BRILL
RODOPI

GRAZER PHILOSOPHISCHE STUDIEN 97 (2020) 1-10

Grazer Philosophische Studien
brill.com/gps

Editors' Introduction

The Challenge from Non-Derogatory Uses of Slurs

Bianca Cepollaro
Vita-Salute San Raffaele University
bianca.cepollaro@gmail.com

Dan Zeman
Slovak Academy of Sciences
danczeman@gmail.com

1 Non-derogatory Uses of Slurs

Slurs are arguably the most prototypical instance of hate speech: they exemplify very clearly how discourse can hurt, abuse and subordinate human beings. These epithets derogate people and groups on the basis of their belonging to a certain category. What is peculiar to these expressions is their so-called hyper-projectivity (Camp 2018: 39): their derogatory content seems to resist all kinds of semantic embedding. This often means that slurs can hurt and abuse despite the embedded position they occupy in an utterance and despite the intentions of the speaker. In light of this phenomenon, it is not surprising that the literature on slurs has taken a keen interest in standard *derogatory* uses. This special issue offers instead a collection of papers that focuses on how slurs can be used in non-derogatory ways. We start with providing a (non-exhaustive) survey of uses of slurs that can potentially be deemed 'non-offensive': we consider reported speech, fictional contexts, pedagogical utterances, and quotation.

It is disputed whether slurs are derogatory when they occur in reported speech. What is contended is whether the derogatory content of a slur occurring in indirect speech is sealed, i.e. entirely ascribed to the reported speaker so that the whole utterance turns out non-derogatory, or whether it gets attributed to the reporting speaker so that the whole utterance sounds derogatory. According to prohibitionist views, for instance, reported slurring utterances are always derogatory because the disparaging force of slurs always survives embedding, including in indirect reports (Anderson and Lepore 2013a, 2013b;

© KONINKLIJKE BRILL NV, LEIDEN, 2020 | DOI:10.1163/18756735-09701002

Anderson 2016). According to certain presuppositional views (à la Schlenker 2007), on the other hand, reported slurring utterances might be non-derogatory on occasion, when the derogatory content of epithets is ascribed to the reported speaker only. Cepollaro, Sulpizio and Bianchi (2019) conducted some empirical studies on the perceived offensiveness of slurs and non-slurring insults ('jerk', 'asshole', etc.) in direct and indirect speech and found that the speaker who utters a slur in a report ('Mary said that Lila is a wop') is perceived as less offensive than a speaker using an unembedded slurring utterance (e.g. 'Lila is a wop'), but nevertheless offensive to some degree. The studies show that the verbs of propositional attitudes (like 'say') succeed in diminishing the perceived offensiveness of slurring utterances, but fail to delete it entirely.

Another interesting case is fiction: slurs are used in all sorts of fictional contexts (movies, plays, books, graphic novels, stand-up comedy shows, songs, etc.; see Stojanovic forthcoming). Within fiction, we can distinguish various uses: epithets can be employed by bigoted fictional characters (e.g. certain uses of the N-word uttered by white characters in Quentin Tarantino's movie *Reservoir Dogs*) or they can express the bigoted author's point of view. For such cases, we can distinguish the question as to whether they are derogatory-in-the-fiction and/or derogatory-in-the-world. Fictional uses of slurs can also be employed in a reclaimed way by fictional characters (e.g. the use of the N-word by black characters of the TV show *Atlanta* by Donald Glover; see Allen 2015 about Tarantino's movies): we shall come back to reclamation in a moment. Let us mention in passing that the question we raise about slurs in fiction could be extended to fictional slurs,[1] i.e. terms that were invented to serve as slurs in fictional works and that typically target groups or entities that do not exist in the real world: think of 'fangs' for vampires from the TV show *True Blood*, or 'toaster' for robots in the TV show *Battlestar Galactica*.[2]

According to Hom (2008), pedagogical uses also count as non-derogatory. Take utterances such as "Institutions that treat Chinese people as chinks are racist" or "There are no chinks; racists are wrong" (Hom 2008, 429), as pronounced in a conversation *about* racism. According to Hom, these count as non-derogatory uses of slurs that need to be accounted for.[3]

1 See Cepollaro and Thommen (2019, 344).

2 Note that the term is called a racist epithet in the fiction by a fictional character (Cylon Number Six says: "That word is racist. I don't like it" and "(…) Tell her you won't have racial epithets used in your presence" in the episodes 'Resistance' and 'Flight of the Phoenix', episodes 4 and 9 of Season 2).

3 Cepollaro and Thommen (2019) argue that the non-derogatory readings of utterances such as "There are no chinks; racists are wrong" stem from a metalinguistic reading of negation.

We should also include in this brief overview the case of quotation. While most scholars agree that quotation marks can seal the derogatory force of slurs, not everybody does: Anderson and Lepore (2013a, 2013b) defend a prohibitionist view according to which the mere phonetic realization of slurs triggers a reaction of offense which cannot be blocked by scare quotes. We can distinguish two different questions here: one is whether or not slurs are derogatory when mentioned; another is whether in certain contexts mentioning slurs is justified by an important purpose: such contexts may include theoretical and experimental investigation on epithets, activism against bigotry or testimony in court.

Finally, reclamation. Among the various potential candidates for non-derogatory uses, reclamation especially drew the attention of scholars in philosophy of language and linguistics. We speak of 'reclamation' (or 'appropriation') when a given slur is used in a very special non-derogatory way on particular occasions, typically by members of the group that the slur targets. Such uses tend to be taken (even though non-unanimously[4]) to convey solidarity and intimacy rather than hatred or contempt and are often employed to help achieve political goals and fight oppression. The phenomenon of reclamation raises an important challenge to the theories of slurs that were recently developed, since it arguably constitutes a rare case where the hyper-projectivity of slurs is defeated. In addition, reclamation might have the potential to turn slurs into non-derogatory terms: certain words appear to have lost their slur status as a result of a process of reclamation (e.g. 'gay', Bianchi 2014).

The relatively recent literature on reclamation[5] addresses a rich set of questions. Some of them are of a linguistic nature and concern the relation between reclaimed and standard uses of slurs. Among the theoretical options, we can for instance distinguish between polysemy views and echoic views.[6] According to the former (e.g., Ritchie 2017), reclaimed slurs carry new stable meanings: reclamation attributes a new subversive non-negative meaning to a previously abusive term. In order for reclamation to take place, the new meaning has to be employed by a certain number of people. If the new meaning spreads enough, it becomes one of the lexically codified meanings of a given entry. According to echoic views (Bianchi 2014, Miščević and Perhat 2016), on the other hand, when people reclaim a slur they do not need to change – at

4 See for instance Asim (2007) and Kleinman et al. (2009).

5 See, e.g., Tirrell (1999); Brontsema (2004); Croom (2013); Bianchi (2014); Cepollaro (2017); Ritchie (2017); Anderson (2018); Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018).

6 It is an open question whether and how the theories proposed in this issue fit in either of the two types of views. To some extent, they might all do, but they also broaden the theoretical landscape in a way that is not limited to this dichotomy.

least not at the beginning – its codified lexical meaning; instead, they engage in an echoic use of language where they evoke the discriminatory contents that bigots convey when they employ slurs and, at the same time, they express their dissociative attitude towards it (more or less like irony). Over time, such an echoic use can get conventionalized and finally give rise to polysemy (or the slur may lose its derogatory power for good). In this view, a slur could in principle get reclaimed on a single occasion, so a weak form of reclamation does not necessary require an entire community.

Additional questions concern social and political matters, such as who can reclaim a slur. Scholars tend to believe that only members of the target group can reclaim a disparaging term (or at least that only they can start such a process): but why is this so? This would constitute a very special kind of context-sensitivity that asks for an explanation. A further problem concerns censorship: shall reclamation be exonerated from censorship and, if so, shouldn't we have precise methods to identify it? Does reclamation succeed in wiping away the toxicity of slurs?

This volume contributes to answering precisely such interrogations, as most papers in this issue focus on reclamation. An interesting general meta-disciplinary question is why scholars have focused on reclamation when thinking of non-derogatory uses of slurs and tended to leave aside the other potential candidates such as slurs in indirect reports, slurs in fictional contexts, slurs in pedagogical scenarios and so on. We see at least two concurring factors. For one thing, whether reported or fictional uses of slurs can truly be non-derogatory is what is disputed in the first place: whether these constitute good cases of non-derogatory uses of slurs is by itself a problem, even before addressing the question as to how slurs can be non-derogatory on certain occasions. By studying reclamation, scholars have focused on the cases associated with stronger (even though not unanimous) intuitions of non-derogatoriness. The second reason to choose reclamation over other potential candidates is that it raises interesting philosophical, social and political issues with respect to civil right movements, language policies and, more generally, the relation between language and power.

Before moving to summarizing the articles featuring in this special issue, a last remark about the policy of mentioning slurs. We are aware that the opinion is split regarding the mention of slurs: some authors refrain from using any actual slurs in papers and presentations, while others think that mentioning them (or at least some of them) in such contexts is justified by theoretical purposes. Here we have chosen to leave the decision of how to proceed in this respect to the authors themselves – as perhaps an illustration of the contentiousness of the very issue. We believe that the theoretical analysis of this

phenomenon benefits very much from the direct observation of as many cases as possible. Nunberg (2018: 240) considers the way in which scholars have refrained from examining different uses and types of slurs a form of methodological incuriosity. The work presented in this volume does not run this risk, as the contributors did justice to the complexities of the matter in many ways: they broadened the scope of the investigation by including less known and discussed cases of reclaimed slurs, they looked at non-English slurs as well as different sources and media (for instance, comic strips), and they acknowledged the heterogeneity of the phenomena that go under the label of 'reclamation'.

2 The Contributions in this Special Issue

The issue opens with **Renée Jorgensen Bolinger**'s paper "Contested Slurs: Delimiting the Linguistic Community". In it, she addresses the case of disagreement around the slurhood of certain terms: within the same linguistic community some speakers do not conceptualize the term at stake as a slur, but others do and, according to Bolinger, not all such cases can be discarded as featuring ignorant or naïve speakers. Such speakers know that their broader linguistic community deems the term in question derogatory, but think that it is not derogatory in the way *they* use it. If we analyze these cases as linguistic variants, we recognize diverging linguistic communities whose languages largely overlap and whose speakers are not just 'wrong' for using different variants. When speakers disagree about the slurhood of certain terms, they might appeal to different languages, thus talking past each other. Note that, according to Bolinger, even though the stubborns who keep using a term that other members of the broader linguistic community deem a slur are not semantically mistaken, they still have compelling reasons to avoid the term in question for moral reasons. Note also that since both the derogatory and the non-derogatory meaning of the term have currency in the shared language as linguistic variants, Bolinger argues that such scenarios speak in favor of a non-semantic analysis of the derogatory aspect of slurs.

Heather Burnett's paper "A Persona-Based Semantics for Slurs" is an exploration of both in-group and out-group uses of "dyke" and a comparison with "lesbian". The main idea of the paper is that both words are associated with *personae* (abstract identities or social types); thus, while the latter is associated with a mainstream persona, the former is associated with an anti-mainstream one. Burnett provides a semantics for "dyke" and "lesbian" based on the Conceptual Spaces framework, in which personae are modeled as points in an

ideological space, which is supplemented with a view of communication as a signaling game fleshed out in the Rational Speech Act model. Importantly, Burnett links ideology and material conditions by means of game theory, showing how the semantics provided can have consequences in the real world by affecting people's behavior in concrete situations, leading to the idea that the meaning of slurs is *strategy change potential*. Thus, the final picture she arrives at is a "two-layered semantics" composed of an internalist ideological aspect and an externalist materialist one. While she advises caution, Burnett surmises that this analysis can be extended to other slurs and seemingly neutral terms to account for reclaimed and other in-group uses.

Christopher Davis and Elin McCready's paper "The Instability of Slurs" offers, first, a test for slurhood based on the satisfaction of several criteria and, second, an account of non-derogatory uses of slurs in a two-dimensional framework previously put forward by the two authors (McCready and Davis 2017). In relation to the latter, the authors take slurs to be *mixed expressives* consisting of at-issue content (mere predication of group membership) and "expressive" content – an invocation of a (possibly ineffable) complex of socio-historical facts, attitudes and prejudices about particular groups. It is in this "expressive" dimension that the offensiveness of slurs resides, according to Davis and McCready. However, they further distinguish between slurs' derogatory character and their offensiveness. While offense is encoded in the invocation corresponding to a slur, derogation is a matter of a speaker's attitude toward the invoked content and is inferred pragmatically. This distinction allows the authors to account both for non-derogatory uses of slurs (as in reclamation) and for derogatory uses of non-slurs (e.g., when someone uses pronouns to purposefully misgender). In relation to the test for slurhood, the most interesting (and perhaps most controversial) claim the authors put forward is that, at least prototypically, slurs are those expressions that target groups which stand in a position of subordination (according to flawed ideologies implemented within society). Finally, they illustrate this idea by discussing several expressions that have been deemed to be slurs (e.g., "honky", "libtard", "TERF").

Leopold Hess, in "Practices of Slur Use", addresses the challenges that reclaimed uses of slurs pose vis-à-vis the apparent nondisplaceability and non-cancellability of the derogatory content of epithets. First, however, he links the derogatory status of slurs to the social identity of their users. Putting the accent on acts of slurring rather than on their contents, Hess ties social identities to *social practices*, which are conceived (along the lines of the account given by McMillan 2018) as requiring both the existence of people actually engaging in a kind of regular action that can qualify as a practice and that of an adequate intentional description of it. This opens the way for an analysis of slur-use in

terms of the social practices slur-users participate in. Since using a slur derogatorily is to participate in a practice of bigotry, using a slur non-derogatorily is to participate in an alternative practice – such as reclamation. However, in order to achieve the expected effect, uses of slurs within such practices have to be done in the appropriate circumstances: for example, those outside the target group cannot participate in (or at least initiate) an alternative practice, but even members can fail to do so if the circumstances are not right – as Hess aptly illustrates with several convincing examples.

In "Pride and Prejudiced: On the Reclamation of Slurs", **Robin Jeshion** tackles various issues connected to slur reclamation and offers a very detailed and insightful description of the phenomenon. The chief distinction Jeshion makes is between two senses of reclamation: *pride reclamation* and *insular reclamation*. While the former (exemplified by "queer") is a process in which meaning change essentially involves pride for belonging to a slur's target group, the second (exemplified by the N-word) is a process in which it dominantly involves the expression of camaraderie with other members of the target group. Not only do the instances of the two types of reclamation have different histories (some of which Jeshion describes in the paper at length), but they also require different explanations of various facts, either common or distinctive. For example, the common fact that it is only the members of the oppressed groups that are in a position to start reclaiming a slur receives different explanations on this view, as does the fact that in pride reclamation out-group use is encouraged and expected, while in insular reclamation it is forbidden. As for the linguistic mechanism that underlies the meaning change inherent in reclamation, Jeshion proposes a polysemy account. The paper also contains an analysis of and comparison with Claudia Bianchi's echoic approach to reclamation, which Jeshion argues falls short of accounting for both types of reclamation distinguished.

Teresa Marques and Manuel García-Carpintero's contribution, "Really Expressive Presuppositions and How to Block Them", is both a critical engagement with the presuppositional views already present in the literature and a further development. Starting from the Stalnakerian notion of context, they provide an original account whose particularity consists, first, in supplementing the Stalnakerian model of common ground with non-propositional aspects (a move already licensed by the need to account for non-declarative sentences) and, second, by conceiving those aspects as normative, having to do with the reactive attitudes of the conversational participants (i.e., emotions seen as *fitting*). Derogation is thus understood as defined by a constitutive norm that makes contempt towards the target group the fitting attitude when a slur is uttered. Further, Marques and García-Carpintero defend the normative

presuppositional account by responding to several objections involving the non-projectability of slurs from certain embeddings ("presuppositional plugs"). While not focusing particularly on reclamation, the paper explains non-derogatory uses of slur as stemming from an erosion of the normative requirements that a use of a slur makes on the conversational record.

In "Reclamation: Taking Back Control of Words", **Mihaela Popa-Wyatt** analyzes reclamation in light of the speech-act-theoretical framework put forward in Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018). In this framework, to employ a slurring utterance is to perform a discourse role assignment: in particular, slurring utterances assign a subordinate role to the target and provide the speaker with a dominant role; these two role assignments are jointly associated with oppression. After reviewing the history of several reclaimed slurs, Popa-Wyatt illustrates how reclamation can find its place in this analysis: when members of the target group self-apply a slur in a non-derogatory way, their act appears to misfire, since the speakers do not fit the role of the oppressor required by the use of a slur; such misfire opens up the possibility that the slur could begin to be used in a different way, which is possible only if the community repeatedly violates the felicity conditions underlying the power imbalance. Members of the target group thus give rise to a new speech act, i.e. the *reclaimed* speech act, that is only accessible to them and that assigns them a powerful role. The effects of the speech act of reclamation are twofold: on the one hand, it gives members of the target group a feeling of empowerment; on the other hand, it also makes it harder for those outside the group to perform the original slurring speech act.

In his paper, "Slurs and Toxicity: It's Not about Meaning", **Jesse Rappaport** pushes the discussion in a different direction: that of the cognitive mechanisms underlying the specific type of offense produced by slurs. While taking the derogatory character of slurs to reside in their expressive dimension, Rappaport is concerned with one of their traits that is connected to derogation, yet importantly different: their intense emotional power, or *toxicity*. Rappaport engages with various views in the literature and shows that most of them don't offer satisfactory accounts of toxicity. Instead, Rappaport puts forward the view that toxicity is a "para-linguistic" phenomenon, functioning at the neuronal level in the same way curse words and other taboo expressions do. Relying on experimental studies in abnormal psychology and language processing, and borrowing from previous work (Rappaport 2019), he takes the toxicity of slurs to be tied to their phonological form, processing of which directly involve the emotional processing centers in the brain, thus explaining their heightened emotional power. Regarding non-derogatory uses of slurs, Rappaport claims that, insofar as derogation is a matter of speakers' intentions, there could be

such uses, but no *non-toxic* uses (he does make room for the proviso that there might be contexts in which using a toxic slur is justifiable).

As we hope transpires from this brief overview, the articles in this volume are very rich and tackle a large variety of questions. Our belief is that they will significantly enrich the debate on non-derogatory uses of slurs, especially that surrounding reclamation. For this, we would like to thank the authors for their insightful and far-reaching papers, the reviewers for their precious work and the editors of *Grazer Philosophishe Studien* for their support and patience.

References

Allan, Keith 2015. “When is a slur not a slur? The use of *nigger* in ‘Pulp Fiction’.” *Language Sciences* 52, 187–199.

Anderson, Luvell 2016. “When Reporting Others Backfires.” In: *Indirect Reports and Pragmatics. Interdisciplinary Studies*, edited by Alessandro Capone, Ferenc Kiefer & Franco Lo Piparo, Springer International Publishing, 253–264.

Anderson, Luvell 2018. “Calling, addressing, and appropriation.” In: *Bad Words. Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, edited by David Sosa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6–28.

Anderson, Luvell & Lepore, Ernie 2013a. “Slurring words.” *Nous* 47, 25–48.

Anderson, Luvell & Lepore, Ernie 2013b. “What did you call me? Slurs as prohibited words.” *Analytic Philosophy* 54, 350–363.

Asim, Jabari 2007. *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn’t, and Why*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Bianchi, Claudia 2014. “Slurs and appropriation: An echoic account.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 66, 35–44.

Brontsema, Robin 2004. “A queer revolution: reconceptualizing the debate over linguistic reclamation.” *Colorado Research in Linguistics* 17, 1–17.

Camp, Elisabeth 2018. “A dual act analysis of slurs.” In: *Bad Words: Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs*, edited by David Sosa, New York: Oxford University Press, 29–59.

Cepollaro, Bianca 2017. “Let’s not worry about the Reclamation Worry.” *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 17, 75–87.

Cepollaro, Bianca, Sulpizio, Simone & Bianchi, Claudia 2019. “How bad is it to report a slur? An empirical investigation.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 146, 32–42.

Cepollaro, Bianca & Thommen, Tristan 2019. “What’s wrong with truth-conditional accounts of slurs.” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 42, 333–347.

Croom, Adam 2013. “How to do things with slurs: Studies in the way of derogatory words.” *Language & Communication* 33, 177–204.

Hom, Christopher 2008. "The semantics of racial epithets." *Journal of Philosophy* 105, 416–440.

Kleinman, Sherryl, Ezzell, Matthew B. & Frost, Corey A. 2009. "Reclaiming Critical Analysis: The Social Harms of 'Bitch.'" *Sociological Analysis* 3, 46–68.

McCready, Elin & Davis, Christopher 2017. "An invocational theory of slurs." In: *Proceedings of LENLS 14*.

McMillan, Kevin 2018. *The Constitution of Social Practices*. Routledge.

Miščević, Nenad & Perhat, Julija 2016. *A word which bears a sword*. Zagreb: KruZak.

Nunberg, Geoffrey 2018. "The Social Life of Slurs." In: *New Work on Speech Acts*, edited by Daniel Fogal, Daniel W. Harris & Matt Moss, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 237–295.

Ritchie, Katherine 2017. "Social identity, indexicality, and the appropriation of slurs." *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 17, 155–180.

Popa-Wyatt, Mihaela & Wyatt, Jeremy L. 2018. "Slurs, roles and power." *Philosophical Studies* 175, 2879–2906.

Rappaport, Jesse 2019. "Communicating with slurs." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 69, 795–816.

Schlenker, Philippe 2007. "Expressive Presuppositions." *Theoretical Linguistics* 33, 237–245.

Stojanovic, Isidora Forthcoming. "Derogatory Terms in Free Indirect Discourse."

Tirrell, Lynne 1999. "Derogatory Terms: Racism, Sexism, and the Inferential Role Theory of Meaning." In *Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy, and Language*, edited by Christina Hendricks & Oliver Kelly, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 41–79.