Research Article

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Slur reclamation, irony, and resilience

Abstract: The process of slur reclamation is a linguistic phenomenon whereby members of a targeted group begin to employ their own slur as a means of self-labelling, expressing pride, fostering camaraderie, and reversing the derogatory perspective of the slur. This action is designed to deprive racist and bigoted institutions of a means of perpetuating social power imbalances. Some authors posit that slur reclamation entails a shift in meaning. The ambiguity thesis (AT) can be developed in a variety of ways depending on the semantic level at which the derogatory content is situated. However, AT is subject to a number of criticisms, including what has been termed *Appropriation Worry* (AW). This paper seeks to elucidate the semantic mechanisms of slur reclamation without recourse to AT. To do this, an imperative account of slurs is adopted, which will be termed *warning theory of slurs* (WT). This account proposes that reclaimed uses of slurs are expressions of irony and resilience.

Keywords: slur reclamation; irony; resilience; hate speech; polysemy

1 Introduction

In contrast to generic pejorative terms (e.g., "asshole", "bastard") or pure expressives (e.g., "fuck"), slurring words (e.g., the N-word) are directed towards a targeted group, which is typically identified on the basis of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. It is commonly assumed that slurs have (or could have) neutral counterparts, i.e., co-extensive or even synonymous expressions that do not convey negative contents or attitudes towards the targeted members (Hornsby 2001: 129). The function of slurs can be described as twofold: to offend the members of the targeted group, which is particularly evident in vocative cases (e.g., "shut up, bitch!"), and to create and reinforce a negative social stereotype about the targeted group. As posited by Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018: 2881), slurs are

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employed by dominant groups to ascribe roles of social subordination to members of the targeted group: slurs cause oppression "via an act of *role assignment*. The speaker takes the dominant role, while the target is assigned the subordinate role". Therefore, slurring utterances can be considered as a particularly extreme form of hate speech.

From a purely linguistic perspective, slurs exhibit anomalous behavior in a number of linguistic constructs. The extant literature has primarily focused on the aspects of *projection* and *variability* (cf., e.g., Camp 2018; Croom 2011; Potts 2007). The derogatory content of a slur projects out of a variety of semantic embeddings, including negation, conditional, question, and reported speech. However, the projective behavior of slurs in embedding is variable. For instance, negated slurs in what Hom (2008: 429) terms *pedagogical contexts* have prominent non-pejorative readings. Even in cases where slurs are used in a bare atomic predication, non-pejorative readings are possible, as demonstrated by the phenomenon of *slur reclamation*.

Slur reclamation refers to a "linguistic practice whereby speakers – typically *ingroups*, i.e., members of the group targeted by certain slurs – employ these terms in order to express pride, foster camaraderie, manifest solidarity, subvert extant structures of discrimination" (Cepollaro and López de Sa 2023: 1–2). Targetism is the thesis that one of the conditions for successful reclaimed use of slurs is that the speaker belongs to the targeted group (cf. Anderson 2018). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary seems to endorse targetism in saying that the N-word's "uses by and among Black people are not always intended or taken as offensive […], but its use by a person who is not Black to refer to a Black person can only be regarded as a deliberate expression of contemptuous racism" (Merriam-Webster n.d.). However, some authors (cf. Cepollaro and López de Sa 2022) weaken this condition, arguing that *authoritative speakers* (i.e., individuals who can use a slur without risking accusations of racism or bigotry) are those who have an appropriate relationship with the targeted group. Experimental evidence has shown that reclaimed uses of pejorative terms can lead to positive social effects (cf., e.g., Galinsky et al. 2013; Gaucher et al. 2015).

As Jeshion (2013: 251) notes, two issues pertaining to slur reclamation warrant attention. An adequate theory of slur reclamation should be able to account for the outcome of such a process, that is, the meaning that a slur conveys in reclaimed contexts of utterance, as opposed to unreclaimed hate speech contexts. Furthermore, it should delineate the reclamation process, that is, its diachronic structure by which a slur acquires a conventionalized, non-derogatory meaning. In regard to the outcome of slur reclamation, a theory of reclamation must account for the coexistence of the derogatory and non-derogatory meanings of a slur that have been reclaimed. This is because slurs retain their derogatory meaning even when

they have been successfully reclaimed. The ambiguity thesis (AT) posits a post-reclamation ambiguity of the slurring term. It can be developed in a variety of ways depending on the semantic level at which the derogatory content is situated. However, AT is subject to a number of criticisms, including what Ritchie (2017: 157) refers to as *appropriation worry* (AW).

The paper primarily addresses the outcome issue and presents an account of slur reclamation that dispenses with AT. It is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews some current content-based theories of slurs and illustrates what problems the alleged semantic ambiguity of slurs raises. Section 3 presents an alternative account within the framework of a directive approach, on which a directive element is somehow involved in the use of slurs (cf., e.g., Kirk-Giannini 2019). Let us call it *warning theory of slurs* (WT), which can be expressed by the slogan: *slurs are warnings!* This terminological choice will become clear later on. It will be argued that WT is able to explain slur reclamation without invoking AT. Finally, Section 4 presents conclusions.

2 Content-based accounts and AT

The majority of linguistic and philosophical literature on slurs has focused on slurring utterances as locutionary linguistic acts, with little consideration given to their illocutionary and perlocutionary components. Two principal content-based approaches can be discerned in the analysis of the locutionary content of slurring utterances. These approaches hinge on whether the derogatory/offensive content is situated at the level of what is said or at the level of what is communicated, where such a communicative content may be conventionally implicated (cf., e.g., McCready 2010; Whiting 2013; Williamson 2009) or pragmatically presupposed (cf., e.g., Cepollaro 2015; Schlenker 2007). The truth-conditional account of slurs maintains that the derogatory content contributes to the truth conditions of the slurring sentence. Those who most effectively articulate this perspective are Hom (2008) and Hom and May (2013). In contrast, the pragmatic approach relegates the derogatory content to the speaker's communicative intentions, or at least to a distinct supplementary dimension of meaning that is not truth-conditionally bound to what is literally said.

Both of these types of content-based accounts of slurs must address the phenomenon of variability. The notion of variability can be approached from a variety of perspectives. Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018: 2881–2883) identify three types of variability. *Inter-group variation* (or *word-variation*) refers to instances where a slur is perceived to be more offensive than another. To illustrate, the N-word is generally perceived to be more offensive than "chink", which is a slur used to refer to

Chinese people. The offensiveness of a slur may vary accross different slurring expressions referring to different targeted group, or even to the same targeted group. *Intra-group variation* (or *use-variation*) refers to the phenomenon of the offensiveness of a slur varying across different utterance contexts. To illustrate, the offensiveness of the N-word is neutralized (or at least, significantly reduced) in contexts of use other than hate speech. This is demonstrated by instances of banter, comedy, reclamation, and youth language (cf. Technau 2018). *Audience-variation* is observed when the same slur, in similar contexts of use, yields different levels of offensiveness depending on the background of the audience. Despite the close relationship between these three forms of variability, this paper will focus on use-variation with respect to reclaimed uses of slurs.

Mankowitz and Shaw (2023: 694) define variability as follows: for certain sentences that embed slurring expressions, both non-pejorative and pejorative construals are available. This definition applies to variability in embedding, such as negation, conditionals, reported speech, and questions. However, it can be extended to encompass slurring atomic predications, which can be considered embedding sentences of 0 degree of complexity. For example, sentences in (1) below can have pejorative readings in contexts of hate speech, but also non-pejorative readings in reclaimed contexts. The favorable evaluation of Morgan Freeman's acting abilities in (1b) may render the non-pejorative (reclaimed) interpretation of the N-word prominent.

(1)   a.   Morgan Freeman is a nigger
      b.   Morgan Freeman is my favorite nigger actor

A shift in theoretical interest from the locutionary component of slurring utterances to their illocutionary (and perlocutionary) components is evident in the work of Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018) and Popa-Wyatt (2020). From a performative perspective, a slurring utterance is regarded as an oppressive speech act, whereby the speaker assigns a subordinate discursive role to the targeted group within a conversational game. This discursive subordination can be a precursor to a long-term social subordination. In this framework, slur reclamation is explained in terms of a performative change triggered by repeated uses of a slur in which its felicity conditions are intentionally violated. These felicity conditions require that the speaker belongs to the dominant group: "if the speaker mis-matches the role of the oppressor, the act of discourse role assignment doesn't necessarily fire, because the felicity conditions aren't met" (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2018: 2902). The performative approach to slur reclamation assumes the existence of an underlying derogatory content at the locutionary level. However, it does not provide an adequate explanation of the relationship between such derogatory content and the illocutionary force involved in reclaimed uses. As outlined in Section 3, WT aims to

elucidate the aforementioned relationship on the assumption that the underlying derogatory content of a slur is of an imperative form.

2.1 The truth-conditional view

The truth-conditional view on slurs (TC) posits that the derogatory component of a slur is an integral part of its literal meaning (cf. Himma 2002; Hom 2008; Hom and May 2013). This implies that a slur is inherently offensive in virtue of what it truth-conditionally predicates of the targeted members, regardless of the speaker's communicative intentions, which may mitigate but not entirely eliminate the semantically encoded offense. Therefore, TC is well equipped to account for the phenomenon of offensive autonomy: slurs cause offense even when the speaker does not intend to use them with derogatory purposes.[1]

Accordingly, TC rejects the tenet of *coreferentialism*, which posits that a slur and its neutral counterpart have the same extension. To illustrate, the extension of the N-word should be limited to those individuals who are morally inferior (or similar) due to their black skin. This extension is obviously empty and does not correspond to the non-empty extension of the neutral counterpart "African-American". In general, let S be a slur, and let $S*$ be its neutral counterpart. In accordance with TC, S expresses the property of being $S*$ *and despicable because of it*. A significant implication of TC is that slurs are characterized by having null extension. More precisely, the thesis of null extensionality is a consequence of the truth-conditional paraphrase and the moral claim that no individual should be the target of contempt (Hom and May 2013: 295). (1a) is truth-conditionally analysed as (1a′).

(1)   a′.   Morgan Freeman is an African-American *and despicable because of it*

Variability presents a challenge to the truth-conditional paraphrase. Of course, TC is able to account for non-pejorative interpretations of embedded slurs, but it encounters significant difficulties in explaining their pejorative readings. In fact, if the pejorative content of a slur is part of its truth-conditional meaning, it should be neutralized when negated, hypothesised, questioned, and so forth. This is what TC correctly predicts in cases of non-pejorative interpretation. However, in

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1 The offensive autonomy phenomenon generally supports the idea that the derogatory content of slurs should be understood in terms of a conventionalized meaning. If slurs are perceived as offensive regardless of the speaker's communicative intentions, their offensiveness is likely to be rooted in an objective semantic dimension.

pejorative interpretations, the derogatory content remains intact even when negated, hypothesised or questioned.[2]

The persistence of offensiveness in embedding is an unexpected outcome according to TC. The difficulties intensify in instances of non-pejorative readings in atomic slurring predications, as in slur reclamation. The most natural strategy available to TC proponents is to invoke AT: a non-pejorative reclaimed reading of slurs must entail a change in meaning (Richard 2008: 16). Indeed, Hom (2008: 428) characterizes the phenomenon of slur reclamation as a process through which targeted groups *alter* the meaning of their own insulting epithets in order to reclaim the term for non-derogatory uses within the group. Consequently, AT treats reclamation variation as a form of word-variation.

Proponents of AT generally do not provide details of the novel meaning that the slur acquires as a result of a successful reclamation process. In particular, it is unclear whether the resulting meaning is the same as or different from the meaning of the neutral counterpart. However, the main challenge associated with AT is AW, namely, the failure of those who adopt AT to provide a rationale for why only members with insider status (typically targeted members) can successfully use slurs with a reclaimed meaning (cf. Anderson and Lepore 2013: 43).

2.2 Jeshion's polysemy thesis

Jeshion (2020) makes a case for the use of AT. She focused on the diachronic structure of slur reclamation, distinguishing between two distinct forms: *pride reclamation* and *insular reclamation*. In the context of pride reclamation, in-group members use their own insulting epithet to self-label, thereby expressing pride in their targeted group membership. They publicly present the reclaimed slur as an appropriate way to refer to the targeted group. In contrast, in insular reclamation the insulting epithet is used by in-group members to promote camaraderie within the group. Insular reclamation is characterised by irony and assumes intimacy between speakers. It is notable that in this latter case, the slur is not presented as an appropriate way to refer to the targeted group.

Both processes result in a change of meaning. Through acts of linguistic creativity and innovation, initiated by in-group members and subsequently adopted by out-group members through imitation and diffusion, the pejorative linguistic conventions that govern the use of a slur in hate speech contexts are gradually

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2 To illustrate, consider the negation of (1a), i.e., "Morgan Freeman is *not* a nigger". In a pedagogical context, it has a prominent non-prejorative reading. However, the negated slurring sentence of the same logical form, "Gene Wilder is not a nigger", seems to retain the same offensive impact as (1a).

replaced by novel linguistic conventions that result in reversal of polarity (at *a minimum* neutralizing the derogatory component of the slur) and weapons control (Jeshion 2020: 122). During the reclamation process, and even afterwards, slurs are *polysemic*. They simultaneously retain the linguistic conventions that codify derogation and acquire novel non-derogatory linguistic conventions. As Jeshion's perspective is aligned with AT, it is subject to the same limitations as TC, that is, it is unclear what exactly the new meaning conventions consist of, and AW is not adequately addressed. Once the novel reclaimed meaning is established, the speaker's authoritative status should not be relevant. It is unexpected that the speaker's insider status continues to be a significant element in the interpretation of reclaimed uses of slurs.

2.3 Bianchi's echoic account

An alternative pragmatic account of slur reclamation that does not make use of AT has been proposed by Bianchi (2014). In elucidating the concept of slur reclamation, Bianchi draws upon the distinction between *descriptive* and *interpretive* uses of utterances, as proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986). An utterance may be employed to represent a state of affairs. This illustrates the descriptive dimension of language. It is also possible to employ an utterance to represent another person's utterance concerning a given state of affairs. As Sperber and Wilson (1986: 229) have noted, the interpretive use of language does not entail the ascription of utterances to a particular individual. A subset of interpretive utterances are echoic uses of utterances. In such instances, the speaker represents an utterance (which may or may not be attributed) and conveys to the hearer their attitude towards the represented utterance. A subset of that subset consists of the ironic uses of utterances. These latter can be characterised as echoic uses in which the speaker communicates a dissociative attitude towards the represented utterance. Bianchi proposes that reclaimed uses of slurs should be considered as ironic echoic uses of slurs.

To exemplify the concept of echoic use of a slur, Bianchi (2014: 40) proposes the following *community use* scenario: two gay friends are talking about their new colleague Tom. At some point, one of them utters (2a) below. According to the echoic view, the utterance of (2a) exemplifies a reclaimed use of the homophobic slur. The speaker employs the slur with an ironic echoic *mention* of its derogatory content.

(2) a.   I'm sure Tom is a faggot

In other words, in uttering (2a) the speaker demonstrates a dissociative attitude towards the derogatory content of the homophobic slur, by ironically echoing its use

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by bigoted people. As pointed out by Bianchi (2014: 40–41), reclaimed sentences such as (2a) are also uttered with a descriptive use. In saying (2a) the speaker assert that Tom is a male homosexual, just as in saying (1a) in a reclaimed manner the speaker effectively asserts that Morgan Freeman is an African-American. In response to this possible objection, Bianchi suggests that the speaker echos *only* the derogatory content of the insulting epithet. Despite its merits, especially in dispensing with AT, the echoic view does not fully account for all instances of slur reclamation. As pointed out by Jeshion (2020: 133–134), it fails to account for pride reclamation, where no verbal irony is involved. In pride reclamation, the speaker does not *mention* the slur, but s/he *uses* it literally to self-label.

3 An imperative account for slurs

For content-based theorists, the most natural explanation for the reclamation process is that reclaimed slurring expressions are semantically ambiguous. However, semantic ambiguity gives rise to a number of challenges. Proponent of AT are reticent to provide detailed information regarding the reclaimed meaning. What precisely do (1a) and (2a) mean in the context of their reclaimed use? The novel meaning of slurring expressions appears to oscillate between a neutral stance and a positive evaluation of the targeted group. Furthermore, in addressing AW, proponents of AT are forced to introduce *ad hoc* arrangements to characterize the ambiguity of slurs as a special form of ambiguity that requires group membership criteria for the reclaimed meaning (cf. Cepollaro 2017; Ritchie 2017). While these are theoretically sound maneuvers, they complicate the semantics of slurs. In contrast, Bianchi's echoic alternative, grounded in relevance theory, does not encompass all instances of reclamation. As demonstrated by Jeshion, it fails to account for pride reclamation.

This section presents an account of slur reclamation in the framework of an imperative approach to slurs. WT postulates that the evaluative component of slurs has the form of a directive content. In accordance with WT, (1a) is to be analyzed as (1a″). In general, let p be a slurring predication, $p*$ its neutral counterpart, and q the encoded derogatory imperative content, then p can be analyzed as a *speech acts conjunction* that takes the following form: $\ulcorner a(p)\&!(q)\urcorner$ (Searle and Vanderveken 1985: 155), where the assertive and imperative illocutionary forces are symbolized by "a" and "!", respectively.[3] Sentences such as (1a) can be regarded as *slurring*

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3 It is noteworthy that a speech act conjunction differs from other types of constructions in which imperatives appear as component parts, such as IaD constructions (conditional conjunctions), e.g., "Be late and you'll lose your job!", or "Come in and you'll feel better!", where the truth of the

warnings, where a warning is in general a "conjunction of an assertion that something is the case and of a suggestion to the hearer to do something about it" (cf. Vanderveken 1990: 24).

(1)   a″.   Morgan Freeman is an African-American. Despise African-Americans because of their being so!

It is assumed that the imperative slurring content is a component of what is literally said. This is a significant distinction between our proposal and the directive view put forth by Kirk-Giannini (2019), which posits that the directive content is conventionally implicated, in the sense developed by Potts (2005). Another significant distinction pertains to the particular content of the pejorative directives. WT posits that the derogatory content is roughly similar to that proposed by the TC, albeit expressed in the imperative form. In contrast, Kirk-Giannini posits that a slur is semantically equivalent to its neutral counterpart at the level of what is literally said: "a slur makes the same contribution as its neutral counterpart to the propositional content […] of the expressions in which it is embedded" (Kirk-Giannini 2019: 8). This is consistent with the tenets of coreferentialism. However, a slur would differ from its neutral counterpart in that it is semantically associated with a *not-at-issue* directive to adopt the speaker's derogatory perspective towards targeted members, where a perspective is "individuated by [its] information-organizing properties" (Kirk-Giannini 2019: 4).[4]

The analysis of pejorative content as a literal constituent of a slur allows us to account for the variability in the projective behavior of slurs based on compositional interactions between the pejorative content and the operators, such as negation or reporting verbs, that occur in the sentence in which the slur is embedded. This resource is absent in Kirk-Giannini's view, in which the directive content does not interact compositionally with the *at-issue* content.[5] Additionally, WT offers a further advantage in the treatment of pride reclamation, as will be seen in Section 3.2. The following sections will demonstrate that the two principal forms of slur reclamation (insular reclamation and pride reclamation) can be accommodated in WT without postulating AT.

declarative component depends on whether the imperative is complied with (cf., e.g., Kaufmann 2012).

4 The notion of a derogatory perspective appears to be problematic. A perspective, as a cognitive disposition, can at best be unreliable in leading to true beliefs about the targeted group. It is unclear in what sense it can be perceived as derogatory. The introduction of affective correlates raises concerns about the objectivity of the derogatory meaning (see Section 3.2).

5 In general, the insularity of the conventionally implicated derogatory content presents a challenge in accounting for the variability in the projective behavior of slurs in embedding, such as under negation or in complement clauses of propositional attitude reports (cf. Camp 2018: 41ff.).

3.1 Insular reclamation

The proposal put forth here is that insular reclaimed slurs should be treated as instances of ironic word usage. It is once more relevant to consider Bianchi's community use scenario. In uttering (2a), the speaker makes a reference to Tom, who is an in-group member. It is evident that the speaker is employing the homophobic slur in a reclaimed manner. In light of the postulated hypothesis that a slur is a mixed expression incorporating both descriptive and imperative content (i.e., a slurring warning, as previously stated), irony can be said to assume two distinct forms. The utterance of (2a), where square brackets are used to signal the ironic use of the bracketed expressions, is ambiguous between (2a′) and (2a″). (2a′) represents the reclaimed use, while (2a″) does not neutralize the derogatory nature of the term. It can be argued that irony is insufficient to negate the offensiveness of the term. For instance, in uttering (2a), the speaker may employ irony to suggest that Tom is a Don Giovanni (or something like that). This ironic and still derogatory sense is captured by (2a″).

(2)   a.   I'm sure Tom is a [faggot]$_i$
      a′.   I'm sure Tom is a homosexual. [Despise homosexuals because of their being so!]$_i$
      a″.   I'm sure Tom is a [homosexual]$_i$. Despise homosexuals because of their being so!

Since the ironic meaning of a word is the opposite of its literal meaning, the speaker who utters (2a) is thereby committed to the truth of (2b), where the slur occurs literally. (2b) is to be considered ambiguous between (2b′) and (2b″), depending on the sense (i.e., *declarative* or *prohibitive*) that negation takes. The appropriate analysis of (2b), as implied by (2a) in its ironic and reclaimed use, is (2b′), whose logical form is $\ulcorner \alpha(p)\&!(\neg q)\urcorner$.[6] In contrast, (2b″) is implied by (2a) in its ironic but still derogatory use. (2b″) is expressed in the form $\ulcorner \alpha(\neg p)\&!(q)\urcorner$.

(2)   b.   John is a non-faggot (John is not a faggot)
      b′.   John is homosexual. Don't despise homosexuals for being so!
      b″.   John is not homosexual. Despise homosexuals for being so!

3.2 Pride reclamation

Pride reclamation does not entail irony or meta-communication. The acts of pride reclamation are characterized by directness and sincerity (Jeshion 2020: 121). This presents a challenge for content-based theories that aim to reject semantic

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6 A weaker version is $\ulcorner \alpha(p)\&\neg!(q)\urcorner$, when irony takes wide scope on the illocutionary force.

ambiguity. If the pejorative content of a slur is not ironically modified in pride reclaimed contexts and no meta-communicative mechanism is involved (as postulated by the echoic view), then pride reclaimed uses should be just as pejorative as the unreclaimed uses. This raises the question of how we might then explain the polarity reversal and weapons control in pride reclamation.

Kirk-Giannini (2019) postulates that slur reclamation is a result of a shift in the affective correlates contingently (and subjectively) associated with perspectives: "it is possible for one and the same perspective […] to be associated with negative emotions by one individual or at one time and neutral or positive emotions by another individual or at another time". Thus he suggests that "the process of reclamation associated with certain appropriated slurs be understood as a process of changing the affective correlates of the associated perspectives" (2019: 22). This proposal presents a dual challenge. Once more, AW arises at the level of perspectives.[7] The concept of a derogatory perspective is undermined by a form of subjectivism. If the affective correlates of slurs are the determining factor in differentiating between derogatory and non-derogatory use, then the desired requirement of conventionalized derogatory content will not be met.

An alternative directive account is provided by WT. As previously stated, WT posits that slurs encode imperatives at level of what is said. In uttering a slurring warning, the speaker engages in describing a state of affairs (the one described by the corresponding neutral sentence), and in addition performs an action: ordering, suggesting, or encouraging contempt toward the targeted group. In the context of insular reclamation, the speaker utters the imperative in an ironic manner, thereby conveying the opposite literal imperative. This represents the reversal of polarity in insular reclamation. In the context of pride reclamation, the speaker utters the slurring imperative with the intention of demonstrating resilience in the face of the contempt they have endured. This phenomenon may be observed, for example, in the actions of boxers, who invite opponents to strike with force, thereby displaying indifference to any strikes that may be made. The objective is to convey to the opponent that their blows are ineffective. This explains why pride reclamation can lead to the empowerment of the targeted group through the process of self-labeling, as tested by empirical evidence (cf., e.g., Galinsky et al. 2013). In pride reclaimed contexts the original derogatory content of the slur remains unaltered. Therefore, the initial acts of pride reclamation yield no semantic alteration or change in the affective correlates associated with a particular perspective. Rather, the imperative slurring is uttered as an act of resistance and a display of resilience. This explains why pride reclamation requires, among its conditions of felicity, the speaker's

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7 Why can only members with insider status (typically targeted members) successfully use slurs with neutral or positive affective correlates?

insider status. Out-group members echo the (pride) reclaimed uses, showing solidarity with the oppressed group. Through the processes of imitation, the slur can spread and become a symbol of the targeted group's courage and resilience. This is suggested to represent the reversal of polarity and weapons control in pride slur reclamation.

3.3 The warrant argument

The moral legitimacy of slur reclamation may be challenged by what has been called the *Warrant Argument* (WA), which was anticipated and rejected by Cepollaro (2021). WA says that reclaimed uses of slurs, due to the polarity reversal of their derogatory content, are tainted by the same moral error that underlies their pejorative uses. Standard pejorative uses of slurs in hate speech contexts are based on an unwarranted connection between descriptive properties and value judgments. The same phenomenon could be observed in reclaimed uses, although in this case value judgments derived from descriptive properties are positive. However, WA continues, the unwarranted connection between descriptive properties and positive value judgments in reclaimed uses of slurs may result in a violation of the principle of equality: after all, no individual is *despicable/appreciable* as belonging to a targeted group. This would make slur reclamation morally objectionable. WA could potentially lead to the conclusion that pride reclamation should be condemned for the same reasons that the derogatory use of slurs is condemned.

In order to resist WA, Cepollaro (2021: 680) suggests to consider slur reclamation (in particular, pride reclamation) as a form of *affirmative action*, that is, "in order to balance an unjust mechanism (negative discrimination), it is morally admissible to introduce a countervailing kind of imbalance (positive discrimination) that is supposed to counteract the initial one over time". Cepollaro's response to WA is based on the premise that positive discrimination is morally acceptable, at least when introduced temporarily to counteract an existing form of injustice. However, this principle is not universally accepted, as evidenced by the debate over gender quotas in politics (cf., e.g., Bacchi 2006; Dahlerup 2007). Furthermore, in the case of certain reclaimed terms, such as "Queer", the requirement of temporariness is not satisfied.

A more straightforward way to block WA is provided by our perspective. WT suggests that the polarity reversal in pride slur reclamation does not concern the encoded derogatory content (the slurring imperative), but rather the objectives of the speech act of reclaimed slurring. In standard pejorative uses, the imperative slurring is intended to oppress and subordinate the targeted group. In pride reclaimed uses, while retaining its literal meaning, the imperative slurring is

intended to convey a sense of strength and resilience in the face of adversity. This is done in order to strengthen the targeted group. In insular reclamation, the polarity reversal is not literal, but the outcome of an ironic use of words. WA is avoided by denying that there is an unwarranted connection between descriptive properties and value judgments in slur reclamation.

4 Conclusions

The majority of theories of slurs posit that they are offensive towards targeted members due to an underlying derogatory content. An adequate theory of slurs must account for instances in which slurs do not convey the intended derogatory content. One illustrative example of a non-derogatory use of a slur is its reclaimed use. In explaining slur reclamation, the most natural move for content-based theorists is to draw on the semantic ambiguity between reclaimed and unreclaimed slurs. However, AT presents a number of challenges. Typically, proponents of AT are reticent to indicate the novel meaning that a slur acquires at the end of a successful reclamation process. It is commonly accepted that reclamation, particularly pride reclamation, does not merely reduce the meaning of the slur to that of its neutral counterpart. The reclaimed slur seems to convey something more, and thus the question arises as to what this additional information might be.

The primary challenge that proponents of AT must address is AW. In response to it, they propose *ad hoc* arrangements to account for the semantic ambiguity of slurs after the reclamation process, characterizing it as a special kind of ambiguity. An alternative, pragmatic explanation of slur reclamation that does not rely on AT is Bianchi's echoic view. This approach has the advantage of avoiding AT, but it is not comprehensive enough to cover all cases of reclamation. In particular, it does not explain pride reclamation. Kirk-Giannini's directive approach circumvents AT, albeit at the cost of admitting a shift in the affective correlates of derogatory perspectives associated with slurs. This strategy reintroduces AW at the level of perspectives and invokes a problematic concept of derogatory perspectives. This paper has provided a proposal for how to treat the evaluative component of slurs in terms of imperative content, which contributes to the level of what is literally said as a component of a speech act conjunction. It was demonstrated that the imperative approach to the derogatory content of slurs proposed here is suitable for explaining the two main forms of slur reclamation (insular reclamation, pride reclamation) without resorting to AT.

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