points out, the symptom only stays in place as long as the subject is unaware of its structuring effects (45). Therefore the bigoted subject position is temporary, contingent upon the ignorance of the subject. The contingency of the bigoted position answers handily how people can both abandon resentment to a point but can also repress resentment within the same mechanism of enjoyment. The bigot will transform the libidinal object to another signifier.

Interesting here is the marking quality of slurs that inscribe upon the speaker an *identity of not-G* (Stanley, 148). This *inside/outside* distinction constitutes the very boundary of group dynamics. How this boundary is grasped by the subject and the other depends upon their respective positions. Here, Hook’s concept of *convexity* illustrates the imposition of the other.

Hook claims what we hate in the other is the “convexity of the subject’s lack” (17). Restated, it is reified, materialized lack possessed by the other. The lack of the subject is the difference and interface between subject and other. The term ‘convexity’ is apt if only for the implied concavity of the subject in response to the imagined infringement from the other’s sphere of influence. Because the subject cannot love the object and the object cannot love the subject, what appears is a failed love in the form of hate.

WHAT IS HATE?

Yanay claims “hatred is a forceful embodied experience, and even when not always admitted and spoken, it is felt, projected, and acted upon” (33). She continues, stating that hatred “carries a *message*”. That message is the ideology which constitutes and conceals the class relations implicit and explicit to the deployment of subordinating speech. Hence, why the undertone of slurs demands the target to “know their place” irrespective of actually being the target of the slurring term.

The disregard of the truth conditions of slurs is interesting here in that it further confirms slurs as functioning in relation to their effects, namely in construction and concealing the class relations of ideology (Yanay, 44).

Consider the following example, where G signifies a slurring term

[1] There better not be any Gs here!

A view also shared by Lynne Tirrell and Elizabeth Camp, [1] serves distinctly as a warning and a signal to the attitudes and beliefs of the speaker of [1] who explicitly declares a region in space better if they were to not find anyone who fits (or rather, reveals) a refused class relation between a speaker of subordinating speech and an other. implicitly, here the slur functions as a *demand for* the other and a *demand of* the other. These demands precipitate from ideology and are rooted in fantasy.

FANTASY IS A PARADOX OF POWER

Yanay locates the nexus of conflict lay in the subject's relation to the desire of the other (37). Hatred presupposes love. That is to say, as human subjects we want to love and we want to be loved. Loving another makes us dependent upon the other. However, hating another makes us dependent upon an other. Both options usurp upon the power of the subject, thus giving rise to the appearance that the other 'has something that isn't them' and that the subject has lost something, stolen by the other.

Yanay reveals the paradox driving the fundamental fantasy undergirding political power - to control another, one must depend upon another to control (37). This dependency of the controller upon the controlled has the repressed consequent that no one is actually in control. Yanay writes, "The denial of attachment creates symptomatic relations which revolve around repeated prejudices, misrecognitions, and failures of communicative language" (37). These failures of communicative language result in the bigoted subject's prejudices impressed upon the targets of hate-speech. They are symptomatic in the sense of *representing something else* other than the slur's extension out in the world and signal a cluster of properties consequently associated with the speaker of a slur. In other words, slurs are symptomatic of an ideology of hate.

Fuchs states that "Ideology is a strategy of reproducing domination and exploitation that operates in the realms of communication, culture, psychology, emotions, and beliefs (217). Fuchs echoes Georg Lukács point that ideology functions to conceal and justify the veiled relation between people (217). Slurs function to delight the community of speakers who use them thus blinding them from the effects of ideology and the associated subordinating speech.

Bianca Cepollaro characterizes derogatory content of slurs as not merely presupposed but *imposed* upon the audience (para. 23). What is important here is the uncontested feature of that which is imposed. Imposition is stronger than an assertion in virtue of an imposed object cannot be cancelled by a speaker, rather, the object can be received or blocked by the audience or retrieved by the speaker.

RECURSIVE RESENTMENT

Cepollaro differentiates slurs from stereotypes in dint of promoting discrimination as a given (para.24). for the bigoted position, discrimination is assumed. Racial resentment is found to be self-generating in an ideology of hatred. Wielding a slur invokes socio-historical relations. Consider the following example of a bigoted response of [2] to reappropriated slurs, from stubborn speakers who continue to use a slur upon being engaged for their use a slurring term G

[2] "why can they say G but I can't?"

[3] (They have taken something from me)

From the subject position of the bigot, a belief in [3] follows from [2]. reappropriative slur utterances confirm their presuppositions that the other *has taken something* from the bigot. The bigot can no longer explicitly say G.

Even in reappropriating use cases, an out-group target speaker of a slurring term will distance themselves from their use, as if to 'trade places' with the original. While this may seem as an instance of reification of the slur, appropriation is a better strategy to mitigate the effects of subordinating speech than meeting a slur with silence. To intervene interrupts the flow of signification and introduces a new demand.

PROBLEMS WITH ENJOYMENT

The enjoyment account of subordinating speech does not arrive unmarked. Jouissance is such an excessively expansive category it risks losing all meaning. However, this is a feature of jouissance that ensures it as a sociologically useful variable. Hook claims this serves a dual purpose of moving beyond the objection of psychologism (22).

BENEFITS OF JOUISSANCE

The enjoyment account offers robust explanatory power. Hook points to two advantages of framing subordinating speech as a kind of enjoyment: (a) identifying the libidinal component of bigoted speech and (b) admitting that the racist *enjoys* slurring (13).

The enjoyment account also allows for the responses of the self-flagellating subject, or one who uses a denigrating term to refer to themselves and accepts the scripts associated with that term. the Prohibitionist account would offer no recompense to why a self-flagellating subject would engage in self-destructive behavior, whereas a theory of enjoyment may locate it in their contradictions.

Prohibitionism fails to account for subject position of reappropriated utterances of slurs. Wthe If a slur is deemed a slur in virtue of being on a list of banned words, there is no possibility for distinction in use, particularly non-derogative uses like pedagogical utterances. In effect, prohibitionism is an extension of an ideology of hatred in its strategy to silence.

Works Cited

- Cepollaro, Bianca. "Slurs as the Shortcut of Discrimination", *Rivista di estetica*, 64 | 2017, 53-65.
- Fuchs, Christian. "Ideology." *Communication and Capitalism*, vol. 15, University of Westminster Press, 2020, pp. 217-34. JSTOR, *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/j.ctv12fw7t5.13.
- Hook, Derek. "Racism and Jouissance: Evaluating the 'Racism as (the Theft of) Enjoyment' Hypothesis." *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, vol. 23, no. 3, Sept. 2018, pp. 244-66. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, doi:10.1057/s41282-018-0106-z.
- Yanay, Niza. *The Ideology of Hatred: The Psychic Power of Discourse*. Fordham University Press, 2013. JSTOR, *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/j.ctt13wzxqm.