Slurring Individuals
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Abstract
This paper explores the functions and features of nicknaming practices, with a particular emphasis on their capacity to derogate and establish power differentials within a group. Upon analysing data from ethnographic and psychological studies, this investigation argues that some pejorative nicknames, due to their capacity to foster unjust forms of intra-group hierarchies, can function analogously to slurs. That is, expressions which target social groups singled out based on gender or ethnicity and which, among other features, elicit deep offense autonomously from the speaker's intentions and irrespective of whether the term is used or mentioned within speech-reports. Building upon this premise, the paper proposes a unified theory that posits both forms of verbal aggression as indexing multiple dimensional qualities such as "negative valence", "neutral arousal," and "high dominance" rather than unique discrete emotional categories such as "contempt" or "anger" and contends that the expression of high dominance states within social interactions is at the root of their capacity to warrant offense. Moreover, the paper translates this hypothesis into a Bayesian model of sociolinguistic variation, drawing inspiration from Heather Burnett's pioneering work on identity construction. This new approach not only accounts for slurs and nicknames' uniform offensive profile but also situates pragmatic reasoning within a psychologically grounded framework for the interpretation of emotional signals.
Keywords. Slur – Nickname – Expressive – Emotion – Indexical Field – Variation

> *Derogatory, generic names for ethnic groups in historical American English, or in the language of any plural society, serve social uses of informal social control in the speech community similar to those that personal nicknames serve in smaller groups. (Allen, 1988, p. 217)*

1. Introduction

Users of any language know that verbal forms of aggression can be as varied and multifaceted as non-verbal ones. Within the realm of disparaging expressions, slurs are standardly considered the category with the most pernicious impact. Slurs are defined as expressions targeting individuals singled out on the basis of socially relevant attributes such as race (e.g., "Spic"), religion (e.g., "Kike"), or gender (e.g., "faggot"). When employed as weapons, they overtly convey speaker's derogatory attitudes towards those affiliated with these categories. However, unlike other types of derogatory expressions, slurs aptly transform into tools for silencing, oppressing, and ultimately, dehumanizing members of social groups. Hence, their utterance provokes offense in those who find unjust forms of inter-group dominance relations detrimental to society.

Despite the particularly scornful denigration they perpetrate, investigations into slurs' offensiveness have been often developed by juxtaposing them with other forms of verbal aggression. Hom (2012), for instance, asserts that both slurs and adjectives like "damned" or "fucked" derive derogatory truth-conditional meanings externally from social institutions. Jeshion (2013), in turn, argues that slurs conventionally express speaker's affective states in a manner analogous to their neutral counterparts when modified by expletive adjectives (e.g., "Spic" vs. "fucking Hispanic"). Bolinger (2017), in contrast, asserts that slurs' offensiveness, although more severe, ultimately arises through pragmatic mechanisms similar to those governing the use of impolite and rude speech. In a similar vein, Nunberg (2018) contends that slurs' offensiveness derives from conversational mechanisms resembling those underpinning the use of expressions that disparage individuals for their occupations, behaviours, or political orientation.

Except for a few tangential mentions, however, the relationship between slurs and pejorative nicknames has remained largely unexplored. Pejorative nicknames, like other types of nicknames (e.g., pet-names), are expressions that modify or substitute individuals' given names. Hence, they are intricately interwoven to an

individual's personal history, social interactions, and beliefs within close-knit communities, across familiar or professional spheres. Despite their transient nature, anthropologists and social psychologists have meticulously collected qualitative and quantitative data regarding nicknaming practices across various cultures and settings, employing methodologies such as interviews, participant observation, and data analysis. This body of research provides an empirically grounded outlook on this form of verbal pejoration, thus facilitating a meaningful comparison to slurs.

Upon synthesizing this data, this paper argues that slurs and pejorative nicknames possess analogous offense-generation patterns and, what is more, the same discursive function within the speech networks where they circulate. For instance, both slurs and pejorative nicknames can be "reclaimed", i.e., be the subject of processes whereby targets opt to embrace their pernicious sobriquets. Moreover, in some circumstances, such as in the context of high-school bullying, pejorative nicknames have the capacity to convey that targets are inferior or unworthy of respect, thereby inflicting enduring and profoundly negative psychological harm upon their individual targets. In these cases, nicknames effectively function as slurring terms, thus reinforcing intra-group, rather than inter-group, dominance relations.

Building upon this premise, the paper develops a unified theory. This theory posits both forms of verbal aggression as indexing multiple dimensional qualities such as "negative valence", "neutral arousal," and "high dominance" rather than single discrete emotional categories such as "contempt" or "anger" and contends that their capacity to express speaker's high dominance states within social interactions is at the core of their capacity to provoke offense. Moreover, the paper translates this hypothesis into a Bayesian model of sociolinguistic variation, drawing inspiration from Heather Burnett's (2017, 2019) pioneering work on identity construction. This new approach not only accounts for slurs and pejorative nicknames' uniform offensive profile but also situates pragmatic reasoning within a psychologically grounded framework for the interpretation of emotional signals.

2. Nicknames, a multiplex phenomenon

Detailed ethnographic examinations of nicknames have predominantly focused on rural settlements across the globe. Within these, the small number of surnames, combined with rigid naming requirements, leads to a replication of real names within the same population (Brandes, 1975; Butkus, 1999; Glazier, 1987). Dorian observes, for instance, that in Gaelic communities "official names were virtually nonfunctional (…) for the simple reason that too many people had the same name" (1970, p. 305). Hence, at first sight, nicknaming practices are perceived as emerging for practical purposes of identification. Yet, upon closer observation, it quickly becomes clear that nicknames can assume a variety of functions within the speech networks in which they occur.

Indeed, following Pitt-Rivers (1971), numerous anthropologist regard nicknames as a means of upholding social control within a community (Gilmore, 1982; Holland, 1990). By subjecting socially undesirable traits or behaviours to ridicule, nicknames serve as educators as to appropriate norms governing social behaviour. This function transcends cultural boundaries. For instance, Mashiri (2002) notes that the Shona people largely rely on nicknaming practices to delineate "inappropriate or excessive behaviour, uphold cultural ideals and politely rebuking deviant behaviour or personalities." (p. 34). Collin and Bricker (1970), in turn, observe that Zinacantecos deride those whose appearance or behaviour deviates from the accepted norms. And, as Glazier (1987) observes in an immigrant Jewish community, nicknames serve as reminders that, regardless of an individual's wealth or success, any attempt "to put on airs" will ultimately prove futile among peers.

However, nicknaming practices abound on contradictions. Nicknames, it is observed, can either connote the speaker's closeness to the subject or constitute a manifestation of deep-seated animosity (Tait, 2006). On the one hand, within a close-knit community, nicknames operate as an intimate mode of address, opposed to the more distant, official nomenclature (Lele, 2009). Skipper (1986), for example, found that highly derogatory nicknaming among coalminers serves as a mechanism for solidifying one's affiliation with a group, thereby enhancing "solidarity of the work group so necessary for both production and survival in the coal mines." (1986, p. 145). On the other hand, however, nicknames are wielded as weapons strategically employed in specific situations to steer individuals back towards conformity or, in the event they already adhere to societal norms, to ensure their continued compliance (Antoun, 1968). As Adams (2009) points out, nicknames carry a "verdictive force": by bestowing a pejorative nickname, the coiner asserts their prerogative to appraise the target negatively and rank them low within a social interaction. It is this phenomenon that we shall delve into further now.

2.1. Nicknames that derogate individuals

2.1.1 Dorian (1970)

In her study of a Gaelic community, Dorian (1970) reports that nicknames (or "by-names") can be broadly categorised as "descriptive" or "nonsensical". The former category encompasses nicknames with discernible meanings or etymological origins. These may allude to distinctive attributes of the individual, such as their physical appearance, personality traits, or behavioural idiosyncrasy. Among these, some are overtly derogatory and thus "painfully pointed". An effeminate man, for example, was branded as "Johnnie Lassie", and an individual who has experienced bedwetting in childhood was christened "Spootie lsputil". In contrast, nonsensical nicknames appear to have either no lexical content or no apparent connection with the individual to whom it is ascribed. Terms such as "Fildy" or "Nogie" fall within this classification.[1]

However, the offensiveness of nicknames is often orthogonal to their descriptive connotations. Apparently complimentary nicknames can harbour derisive undertones, particularly those aimed at humbling the individuals for their pretensions to lordly bearings or special talents (e.g., "The King", "The Laird", "The Bard", etc.). Similarly, nonsensical nicknames, lacking any descriptive connotations, may or may not be offensive. Whereas "Fildy" and "Nogie" are reported to cause offense, "Dodgey" and "Bebban" are not. Therefore, the appropriate use of nicknames requires deep knowledge of communities' social structure. As aptly articulated by the author:

> "Learning to use the bynames is a problem of establishing the offensiveness or inoffensiveness of each byname, a quality that is not always inherent in the by-name but may vary with the identity of the speaker and the designee. That is, for each by-name of (for example) the nonsense variety, one must ask "(in)offensive to whom?' and "(in) offensive from whom?" (p. 306)

Hence, nicknames' offense can vary as follows:

1) *Target-variation*: targets may or may not take offense when reminded of a particular attribute (e.g., red hair, a lame leg, etc. Having a father who worked as a cobbler might be a source of pride to one individual but a source of shame to another.
2) *User-variation*: whereas some individuals, often close friends, can use nicknames with impunity, the same usage from a younger or unfamiliar person is likely to be met with resentment. Informants who supplied the by-name "Cut" for another villager, for example, noted that they themselves would not address him by that name but that individuals closer in age and friendship can.
3) *Context-variation*: additionally, those interviewed assert that the offensiveness of a nickname is not only neutralized in contexts where the user and the target are close acquaintances, but also when the appropriate intonation is used.

Subsequently, the author describes speaker's "lack of innocence" when using pejorative nicknames. Speaker's noticeable ignorance of the offensiveness of a nickname doesn't block its harmful impact. English speakers, who are outsiders to the Gaelic community, often find themselves in difficulties when they try to imitate the linguistic customs of their Gaelic-speaking acquaintances. Some "use all the by-names indiscriminately as the functional equivalents of official names or nicknames until they are brought up sharply by anger or laughter, depending on whether the misused by-name is offensive or inoffensive" (p. 316). The absence of malevolence does not suffice as grounds for exculpation, a norm that applies to even to the author herself: "I had heard one Golspie man called nothing but Nogie (…). I had no idea, until I referred to him that way in what turned out to be his brother-in-law's house, that he, and on his behalf his family and close friends, objected to the by-name." (p. 305).[2]

2.1.2 Gilmore (1982)

Similar to Dorian (1970), Gilmore draws a distinction between descriptive and nonsensical nicknames. In his study of an Andalusian village pseudonymized as "Fuenmayor", the former category often comprises labels that ridicule target's snobbery such as "Pepe 'el de la Clase Media'" (Joe Middle-Class), and gender-reversing insults

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[1] It is noteworthy to observe that while nicknames may be descriptive in nature, their referent is not necessarily determined by whoever "fits" the description (Jeshion, 2021). This phenomenon becomes evident in situations where nicknames are extended from one individual to their offspring. Antoun (1968), for example, reports of various individuals within an Arab village identified by the nickname "Sevener," a term derived from a common ancestor who was born prematurely in the seventh month.

[2] Dorian (1970) also points out that derogatory nicknames, apart from causing offense, serve to enhance solidarity among those who employ them. A speaker tends to use pejorative nicknames exclusively with those who share with them the "critical, patronizing, or otherwise socially distanced attitude that the byname inevitably expresses toward the man or woman it attaches to" (p. 313).

such as "Maripepa Caramelo" (Little Miss Caramel), used in reference to a man with a high-pitched voice. Nonsensical nicknames, in turn, can have effects stronger than those of their descriptive counterparts: for instance, an individual christened with the nonsensical nickname "Matruco" achieved notoriety in the town for his furious and unrestrained displays of temper upon hearing the word.

Additionally, nicknames can also be categorized based on whether they arise as distortions of given names or not: an individual with the middle name "Hermogenes" is called "Er Mogenes" (Er being Andalusian for 'El') and "Los del Catalino" are descendants of a woman named "Catalina", considered an unusual name in Fuenmayor. In all these instances, Gilmore observes, "meaning" is irrelevant. Even when the descriptive element of the nickname denotes a neutral attribute, such as the target's birthplace (e.g., "El Sevillano"), they can be viewed as deeply derogatory due to the generalized impression that it "cheapens" the individual, overshadowing all other aspects of their identity.

Subsequently, Gilmore emphasizes the ambivalent value of nicknames, whose utterance simultaneously constitute "a joke and a slight" (p. 693). The mere articulation of a nickname engenders satisfaction to everyone present but the target himself, who becomes the object of public amusement. Simultaneously, the utterance inescapably wounds the recipient. In this context, however, nicknaming signifies more than "simple rejection" by the community. Rather, it poses a threat an individual's sense of control, an attempt to subjugate them by conveying that it is not them, but the community, to decide for their public image. Among men, in particular, nicknames are perceived as assaults a "kind of symbolic castration" (p. 697). This may explain, according to Gilmore, the intense outbursts that many people exhibit in response to hearing them.[3] Nonetheless, such displays of anger are often futile. Interviewees, in fact, declared that their use of nicknames is enhanced by the knowledge that the nickname provokes a strong reaction on the bearer.[4]

2.1.3 De Klerk and Bosch (1996)

Numerous ethnological studies are set in small-scale peasant villages, thus raising questions about the applicability of their dynamics to different contexts. As Brandes (1975) posits, for nicknaming practices to effectively exert its social control function, an agreement among members of the community regarding what constitutes right or wrong (or "moral unity") is essential. Consequently, the integration of nicknaming practices into the fragmented design of urban life may appear doubtful. Nevertheless, evidence shows that nicknaming practices manifest across various settings, urban and rural alike, insofar as social relations within them are "primary, face-to-face, and multifaceted" (Glazier, 1987, p. 84).

De Klerk & Bosch (1996) study of nicknames among South-African adolescents stands as representative. Like Gilmore (1982), the authors distinguish among nicknames which are transformations of an individual personal name (e.g., "Furry": "my name is Jennifer, which became furry") or replacements thereof (e.g., "Sput": "he was born when Sputnik was in the news a lot"). Of particular relevance, the authors emphasize the usage of gendered nicknames, which are those that are applied based on prevailing social norm or ideologies. Within this category, one finds "objectifying" nicknames such as "Sexy Ankles". These labels, by drawing attention to specific attributes of the bearer, influence perception and foster false expectations grounded in gender-role stereotypes. This suggests that nicknaming practices among schoolchildren can effectively serve as "instruments of the social control of personal appearance and personality projection" (Starks et al., 2012, p. 136).

In De Klerk & Bosch (1996)'s study, interviews also unveiled that grounds for disliking a nickname don't reduce to a single factor but are variegated. The reasons mentioned by interviewees included the perception that the name was derogatory (e.g., "Ndludlu": "when I was young I was fat, but I don't like it because it doesn't sound good"; "Gofor": "my older brother always tells me to get things for him ... makes me sound like his slave"), a distaste for the nickname based on "social" reasons, like it no longer aligning with the individual's identity (e.g., "Tomqi": "I am no longer small"), embarrassment (e.g., "Toesie": "I get shy if others hear it"), or a belief that the name is overly childish (e.g., "Kosie": "dis nie goed vir my manlike ego nie" [it's not good for my male ego]).

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[3] Almost every ethnographer working in Mediterranean-Hispanic areas reports incidents of violent responses to nicknames' utterances. Foster (1964), for example, tells of a case in which a Mexican villager knifed a neighbor simply for using his meaningless nickname face-to-face.
[4] Gilmore (1982) also observes that the mere mention of pejorative nicknames during interviews elicited emotional reactions: "I was warned against using the names openly because most people take offence." (p. 693). Participants were generally reluctant to talk about their own pejorative nicknames and of absent third parties as well, thus indicating that the pejorative character of a nickname persists when these are not used as weapons.

Finally, the study found that interviewees frequently found themselves uncertain about their stance on when they approved or disapproved of nickname usage, hence indicating their awareness of the strong contextual constraints they impose ("it depended on who used it and in what context", "when I first met him his friends used it and as the friendship progressed I started using it as well"). Lastly, the authors observe that certain nicknames, despite their offensive connotations, are not disliked. This tolerance stemmed from the playful or affectionate effects inherent in their use by particular people (e.g., "Pong": "from the rhyme Inky pinky ponky, daddy bought a donkey--only my brother uses it"). Astonishingly, some individuals actively embrace and propagate their pejorative nicknames. Despite the negative intent behind these nicknames, their uniqueness was perceived by their bearers as enhancing popularity (e.g., "Mandoza": "It's nice to be called differently sometimes").

2.2 Nicknames, name-calling, and bullying

The investigations so far considered have primarily centred on nicknaming practices within specific communities and relatively circumscribed timeframes. Moreover, within the communities under scrutiny, nicknaming emerges as a tool employed to target potentially any individual, be they perceived as a subjugated or dominant community member. Consequently, ascertaining the longitudinal impact of nicknaming practices becomes a challenging task, leaving it unclear whether and to what extent their social and psychological effects may diverge from those of other community social control practices such as gossiping or public censure.

Nonetheless, nickname's longitudinal effects become more evident within the realm of "name-calling", one of the most pervasive forms of bullying. Bullying, following Olweus' framework (1993), constitutes intentional acts of aggressions that are carried out repeatedly and which involve an imbalance of power, either actual or perceived, between the victim and aggressor. This definition encompasses various forms of abuse, including verbal bullying (teasing and name-calling) and physical bullying (physical threats or harm). Of these, name-calling emerges as the most frequently reported (Peterson & Ray, 2006), in particular across junior/middle and secondary school children (Whitney & Smith, 1993). Notably, verbal forms of aggression often escalate into physical forms as well (Boulton et al., 1999) and constitute a major risk factor for poor physical and mental health (Espelage et al., 2013). Long term effects include, for example, higher risk of developing depression and decreased self-stem in adulthood (Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

Thus, within inter-individual dominance relations, imposing undesired labels constitutes a verbal form of aggression capable of having a negative impact on their target's psychological and social well-being. It may be argued, however, that name-calling and nicknaming constitute different forms of verbal aggression. Even though nicknaming and name-calling have been standardly considered a single phenomenon within the literature on bullying, an individual may be subjected to different "names" (e.g., "effeminate", "skinny", "stupid", etc.) without necessarily being associated with a unique nickname (Starks et al., 2012). Therefore, findings regarding the enduring detrimental effects of name-calling may not necessarily be attributed to nicknaming practices.

Yet, calling an individual with a "name" F (as exemplified in vocative constructions such as "Hey, F!") and entirely replacing a target's name with F (as in "F is reading") constitute two phases within the same overarching process. Within this regard, Crozier & Skliopidou (2002) research on the long-term effects of being called names during one's school years appears as relevant. They conducted surveys involving adults, seeking their current views on such experiences. They majority of participants rated the names they had received as moderately, very, extremely, or quite hurtful. The reported age of onset ranged from 4 to 18 years, with a mean of 11.30 years, and its persistence could go from less than one year to between 2 and sex years (71%) to at least 10 years (22%). Importantly, the same expressions tended to be employed by several people rather than a sole person. Among those that also endured physical bullying, half said it was connected to name-calling. All these results were more pronounced for the "most hurt" category, who reported an earlier mean of onset, longer duration, higher incidence of physical bullying, and larger long-term effects on their personality and attitudes than the "moderately hurt". Therefore, this study shows that the most hurtful "names" assigned to a target, owing to factors such as the age of onset, the frequency of usage, and their broad use by various people, operate more like nicknames rather than ephemeral labels employed in the heat of the moment.

2.3 Summary of the data

As observed, nicknames mainly serve as tools of social control, reinforcing established social norms and power differentials. They can be categorized along various dimensions:

- *Descriptive or non-sense*: many nicknames incorporate descriptions, while others remain enigmatic.
- *Derivations or replacements*: they may derive from the target's official name or replace it altogether.

- *Normative or not*: some nicknames exert their social control function by directly appealing to norms regarding gender (e.g., sex-reversal insults) while others not.

It is worth highlighting that no single factor pertaining to a nickname is sufficient to make it offensive. Nicknames can be descriptively positive or neutral, or altogether non-sensical, and yet retain the capacity to inflict offense. Moreover, their degree of offense is modulated by multiple contextual factors, including the identity of the speaker, the situation in which the term is employed, etc. Nicknames have the capacity to offend whether they are used or merely mentioned, whether in a research context or joyful conversations. Crucially, they offend regardless of whether the speaker was aware of the term's offensiveness. However, nicknames can simultaneously enhance affiliation in two ways: i) among friends, where their use is accepted as part of "mock aggression" and ii) among bigots, who assert a common distance from the target, thus promoting a feeling of cohesion and trust among them. Lastly, some nicknames are accepted with a sense of pride despite their negative connotations, mostly when the target wants to underscore their singularity.

3. Comparing Slurs and pejorative nicknames
3.1 Slurs: definition, functions, and offense-generation profile

As mentioned in the Introduction, slurs encompass derogatory expressions aimed at specific groups singled out by collective affiliations such as ethnicity or religion. Thus, in contrast to expressions such as "stupid", slurs target individuals as members of a certain group, not qua individuals on the basis of their appearance, behaviours, or idiosyncrasies. However, the distinction between derogating individuals by virtue of their group membership versus their individuality is not clear enough. To wit, any individual feature may be shared by various individuals that could be bundled up in an identifiable social group (Jeshion, 2013; Diaz-Legaspe, 2020). Consequently, for numerous terms that are clearly derogatory, there is no universal agreement regarding their classification as slurs or personal insults (e.g., "fatso", "whore", "retard", etc.).

Instead, what distinguishes slurs is the "particular moral or political tenor" of the offense they inflict (Nunberg 2018, p. 239). In contrast to other forms of verbal aggression, slurs possess the capacity to "dehumanize" or imply that the target is inferior, thus representing a kind of verbal thoughtcrime. As Jeshion (2017) points out, to dehumanize, slurs need not convey that their targets are subhuman, but "only" that they are beneath the rest as persons. Given their moral implications, it is irrelevant whether slur's utterance actually elicits offense in the audience. As Bolinger (2017) emphasize, an utterance may warrant, but fail to actually generate offense (owing to circumstances such as the absence of an audience or the audience sharing the same derogatory attitude). What is relevant is that, in such situations, audience members, included the target, are "morally justified" or entitled to act offended regardless of how "hard-skinned" or resilient they are (Diaz-Legaspe, 2020).

Nonetheless, an exclusive focus on slur's offensiveness obscures that fact that slurs are mainly employed in casual or humorous exchanges among bigots. In those contexts, the speaker's goal is to provide pleasure and gratification to their peers rather than to subject their targets to humiliation (Camp, 2013; Nunberg, 2018). Indeed, slurs serve to foster a sense of camaraderie and shared sentiment of superiority, aiming to revel in the schoolyard-style naughtiness of using forbidden words and to underscore the normative values of the group. However, note that both phenomena are not mutually exclusive but can be analysed as two sides of the same coin. In such situations, humour serve as a veil for underlying contempt, with the experienced amusement deriving precisely from the harm inflicted upon the target.

That being acknowledged, which are slurs distinctive characteristics?

- *Autonomy*: with the exception of specific contexts, the offensiveness of a slur remains "independent" of the beliefs, attitudes, and intentions of individual speakers (Hom, 2008). As McCready & Davis (2017) point out, slurring utterances act as "invocations" that produce effects that go beyond, and in many cases despite, whatever intentions the utterer may have had or is inferred to have had.
- *Projection*: the offensiveness of slurs "projects" out of various forms of embedding, including negations or disjunctions (Bolinger, 2017). Saying "There are no Spics living here" inflicts offense towards Latino-Americans even though the slur occurs under the syntactic scope of a negation. However, this description may be construed as presupposing a semantic view of slurs, where their derogatory "content" projects. However, slur's objectionable status also pertains to the mere presence of their tokens. Even when the slur occurs within quotation marks, it can trigger offense (Anderson & Lepore, 2013).
- *Variability*: Some slurs are more insulting than others, exhibiting varying degrees of offensiveness (Hom 2008, Jeshion 2013, Camp 2013, among others). These differences can be classified into different types (Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018): "word-variation", which can be "inter-group" ("Nigger" is perceived as more

offensive than "Chink") or "intra-group" ("Kike" is considered more offensive than "Yid", even though both refer to the same group), and "use-variation", where the level of offense varies across different uses of the same slur, contingent on contextual factors such as the interlocutor's identity, situation, tone of voice, etc.

- *Appropriation*: in so called "appropriated contexts" (Hom, 2008), namely, among members of the derogated group, slurring utterances cease to elicit offense. Instead, they are seen as fostering camaraderie, group-identity, and solidarity (Jeshion, 2013). In some cases, slurs permanently shift their standard negative effect to a positive one, enabling members of external groups to employ the term harmlessly (as exemplified by "queer"). Yet, as Popa-Wyatt (2017) points out, the fact that a slur is used in appropriated contexts doesn't automatically make it inoffensive. It is entirely possible for a gay speaker to use a homophobic term to derogate another gay individual, for instance.

3.2 Pejorative Nicknames, in contrast

Pejorative nicknames seem to lack several attributes associated with slurs. Take, for instance, projection. In a conditional utterance such as "If F studied, then he will pass the exam" (where F is a pejorative nickname), one could argue that "F" still elicits offense towards the individual it references, thus displaying a projective behaviour. However, it remains unclear whether the offense triggered in this scenario arises from the derogatory meaning of "F" or from the fact that it is a name, and thus presupposes the existence of its derogated referent. Additionally, consider nickname's variability. In the studies reviewed so far, there is no evidence to suggest whether two or more nicknames F and G that denote the same individual can differ in terms of their degree of offensiveness. This makes it challenging to determine to what extent nickname's offensiveness patterns with that of slurring terms. [5]

Arguably, one of the most prominent distinctions between nicknames and slurs lies in the fact that the former doesn't provoke the same kind of "moral" offensive associated to the latter. In the hierarchy of offensive language, slurs are placed much higher than other forms of profanity. Thus, even though nicknames may have lasting negative effects on their targets, they may not fundamentally differ from other forms of aggression or disrespect, such as consistently attributing negative traits to individuals (e.g., being lazy or incompetent). Unlike the schoolyard bullies' use of nicknames to taunt the vulnerable, slurs tap into condemnable racial or gender-based social injustices that transcend generations and societies.

3.3 Slurs and Pejorative Nicknames, intermingled

Several scholars have conceived derogatory epithets for marginalized groups as nicknames. For instance, Carter (1944), considers that minority groups in America "have acquired nicknames which have given them a fixed status in their relation to the majority or dominant group" (p. 241). Busse (1983), in turn, observes that ethnic heritage plays a role in the "nicknaming" process of groups, which is employed in attempts to facilitate the control of social and/or cultural "outsiders", i.e., marginalized groups. Furthermore, Allen (1983, p. 309) posits that the creation and use of "generic nicknames for ethnic persons" within the "macrocosm" of society is analogous to the formation and use of nicknames in the "microcosm" of small social spheres, such as among schoolchildren. In a nutshell, both inter- and intra-group nicknaming are observed to contribute to the enforcement of social norms and hierarchies.

These authors were heading in the right direction. Indeed, slurs and nickname's offense-generation profile exhibit remarkable similitudes:

- *Autonomy*: the mere pronouncement of a pejorative nickname can elicit strong emotional responses independently of whether the speaker is unaware of the term's connotations or whether it is used without the intent to cause harm.
- *Projection*: nicknames can be offensive even when merely mentioned rather than used. In interviews, researchers themselves were sometimes forbidden from mentioning certain nicknames. This suggests that, like slurs, their offensiveness is linked to the sheer presence of their tokens rather than their semantic content. Consequently, we can anticipate that the occurrence of nicknames within multiple types of linguistic embeddings will produce similar effects.

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[5] It may also be noted that nicknames and slurs fall into distinct grammatical categories. Nicknames are grammatically similar to the original names from which they derive, so they cannot be pluralized (for any nickname F, it is infelicitous to say "There are many F's in the party") and are non-predicative (for any nickname F, saying "John is F" signals that "John" and "F" are co-referential). In contrast, slurs are typically nouns, and thus can be felicitously pluralized, predicated, etc. However, the class of slurs doesn't constitute a unified grammatical class as well (Sennet & Copp, 2020), as it also encompass adjectives (e.g., "slutty") and verbs (e.g., "to jew"), thus making this grammatical distinction somewhat superfluous.

- **_Variability_**: the majority of studies reviewed indicate that the offensiveness of nicknames is contingent on factors such as who is uttering them, in which situations they are used, and the manner in which they are spoken. Now, "inter-individual" word-variation can be inferred from Crozier & Skliopidou (2002) study, where individuals rated the names they received as moderately, very, extremely, or quite hurtful. "Intra-individual" word variation is not explicitly documented but can conceivably arise in situations where the same individual is assigned different nicknames, with one being more offensive due, for example, to its connotations.
- **_Reclamation_**: nicknames appear to be "reclaimed" at times, embraced by their recipients to enhance pride and build a stronger identity. Although his phenomenon warrants further exploration, evidence suggest that, despite their negative or highly offensive connotations, some individuals opt to embrace their labels to enhance their uniqueness.

It may still be rightly asserted that slurs have historically served as tools of discrimination and atrocities. Therefore, while the harm inflicted by schoolyard nicknaming upon its recipients is undeniable, categorizing such nicknames as "slurs" risks trivializing the efforts of those who fight against deeply ingrained forms of oppression.

However, to really grasp nickname's potential to offend, two factors merit consideration. First, it should be reminded that dominance relations exist not only among groups but also among individuals. Hence, akin to slurs, special attention should be directed towards those nicknames that are grounded on existing oppressing relationships among individuals. Second, akin to slurs, whether or not anyone, including the target, feels actually offended after the utterance of a pejorative nickname remains irrelevant. Nicknames inhabit micro-networks where, for instance, teachers or classmates may fail to take the aggression seriously or exclusively view it as part of verbal play, thus failing to feel offended and respond accordingly. Yet, as seen earlier, nicknames can inflict severe and enduring consequences on their individual targets.

Therefore, it is possible to simultaneously maintain that, at their core, both slurs and nicknames enact the same type of offense, while also recognizing that their perlocutionary consequences can significantly differ. On the one hand, they are grounded on social hierarchies where targets are placed as subordinated. On the other, they operate at different social scales or networks, so it is expected that their perlocutionary effects will exponentially differ.[6]

To illustrate this idea, consider the fact that both slurs and pejorative nicknames are, at their core, "action-engendering", that is, incite other forms of violent actions. Concerning group-based slurs, Tirrell (2012) argues that in Rwanda they were inextricably linked to genocide, not merely a precursor to it. Labelling the Tutsi as "inyenzi" (cockroach) stripped them of their humanity, legitimizing hatred and authorizing killings. Similarly, the numerous studies on verbal bullying reviewed earlier corroborate that some pejorative nicknames often develop into other forms of aggression, particularly physical violence. In small social spheres, too, labels dehumanize their individual targets, rendering it acceptable to inflict harm upon them. Therefore, pejorative nicknames can effectively operate as slurs within the groups in which they circulate.[7]

This revision of the empirical domain sets up the basis for a unified account of the structurally similar offensive characteristics of slurs and pejorative nicknames (henceforth referred to as "slurring tags", for lack of a better name). This unified perspective identifies a single phenomenon that operates at different social scales: the imposition of labels that attempt at assigning a subordinate role within a hierarchy.

4. A unified proposal

Slurring tags are employed by speakers to express a wide spectrum of emotions. In hostile situations, slurring tags express speaker's contempt towards their targets. However, they can also be used privately, in a jocular or camaraderie-inducing vein, to foster a sense of unity among individuals sharing prejudiced views. In all these scenarios, however, slurring tags warrant offense and cause harm. Conversely, certain insults, despite conveying extreme contempt or loathing, are often perceived as unoffensive, especially when targeted at individuals or

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[6] To understand the notion of "scale" in this context (or the social micro- and macrocosms, as Allen terms it), we must take into consideration the material requirements they impose. When it comes to inter-group nicknaming, a discourse network requires the involvement of at least two distinct communities. In contrast, inter-individual nicknaming requires only the engagement of two individuals to bring a network into existence.

[7] Moreover, it is worth noting that the distinctions made earlier with regard to nicknames above can also be readily applied to slurs. Slurs can be either descriptive or non-sensical (e.g., "Beaner" vs. "Kike"), originate from official names or not (e.g., "Jap" vs. "Guido"), and be based on norms or not (e.g., "slut" vs. "Spic") (see Jeshion, 2021, for an in-depth review).

groups holding a dominant position. Moreover, slurring tags exchanged within the targeted group or among close acquaintances can still display derogatory attitudes, without necessarily causing offense.[8]

These observations appear to undermine theories that associate the offensiveness of slurring tags to any affective states that the speaker may be expressing through their use. For instance, Jeshion (2013)'s influential theory of slurs for groups, which posits that all of them are conventionally linked to the expression of contempt, has faced criticism on the grounds that the expression of contempt alone is neither sufficient nor necessary to account for the distinct type of denigration that slurs inflict upon their targets. In essence, an expression can be profoundly contemptuous without thereby qualifying as a slurring tag, and conversely, a slurring tag can convey other emotions (e.g., disgust, amusement, or even admiration) while still being highly offensive. Should we, therefore, conclude that the offensiveness of slurs is altogether independent from the emotions they convey? In the ensuing discussion, I argue that this is not the case.

The proposal that I develop in this section is based on three independently motivated grounds: i) that emotions can be delineated in terms of basic dimensions such as valence, arousal and dominance rather than discrete categories such as "contempt", ii) that affective signs can be linked to these dimensions through an indexical, rather than conventional, perspective of affective meaning; and iii) that lay people infer the underlying states of agents by integrating one or multiple affective cues, including linguistic signs, employing Bayes theorem. In a nutshell, I argue that the core of slurring tags' offensiveness stems from the fact that, unlike other derogatory expressions, they index high dominance affective states. Under this framework, slurring tags index values derived from affective dimensions, but are ultimately interpreted based on what is assumed about the speaker's affective states at the utterance context, using Bayesian updating.

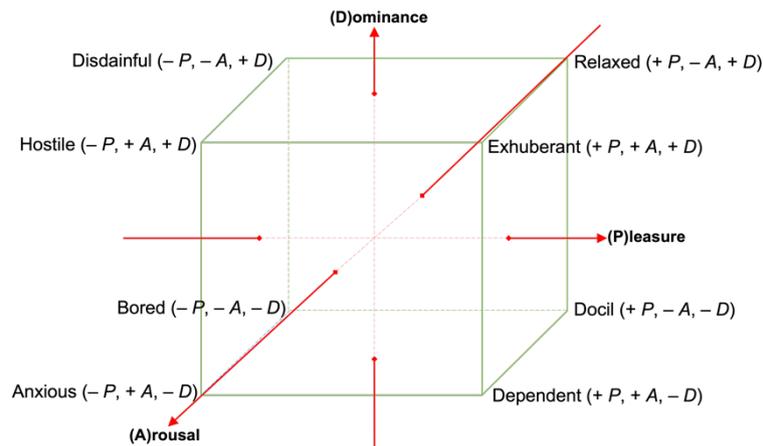4.1 Ingredients

4.1.2 Affective dimensions

Within affective sciences, affective states are not only conceived as discrete categories such as "contempt" or "joy", but also in terms of more basic dimensions. According to Mehrabian and Russell (1974), affective experiences can be measured using the following three orthogonal, continuous, and bi-polar dimensions:

- *Pleasure* (also called "Valence"): this dimension pertains to the emotional experience's hedonic aspect. It ranges from negatively valenced states (e.g., sadness) to positively valenced ones (e.g., joy).
- *Arousal*: this relates to the physiological component and ranges from low mental alertness (e.g., boredom) to high mental alertness (e.g., excitement).
- *Dominance*: this reflects how much control subjects perceive over a stimulus. It corresponds to a scale that ranges from the sensation of being submissive (– D) to the sensation of being dominant (+ D).

Following Mehrabian (1996), all possible combinations of low and high values in each dimension result in eight prototypical temperaments, that is, predispositions to feel in particular ways when the appropriate conditions are met. For instance, as Figure 1 illustrates, hostility corresponds to the [– P, + A, + D] state and anxiety to the [– P, + A, – D] state.

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[8] Similar considerations are applicable to slurs' intensity. The degree of intensity of the emotion expressed can likewise vary, ranging from, for instance, mild condescension (e.g., "You are a nice person, F") to intense hatred (e.g., "You don't deserve to be here, F"), yet still retain its capacity to offend (cf. Camp 2013).

(D)ominance

Disdainful (− P, − A, + D) Relaxed (+ P, − A, + D)

Hostile (− P, + A, + D) Exhuberant (+ P, + A, + D)

(P)leasure

Bored (− P, − A, − D) Docil (+ P, − A, − D)

Anxious (− P, + A, − D) Dependent (+ P, + A, − D)

(A)rousal

Fig. 1 PAD model's space of temperaments adapted from Mehrabian (1996), where all possible combinations of low and high values in each dimension result in eight prototypical temperaments

Affective dimensions can be applied in various ways. As Colombetti (2005) observes, we can distinguish between the valence of an emotion, the valence of the experience of that emotion, and the valence of the aspects or outcomes of such emotion (e.g., its behavioural, physiological, or teleological aspects). Similarly, dominance can assume different roles depending on the context in which the state is elicited. When directed towards a novel situation, it pertains to an individual's perceived capability to overcome a challenge. However, within inter-personal interactions, it assumes a distinct function. To wit, expressions of dominance among social organisms correlate and give rise to measurable dominance hierarchies. In this sense, dominance takes on a comparative, rather than individual, trait of social organisms.

For this reason, dominance has been often characterized as "peripheral" to emotions. Indeed, it has been located as a conative factor, meaning it relates to an individual's motivation to act within an emotional experience. Consequently, it has been debated whether it constitutes a component of "core affect" or not (Russell & Barrett, 1998). Nonetheless, for our current purposes, whether dominance or other dimensions constitute primary or secondary aspects of emotional experiences is irrelevant. What we require is for signs to be linked with values derived from these dimensions, thereby incorporating them as their "meaning". It is to this link to which we now turn our attention.

4.1.3 Indexical fields

How does the link between signs and affective dimensions is established? As previously noted, we can assume that the link between slurring tags and affective states is indexical, rather than conventional. Indexical associations are typically instantiated by variables, that is, contrast sets which include alternative ways of "saying the same thing" (Labov, 1972). They are grounded in the perceived co-occurrence of a sign and some attribute of the speaker, emerging from factors such as co-presence, causality, or other form of spatial or temporal contiguity (Silverstein, 1976).

For example, even though the following utterances have the same truth-conditions, the different ways of pronouncing (ING) have been observed to index different social traits of speakers (Campbell-Kibler, 2005). Specifically, the use of "-ing" tends to be linked with competence (e.g., being educate or articulate) but aloofness (e.g., being formal or unfriendly). Conversely, the use of "-in" tends to be associated with the with being incompetent but friendly:

(1) a. John is fishing.
     b. John is fishin'.

In sociolinguistic terms, the set of qualities associated with a variant is referred to as its "indexical field", defined as a "constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the form" (Eckert, 2008, p. 453). In other words, how variables are interpreted in a context heavily depends on what other properties are believed to hold of the speaker. While some people that employ the "-in" variant can be more

seen as easy-going or friendly, others can be seen as insincere or condescending contingent on listener's background assumptions.[9]

4.1.1 Affective cognition

Yet, how do background assumptions influence affective reasoning? We assume that emotions arise as reactions to specific events. If someone wins the lottery, we assume they are experiencing happiness. However, we also consider other people's beliefs and desires. If we know that the lottery winner views money as useless, our initial inference is defeated. Moreover, we also anticipate that emotions trigger specific types of actions (e.g., fleeing) or expressions (e.g., frowning), and use them during the inference process. Consequently, even though the causal flow from events and mental states to emotions and, in turn, from emotions to expressions and actions is unidirectional (see the arrows in Fig. 2), information can flow in different directions (Hess and Hareli, 2015, 2017; Ong et al., 2015):
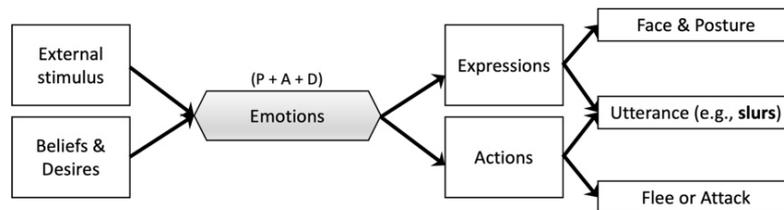
Fig. 2 Lay theories of emotions, indicating the causal flow form emotions' causes to their outcomes (based on Ong et al. 2019). Depending on the situation, agent's utterances can be analysed as "actions", akin to fleeing, or "expressions", akin to facial configurations

One way to represent this flow of reasoning employs Bayes' theorem (Zaki, 2013; Ong et al., 2015, 2019; Saxe and Houlihan, 2017). For example, to infer an individual's emotion "e" after they perform an action "a" (i.e., "P(e|a)", read as "the probability that someone is feeling e based on action a"), we combine the likelihood that the action a is performed given that the agent is experiencing an emotion e (i.e., "P(a|e)") and the prior probability that emotion e occurs (i.e., "P(e)"), and then divide the result by the probability of action a occurring in the first place (i.e., "P(a)"), as shown in the formula below. In more complex scenarios, agents infer an individual's emotion e from multiple cues, such their actions a and expressions "x" (i.e., "P(e|a, x)").

(2)
$$P(e|a) = \frac{P(a|e) \times P(e)}{P(a)}$$

These multiple cues can be either in harmony or in conflict with each other. In cases where cues are in harmony (e.g., after winning the lottery, the subject smiles), both cues reinforce and fine-tune each other. However, when they contradict each other (e.g., when, after winning a lottery, an individual appears sad), interpreters need to rely more on some cues over others. It has been standardly assumed that, across contexts, some cues "dominate" others, e.g., that facial expressions are more reliable than past events. However, evidence suggests that the weight interpreters assign to each cue varies depending on the situation. Sometimes, an individual's body posture or the background scenery can be perceived as more reliable than their facial expressions (Hess and Hareli, 2015; Kayyal et al., 2015).

4.2 Assemblage

How might we characterize the effects of slurs through the lens of the PAD dimensions?

- When a speaker utters a slurring tag, listeners are likely to infer speaker's negative evaluation of its referent or an inclination towards displeasure regarding it. Thus, slurring tags index negative valence.
- Slurring tags can be uttered in both heated and jovial contexts. Hence, slurring tags do not come out as infelicitous in situations where the speaker does not experience strong feelings towards the target. Thus, slurring tags index neutral arousal.

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[9] Note that conventional and indexical contents should not be treated as qualitatively separate kinds of content. Instead, they constitute a "gradient cline between two phases of the same process" (Beltrama, 2020, p. 13). Highly activated indexical associations could be analysed as parallel to conventional content and, conversely, highly context-sensitive conventional associations may be analysed as parallel to indexical content.

- By uttering a slurring tag, the speaker displays that it perceives its referent as lesser, thereby attempting to present themselves as superior in relation to them. Hence, slurring tags index a high degree of dominance.[10]

How can this hypothesis account for the offensiveness of slurring tags? As mentioned earlier, slurs can express emotions of opposite valence and still be regarded as offensive (e.g., they can express contempt towards the target group or amusement at their expense). Nevertheless, in both cases, slurs invariably express that targets are beneath others within a dominance hierarchy. Hence, a multidimensional analysis provides a straightforward account of slurs' offense: as slurs are associated with high-dominance affective states, their utterance warrants offense to those who perceive oppression, or any attempt at oppressing, as detrimental to society. That is, slurring utterances provides moral justification for those who reject unjust forms of hierarchy, either across groups or among members of the same social group, to take offense.

Yet, it might be contended that the expression of high dominance, which involves deeming targets as low in worth, necessarily presupposes the expression of a negative evaluation, thus implying that both aspects cannot be genuinely disentangled. Nonetheless, despite the frequent co-occurrence of high dominance and low pleasure in various contexts, they appear as dissociated in many others. Indeed, it is entirely possible to evaluate an individual or group negatively without conveying that they are inferior as persons (e.g., when characterizing people as unpunctual). Conversely, it is possible to express that someone is lesser than others without negatively appraising them (e.g., as exemplified by the utterance "Chinks are much smarter than us"). Being evaluated as good in some aspect doesn't preclude being simultaneously judged as inferior, and vice-versa.

Now, how can we operationalize affective dimensions in a theory of meaning? Drawing inspiration from Burnett (2017, 2019), I posit a structure ⟨Q,>⟩, where "Q" is the set of relevant affective qualities and ">" denotes relations of compatibility between them (e.g., that an individual cannot be in a [P-] and [P+] state simultaneously, etc.). As noted earlier, slurs don't correlate with a specific degree of arousal, so this dimension is omitted:

(3) Q = {[+ P], [– P], [– D], [+ D]}
    a. [+ P] > [– P]
    b. [– D] > [+ D]

Based on this structure Q, four types of affective states α are derived: the [– P, + D] affective state, labelled CONTEMPT, the [+ P, + D] state, labelled AMUSEMENT, and so forth. Importantly, these labels assemble various discrete emotional categories. For example, CONTEMPT encompasses [– P, + D] states in general (e.g., rage, hostility, etc.), and not solely contempt:

Table 1. Affective states α ∈ aff

AFF	AFFILIATION	AMUSEMENT	ANXIETY	CONTEMPT
α	[+ P, – D]	[+ P, + D]	[– P, – D]	[– P, + D]

Then, I posit that for a given slurring tag F, there is a non-slurring alternative tag F* that references the same target. For example, we assume that pairs such as "Spic" and "Hispanic", or "Furry" and "Jennifer", are such alternatives, with the former term of each pair emerging as a hypocoristic variant of the latter. Note, however, that we don't need to assume that F and F* are fully co-referential or etymologically related; it suffices that they represent salient lexical choices for the speaker within the conversational interaction.

How can we characterize the link between the alternatives F/F* and the affective states α ∈ AFF that they express? Given the instability of slurring tags across utterance contexts, I posit that the link between F/F* and affective states is indexical. That is, grounded on the statistical correlation between the use of F/F* and a variety of PAD qualities, any of which may be activated within a particular context. Specifically, I propose that slurring tags exhibit a stronger correlation with [+ D] states, such as CONTEMPT, as opposed to [– D] states, such as AFFILIATION. To capture these regularities, I assign to F a probability distribution $Pr(F|\alpha)$, which represents the likelihood of

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[10] Why do slurs come to signal high dominance? The answer is as multifaceted as the explanation for why a slur signals negative valence. The indexing of high dominance may primarily arise in situations where there is an arbitrary power imbalance that unfairly determines some or all aspects of the life of a group or individual. However, it can also emerge when such relations are not yet consolidated. An expression can attain the status of a slurring tag when it is perceived by the target as threatening their capacity to autonomously build their own identity (cf. Anderson and Lepore, 2013).

uttering F given an affective state α. In turn, as Table 2 illustrates, the non-slurring alternative F* is associated with the distribution $Pr(F^*|\alpha) = 1 - Pr(F|\alpha)$.[11]

Table 2. Affective-indexical meaning of F and F*

AFF	AFFILIATION	AMUSEMENT	ANXIETY	CONTEMPT
$Pr(F|\alpha)$	0.3	0.6	0.4	0.7
$Pr(F^*|\alpha)$	0.7	0.4	0.6	0.3

Then, I postulate that slurring tags are interpreted based on the listener's prior beliefs regarding the speaker's affective disposition towards the target of the insult. Following Burnett (2017, 2019)'s framework, I represent the listener's prior beliefs as a probability distribution $Pr(\alpha)$, read as "the probability distribution that the speaker feels an affective state α with respect to the target". In a situation where the listener has no expectations about the speaker's emotional stance towards the target (e.g., due to lack of familiarity), we represent $Pr(\alpha)$ as a uniform distribution over affective state.

Table 3. L's prior beliefs about S's affective stance α

AFF	AFFILIATION	AMUSEMENT	ANXIETY	CONTEMPT
$Pr(\alpha)$	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25

Finally, once the speaker utters a slurring tag F aimed at an individual or group, the listener updates their prior beliefs by conditioning $Pr(\alpha)$ on F's affective meaning, $Pr(F|\alpha)$. In other terms, the interpretation process involves i) combining the likelihood of F's signalling an affective state α with the listener's prior beliefs about the speaker's affective stance towards the target, and then ii) readjusting the resulting measure with a normalizing constant, i.e., the sum of these terms computed for all affective states α ∈ aff:

(4)

$$Pr(\alpha|F) = \frac{Pr(\alpha) \times Pr(F|\alpha)}{\sum_{\alpha \in aff} Pr(\alpha) \times Pr(F|\alpha)}$$

The model set out in this section lead us to state its key conjecture. Namely, that the affective information expressed by the use of a slur, as inferred by an audience member, is constrained by the perceived affective relationship –according to that particular audience member– between the speaker and the target of the slurring tag. Put differently, the process of reasoning about the speaker's potential emotions towards the target can influence the weighting assigned to the affective states α ∈ aff within a particular context. In what follows, I shall put this model into work by examining how it accounts for the analogous offense-generation profiles of slurs for groups and individuals.[12]

4.3 Autonomy

To understand the disconnection between the offensiveness of slurring tags and the speaker's lack of ill-will in uttering them, we can turn to a representative illustration. To render this illustration elucidative for both individual and group-based slurring tags, let us use a term that can assume a dual role of a group slur and an individual nickname. For instance, a person of African descent might be colloquially referred to as "Blackie", an hypocoristic term which, due to its racial connotations, can develop into a slurring tag within some linguistic networks. In a scenario where someone utters (5), we expect the slurring tag to be interpreted as offensive by the listener:

(5) Blackie was promoted.

To derive this interpretation, we assume that the listener lacks any prior expectation about speaker's affective disposition towards the target. Hence, we plug the uniform distribution in (Table 3), along with the indexical field

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[11] This distribution fluctuates contingent upon the relation between the specific slurring tag and its alternative. For example, gender-based tags have alternatives which explicitly carry normative connotations (Ashwell 2016). Hence, in this case, the differences between the indexical fields associated with F and F* are likely to be less pronounced.

[12] Before moving on, note that this model holds the potential to be developed into a full-fledged game-theoretic framework of affective signalling, wherein speakers and listeners would employ distinct strategies to achieve their communicative goals. Inspired on Henderson and McCready (2019), it may be posited that speakers are sensitive to whether listeners are likely to (dis-)approve of their use of slurring tags. In such context, the utilities of messages would be calculated over message-listener pairs, rather than solely by the messages' informativity. However, given our current focus on understanding slurring tags' offense-generation profile, I leave this fertile area for future research.

associated with "Blackie" (as outlined in Table 2), into the formula presented in (4). The upshot is that the listener is more likely to interpret (5) as a manifestation of the speaker's CONTEMPT towards the person who was promoted (cf. the fourth raw in Table 4). Then, because the display of high dominance within interpersonal interactions warrants offense, we explain why this utterance is deemed offensive.

Table 4. Neutral scenario

AFF	AFFILIATION	AMUSEMENT	ANXIETY	CONTEMPT
$Pr(\alpha)$	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25
$Pr(F|\alpha)$	0.30	0.60	0.40	0.70
$Pr(\alpha) \cdot Pr(spic|\alpha)$	0.08	0.15	0.10	0.18
$Pr(\alpha|spic)$	0.15	0.30	0.20	0.35

Now, a noteworthy feature of this explanation is that, regardless of whether the interpreter infers that the speaker holds positive or negative sentiments towards the target, the outcome of the update will consistently favour [D+] states. If the speaker is perceived as feeling positively, they will be interpreted as experiencing amusement at the expense of the target and people of African descent in general. And, if they are perceived as feeling negatively, they will be interpreted as bearing hostility towards them.

Naturally, the speaker may attempt to counteract this interpretation by adding affective cues that signal low dominance (e.g., through tone of voice modulation, or by explicitly following (5) with "He deserves it!"). Or, ultimately, by explicitly declaring that he was ignorant of the term's pejorative connotations. However, the ultimate decision rests with the listener in terms of weighting these factors as reliable vis-à-vis the indexical field of "Blackie". This elucidates why listener's offense remains justified independently of the speaker's beliefs, intentions, or any psychological state.

4.4 Projection

Indexicality is not restricted to the use of lexical items but applies to the phenomenon of variation between alternatives more generally. Virtually any facet of human behaviour, like clothing, habits, or activities, has the potential to index social (or, as we are currently demonstrating, affective) qualities, as long as they evoke a noticeable contrast between relevant alternatives. When someone opts for one style of clothing over another or engages in one type of sport rather than another, they are, perhaps unconsciously, presenting themselves in a particular light.

Consequently, indexicality can also account for the 'projective' character of slurring tags. That is, the phenomenon whereby their capacity to offend survives even when they occur under the scope of entailment-cancelling operators, such as negations or quotation marks. To wit, repeatedly employing a form of pronunciation such as "-in" rather than "-ing" (e.g., saying "cookin'" vs "cooking") within conditionals or speech reports is not less indicative than its unembedded counterpart that the speaker is probably friendly but incompetent. Likewise, the mere utterance of a slurring tag, whether inside or outside of quotation marks or other forms of embedding, does not block its capacity to index dominance. Thus, given that indexicality is not attached to the truth-conditional content of an expression, embeddings are ineffective in blocking slurs' expression of high dominance.

4.5 Variation

By virtue of its indexical nature, the proposed view proves adept at elucidating various forms of offense variation exhibited by slurring tags.

4.5.1 Word variation

The degree of offensiveness triggered by slurring tags fluctuates across expressions, whether aimed at the same target or at different targets. Terms like the "Kike", for instance, carry a more pronounced sense of offense compared to others like "Yid", even though the refer to the same group. Alternatively, a pejorative nickname like "Blackie" may be considered more offensive than "Chinaman" in some discourse networks where they refer to different individuals.

To elucidate this phenomenon, note that specific expressions gradually acquire different indexical meanings that reflect the pleasure, arousal, and dominance values they regularly co-occur with. Within a discourse network, expressions that consistently co-occur with high-dominance feelings such as CONTEMPT, either because they are

often uttered as consequence of these states or because they are contributing factors to them, will gain the classification of slurring tags.

Predictably, certain of those tags will eventually index D+ states with more "strength" compared to others. This discrepancy can be attributes to i) external factors like the additional presence of other forms of aggression such as physical violence or institutional discrimination, ii) internal factors such as the target's explicit prohibition of the term's use within the discourse framework, or a combination thereof. As a result, some slurring tags will be regarded as more reliable indicators of high dominance states relative to other tags, consequently triggering a greater sense of offense.

4.5.2 Use variation

Within specific contexts, slurring's tags offensiveness dissipates. A host of different factors may, depending upon the slurring tag, contribute to modulate and eventually block its interpretation as offensive within a context. On occasions, users may grant permission to specific users to create and use tags for them. In others, the right intonation or context may counteract the expression of dominance, making it harmless.

One of the most important factors in this regard is the agent's identity. When the speaker is recognized as embodying a particular identity, such identification is interpreted as giving reasons to the speaker to feel in certain ways and act upon those feelings. Should the speaker be recognized as Catholic, for instance, listeners may surmise that the speaker is disposed to feel positively about the Catholic church and favour its teachings. If the speaker and target are close friends, it will be then assumed that they don't consider each other as worth of disrespect or morally lesser. Even though these assumptions may be proven incorrect, speaker's social identities initially guide how listeners think about them.

For instance, in a scenario where the listener is aware that the speaker is a person of African descent (or shares a childhood camaraderie with the target), and the speaker utters (5), the listener will consider it reasonable to anticipate the speaker to feel [+ P] rather than [– P] states towards the target. Additionally, the listener is likely to expect the speaker not to experience [+ D] feelings towards the target as well. In this case, we plug a distribution which favours [+ P] and [– D] states (e.g., AFFILIATION), and the probabilistic indexical field associated with "Blackie", in the formula in (4). As a result, we deduce that, upon hearing (5), the listener will interpret the speaker as more likely expression AFFILIATION (e.g., affection, friendship, etc.) towards the target, thus explaining its non-offensive character[13]:

Table 5. Friendly scenario

AFF	AFFILIATION	AMUSEMENT	ANXIETY	CONTEMPT
Pr(α)	0.60	0.15	0.15	0.10
Pr(F|α)	0.30	0.60	0.40	0.70
Pr(α)·Pr(spic|α)	0.18	0.09	0.06	0.07
Pr(α|spic)	0.45	0.23	0.15	0.17

This example serves as an illustration of how, despite their typical oppressive function, slurring tags can be uttered without harm when the speaker belongs to the social group derogated by the slur or shares an intimate personal bond with them.

Numerous alternative interpretations can be explained using the same mechanism, including the most unorthodox ones. As alluded to earlier, uses of slurring tags among insiders don't always render them inoffensive. For example, McCready & Davis (2017) highlighted an instance where the use of a group-based slur among African Americans in the presence of a white person was interpreted as offensive. In such situations, it is conceivable that the speaker, and African American, is trying to accommodate the idea that he is, in truth, not of African descent, as such idea seems required to interpret his utterance of (5) as expressing that African American people are inferior. Thus, if the listener accepts the idea that the speaker doesn't sees himself as African American, they will likely interpret the utterance as an expression of CONTEMPT. Conversely, if the listener doesn't accommodate such idea, they will

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[13] Among close acquaintances, one can conceive non-offensive uses of a slurring tag as a "test" of the speaker's relationship with the target. If the target takes offense, then the speaker's presumption of interpersonal closeness is proven erroneous. Conversely, if the listener interprets the slurring tag as endearing, the speaker's presumption of closeness is confirmed and thus the pejorative utterance reinforces their relationship. Due to its risky character, however, verbal mock aggression can easily scale into genuine aggression.

perceive the speaker as expressing ANXIETY instead. Specifically, as expressing unease because of the mismatch between the culture he comes from, and the culture aspires to belong to.

4.6 Reclamation

We can distinguish two ways of dismantling the act of subordination enacted by slurring tags. This stands as the inverse process outlined in the case of word-variation (Section 4.5.1). Specifically, under this framework, reclamation constitutes the process by which a term that acquired a relatively strong indexical association with D+ states gradually loses it over time. This process may manifest in two, often interconnected, ways:

- ***Diachronic***: with a high frequency of uses of slurring tags expressing non-dominant affective states, the indexical field linked to it may be gradually reinterpreted by the members of the speech network in which it circulates. As a result, the likelihood that a user of the term holds derogatory falls, leading to the attenuation of the signal's capacity to dehumanize. At this point, employing the term is equally likely to correlate with an affiliative or denigrating attitude (see also Bollinger, 2017).
- ***Synchronic***: as observed in Section 2, individuals who exhibit greater distress in response to hearing their pejorative nicknames are more susceptible of being ridiculed by them. Similarly, as Rappaport (2019) points out, campaigns to prohibit the use of group-based slurs, although instrumental in generating an environment characterized by inclusivity and respect, may increase the strength of a slur. From this it follows that, if the imposed label is embraced by the target, this automatically inaugurates the process of attenuating its harmful effects. Moreover, instead of merely accepting the slurring tag, targets sometimes actively adopt it, thereby neutralizing the status of the label as an imposition upon the bearer or violation of their autonomy.

5. Forecasting alternative analysis of slurring tags

In this section, I analyse how standard semantic and pragmatic theories of group-based slurs would explain nicknames' offense-generation profile. If the analogy with pejorative nicknames holds, providing an accurate account of the nicknames' behaviour becomes a crucial requirement for an adequate explanation of tag's offensiveness. Note that the view proposed in this paper, based on the assumption that slurring tags are associated with affective states, aligns with Jeshion (2013) expressivist view, who contends that slurs encode speaker's contempt toward target groups. Therefore, prior to presenting alternative viewpoints, I will take a closer look at the differences between my proposal and Jeshion's expressivism.

Jeshion (2013) view of group-based slurs is semantic in nature. It identifies three components of slurs' semantics: (i) a *truth-conditional* component, (ii) an *expressivist* component, and (iii) an *identifying* component. The truth-conditional component of slurs captures the fact that they refer to the same group referenced by its non-slurring counterpart. The expressivist component captures slurs' ability to express contempt towards members of socially relevant groups in virtue of their group membership. Finally, the identifying component ascribes a property to the group that is perceived as central to its identity.

The view articulated in this paper also includes both a truth-conditional and expressive components. Firstly, it assumes that slurring tags have counterparts sharing the same referent. Secondly, it assumes that slurring tags express affective states. However, unlike Jeshion's expressivism, it conceives this expressivist component as multi-dimensional, namely, as decomposed in three independent affective dimensions. Furthermore, it operationalizes the relation between slurring expressions and affective dimensions as indexical, rather than conventional. Finally, we don't include any identifying component that ascribes a property to the target that is central to its identity. As observed in Section 2, individual-based slurs are often senseless and, when they do connote a description of the target, it is often irrelevant. With this groundwork laid, let us explore other potential explanations of slurring tags' offensiveness.

5.1 Conventional accounts

A Hom (2008)-style explanation would posit that nicknames elicit offensiveness because they ascribe derogatory properties to their targets. In this framework, a nickname would be analysed as a socially constructed property such as 'ought to be subject to p1 + ... + pn because of being d1 + ... + dn all because of being X', where 'd1 + ... + dn' are the negative stereotypes attributed to the target X by an ideology. Since it is false that anyone ought to be subject to any kind of negative evaluation on account of their identity (e.g., their race, gender, etc.), the truth-conditional account predicts that pejorative nicknames have a null extension.

However, assuming that members of a close-knit community (e.g., a high school) contemplate such complex social properties when they coin or use nicknames seems to go against the intuition that, as non-sensical and hypocoristic labels demonstrate, the descriptive connotations (d1 + …+ dn) of any nickname are often irrelevant to them. Moreover, the last component of the property ascribed ("…all because of being X") fits well with group-based slurs (e.g., "…all because of being Chinese/Black/Jew", etc.) but does not seem adequate in the context of nicknaming (e.g., "…all because of being John/Mary/Alex"). Finally, holding that the derogatory aspect is part of the truth-conditional content of an expression, thus rendering slurs non-truth-apt, contradicts the intuition that nicknames do indeed refer to their individual targets.

An alternative semantic approach could be framed in terms of perspectives. A Camp (2013)-style explanation would posit that pejorative nicknames conventionally signal speaker's commitment to a derogating perspective of the individual referred. In this framework, perspectives are open-ended ways to structure one's thoughts, which emphasize some properties of the world as explanations of other properties. Thus, by uttering a pejorative nickname (e.g., "Blackie") the speaker would signal allegiance to a perspective where a property determining the nickname's extension is highly central in thinking about the individual target.

A central issue with the perspectival view pertains to the nature of such extension-determining property. A pejorative nickname F referring to an individual I is, grammatically speaking, a name, and hence doesn't encode any extension-determining property at the truth-conditional level. However, it is plausible to adopt a predicativist view of nicknames. Under this framework, a nickname F would be conventionally associated to a property determining its referent I. One may conceive of such encoded property as either i) a description of the individual target I (e.g., "being black", "being effeminate", etc.) or ii) simply as the property of "being I". The former option is, however, erroneous, as nicknames don't determine their individual referents satisfactorily, by whoever falls into the description they are linked to (Jeshion, 2020). The latter option is explanatory innocuous, as no one would object to the property "being I" as central in thinking of all the other attributes of I.

5.2 Conversational accounts

A Bollinger's (2016)-like pragmatic account would propose that the offensiveness of pejorative nicknames is a function of the contrastive choice made by the speaker between the nickname and the target's personal name. When speakers have the free choice between such referentially equivalent expressions, one being neutral and the other tainted with prejudiced attitudes, and choose the latter option, they signal their affiliation to the bigoted attitudes of the people that typically uses it. Under this framework, the content of the nickname would be determined by co-occurrence expectations, as they regularly co-occur with contexts in which derogatory attitudes are expressed.

This mechanism bears various similitudes to the indexical one proposed in this paper. To wit, both proposals are based on expressions signalling attitudes to varying strengths based on the regular co-occurrence of the nickname and contexts where derogatory attitudes prevail. Thus, both proposals explain the categorization of a term as a slurring nickname (or its ceasing to be so) based on the statistical robustness of the signal. In this view, nickname's degree of offensiveness would entirely depend on the interpreter, that is, would vary with speaker's confidence that the use of the nickname signals the speaker's endorsement of offensive attitudes.

However, in the account proposed in this paper, users of nicknames signal their affective states towards the target, rather than their endorsement of an attitude. This difference stems from our consideration of the speaker's expression of high dominance as the explanatory factor for the particular kind of offense elicited by slurring tags (in contrast to other forms of verbal aggression, such as calling someone "stupid"). Moreover, the indexical approach explicitly outlines a Bayesian method for understanding how various contextual factors are integrated in determining listener's degree of "confidence" that the utterance signals speaker's expression of high dominance.

Finally, we could propose a sociocultural explanation akin to Anderson and Lepore (2013)'s. This explanation would posit that nicknames are offensive because they are taboo: there are societal norms prohibiting the use of pejorative nicknames, rendering their use offensive to those who adhere to such prohibitions as it constitutes a transgression of such norms. Under this view, various factors would contribute the prohibition of certain nicknames, including their connotations, typical usage, the identity of the coiner, etc.

This view would correctly accommodate the arbitrariness of nicknaming practices. As observed in Section 2, nicknames can offend even when they are laudatory and, conversely, can be perceived as endearing even when they convey the hardest insults. However, a drawback to this view is that, in many contexts, nicknames oppress and have long-lasting psychological effects on their victims even in the absence of taboos or social prohibitions

ruling their use. Within close-knit communities, such as high schools, educators, peers, and even the target himself, may fail to acknowledge the effects of pejorative nicknaming, dismissing it as playful banter. Thus, while prohibitions are indeed a significant factor, they are unnecessary within pejorative nicknaming practices.

6. Conclusions

Analogies come in various forms, one of which consist of "proportional metaphors". These are analogies that imply a ratio and where phenomena are mutually interchangeable. In this context, phenomenon A is compared to B and, vice versa, B compared to A. In this paper, we used this type of analogy. Mapping the offensiveness of slurs onto that of pejorative nickname has afforded us a holistic perspective, revealing aspects of nicknaming that we would typically perceive in isolation. Conversely, mapping nicknaming practices onto slurring practices has allowed us to dissect what is typically viewed as a compact phenomenon. This correspondence underscores the importance of simultaneously considering the broader social and political landscape alongside the intricate web of interpersonal relationships when studying pejorative expressions, rather than exclusively focusing on one of them.

Upon this proportional metaphor, I proposed that slurs and nicknames offensiveness' originate from a common source and therefore can be given a structurally similar explanation. To summarize the view proposed, slurs are indexically associated with affective qualities derived from the pleasure, arousal, and dominance dimensions. According to this perspective, these qualities are expressed during the process of interpretation based both on how the slur is typically used within a speech network and how the listener affective predispositions are perceived by the listener. The affective states expressed by the use of the slur generates offense insofar as they manifest a high degree of dominance, which makes them tools of oppression within inter-personal or inter-group dynamics. Importantly, this indexical view explains why slurring tags can express a wide spectrum of emotional states while remaining offensive, anchoring linguistic interpretation on an independently grounded cognitive view of how emotional cues are interpreted.

Future research endeavours have the potential to refine the predictions offered by this proposal, utilizing advancement in Bayesian computing and the evolving field affective cognition in psychology. Furthermore, this work initiates a discussion on the practice of labelling and nicknaming, exploring methods to detect those instances that may inflict harm on single individuals. While governments have formulated legislation addressing hate speech and group-based slurs, there is a notable absence of focus on nicknaming practices. Examining these two phenomena in parallel can assist in identifying situations where nicknaming serves a slurring function, such as in cases of bullying, with the aim of preventing long-term psychological distress.

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