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Practices of slur-use

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Abstract

Given the apparent nondisplaceability and noncancellability of the derogatory content of slurs, it may appear puzzling that non-derogatory uses of slurs exist. Moreover, these uses seem to be in general available only to in-group speakers, thereby exhibiting a peculiar kind of context-sensitivity. In this paper I argue that to understand non-derogatory uses we should consider slurs in terms of the kind of social practice their uses instantiate. A suitable theory of social practices has been proposed by McMillan. In typical (derogatory) uses the practice is one of bigotry and discrimination. Non-derogatory uses are only possible to the extent they consitute acts of an alternative, non-derogatory practice. In the core cases it must be a subversive practice of satire or reappropriation. The social identity of speakers is not an ultimately decisive factor (in-group uses may still be derogatory) but it is an important constitutive condition: most non-derogatory practices of slur-use can only be performed by a member of the target group.
Keywords: Slurs, non-derogatory uses, social practices, in-group uses, reappropriation, intentional description.

1 Introduction

There are many ways in which one can insult, derogate or offend people based on their membership in a social group, whether defined by race, religion, sexual orientation, class etc.: repeating harmful stereotypes, imputing objectionable behaviors, mocking people's speech, hurling obscenities at them or simply saying "I don't like those [...]", and so on.[1] There is, however, a class of words, which have come to be labelled with the semi-technical term *slur*, that are importantly different in that they are specialized, weapon-like vocabulary, which has no other purpose than to hurt and denigrate. As such, they are uniquely involved

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in practices of discrimination and injustice. Nevertheless, slurs - some slurs, sometimes - can also be used in ways that are not derogatory. Explicating this possibility and the relation between non-derogatory (ND) slur-uses and the harmful practices in which slurs are normally involved is the objective of this paper.

In section 2, I describe ND uses of slurs and the theoretical puzzle they pose. I argue that the speaker's social identity (unlike their intentions) is a critical factor for determining whether a give slur use is derogatory or not, but not the ultimately decisive one, and that extra-linguistic context also has a role to play. I propose to employ the concept of social practice to capture the relevant configuration of speaker identity and context. In section 3, I briefly discuss the nature of slurs and their relation to practices of bigotry, and in section 4, I sketch a theory of social practices based on a recent proposal by Kevin McMillan. Finally, in section 5 I bring all the threads together to show how we can understand ND uses of slurs as acts of alternative practices of subversion, re-appropriation or community-building.

2 Non-derogatory uses of slurs

There is substantial debate concerning the nature of slurs' meaning, the mechanisms by which it is communicated, their various properties, as well as the boundaries of the category.[2] What is undeniable is the derogatory content of these expressions, its unique toxicity, and broad scope. Unlike with other pejoratives, such as *asshole* or *idiot*, a slur insults and denigrates not only its referent on a given occasion of use, but all members of the social group which it targets.

Moreover - and this is also rather uncontroversial - this derogatory content is extremely difficult to cancel, mitigate or displace in any way. Two fundamental properties of slurs can be defined with respect to this. First, very strong *Projection*: derogatory content 'escapes' from all embeddings, and cannot be displaced.[3] Second, slurs are also characterized by a property that has been called *Derogatory Autonomy* (cf. Hom (2008).) The derogation of slurs is independent of the speaker's manifest attitudes or intentions, as the following examples of all-too-familiar kinds of remarks illustrate:

(1) Some of my best friends are faggots. I have nothing against them.

(2) I believe that niggers are just as good or bad as the rest of us.

(3) You gotta admire the cleverness of those kikes.

[2]See, among others, Ashwell (2016), Blakemore (2015), Bolinger (2017), Cepollaro (2015), Croom (2015), and Sosa (2018).

[3]Cf. Simons et al. (2010) on types of projective content, and Anderson and Lepore (2013) for a discussion of projection with slurs. A formal theory of two-dimensional meaning, which accounts for projective behavior, is applied to slurs in McCready (2010).

Statements like these are very often nothing but expressions of hypocrisy, but what is important to note is that even if they are uttered sincerely and with best intentions they remain offensive, and the slurs used in them still carry their derogatory meaning.

Considering how strong the intuitions concerning the non-displaceability (Projection) and non-cancellability (Derogatory Autonomy) of slurs' derogatory content are, it may appear puzzling that ND uses of slurs exist. Their distribution is very limited, and their nature unclear and debated, but there are many examples familiar and robust enough, such as these:

(4) "Wop" is a slur for Italians.

(5) My child said our neighbor was a "jap". I had to do a lot of explaining.

(6) I'm not a chink - I'm Chinese. (Whiting 2013)

(7) There are no niggers, there are only African-Americans. (Anderson and Lepore 2013)

(8) [Richard Pryor:] White folks do things a lot different than niggers do. They eat quiet and shit...

(9) [among friends, both Black:] Hey, my nigga!

(10) [among friends, both gay:] Oh, you know Tony, he's that fabulous fag from the bar.

(11) [name of an organization:] Dykes on Bikes.

(12) Our department is opening a BA program in Queer Studies.

The various slurs in (4)-(12) arguably do not convey a derogatory meaning in those particular uses; or at least they have salient non-derogatory interpretations - unlike the examples (1)-(3) in the previous section, where no such interpretations were available.

The apparent reasons for these slurs not having a derogatory effect are varied. In (4) and (5) the expressions are quoted, and therefore only *mentioned*, and not actually *used*. Quotation neutralizes derogation and offensiveness, making it possible to talk *about* slurs in a neutral way. In (6) and (7) the slurs are also not used directly. While no overt quotation device is present, the contrast between a negated slur and an endorsed co-extensive neutral expression in each example makes it clear that the negation is meta-linguistic, and therefore the slur is also only mentioned. For a discussion of meta-linguistic mentions of slurs, see Whiting (2013), Anderson and Lepore (2013) or Cepollaro and Thommen (2019).

These examples are not particularly puzzling or controversial. The mechanisms of quotation and meta-linguistic negation[4] are external to a theory of slurs - whatever the nature of

[4]Cf. Geurts (1998) for a discussion of meta-linguistic negation and Cappelen and Lepore (2017) for an overview of quotation theories.

their derogatory meaning, it is to be expected that it becomes neutralized in such contexts. In light of this, I will not discuss these kinds of non-derogatory uses any further.

The remaining examples are more interesting and potentially problematic. Perhaps the most prominent example of ND slur use, in American English at least, is the use of *nigger* by Black comedians, hip-hop artists and writers.[5] Example (8) comes from a routine by the Black stand-up comedian Richard Pryor. Chiefly in the spelling/pronunciation variant *nigga*, as in (9), the word is also used in the vernacular of Black speakers, often in a familiar way.[6]

Some homophobic slurs have such non-derogatory in-group uses as well. (Cf. Brontsema (2004).) *Fag*, *queer*, or *dyke* are all used among homosexual speakers with manifestly no derogatory meaning (as in (10)). *Queer* and *dyke* are also frequently used in the contexts of political activism - in the names of LGBTQ organizations (as in (11)) or events, in slogans etc. *Queer*, moreover, has a specific conventionalized use in academic contexts, as in *queer studies* or *queer theory*, where it functions as a descriptive term referring to "non-normative" forms of sexuality and sexual identity. In this sense, it seems to be largely separated from derogatory associations.

Such uses of slurs - which are often called *reclaimed* or *reappropriated* uses - are generally limited to in-group users. (*Queer studies* appears to be an exception. I will come back to that later.) That is, it seems that only a member of the group targeted by a given slur can use it in a non-derogatory way, and get away with it, so to speak. This is especially clear in the case of the N-word, and the fact that only Black speakers seem to be 'allowed' to use the word without causing offense, has been thematized and discussed in the public discourse and in popular culture.[7] The situation is similar with other slurs, including the homophobic terms mentioned above - their non-derogatory uses seem to be available only to in-group speakers.

This apparent limitation gives rise to the common complaint of bigots everywhere "If they can say it, why can't I?". If we disregard the offensiveness of the complaint, and focus on the theoretical content of the question, it is an important and perplexing one.

[5]See Asim (2007) for an in-depth discussion of ND uses of 'the N-word'. Note that Asim (like many others) is critical of the widespread in-group use of the slur, arguing that it inadvertently serves to reinforce the subordinate position of African-Americans. "Re-appropriated" uses of slurs often give rise to such controversies within the target communities. I will not engage this issue; my focus is on describing the conditions under which a use of a slur may be treated as non-derogatory, even if there are reasons to avoid such uses anyway.

[6]Throughout this paper I rely on examples of slur-use taken from American English and American society. Such examples are most often discussed in academic literature on slurs, and it is also easiest to find non-academic discussions and opinions on them. I will assume that a theoretical account of the sort I propose here is abstract enough to be applicable to other contexts - roughly speaking, if there exist ND uses of whatever words are slurs in a given culture, they will depend on the availability of non-derogatory, subversive practices.

[7]See, e.g., Julious (2015) or the *Black-ish* episode discussed below.

Slurs exhibit a kind of context-sensitivity that is rarely, if ever, found in any other lexical category.[8] Whether a slur is derogatory or not in a given instance of use seems to depend on the social identity of the speaker - on their race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation (relative to however the group targeted by the slur is defined).

My aim in this paper is to investigate this dependence of the derogatory status of slurs on the social identity of their users, and to suggest a theoretical explanation for it. The first step is to get a strong theoretical grip on what exactly this dependence is.

Prima facie, it may be tempting to assume that speakers' intentions or attitudes are somehow essential to non-derogatory uses, but it is easy to find examples showing that for out-group speakers, good intentions are not enough to make their uses of slurs non-derogatory. We have seen this already in (1)-(3). Those examples could possibly be explained away because they require a lot of charity to be interpreted as well-intentioned and not hypocritical. But a lack of hypocrisy is not enough. A high-profile case in point was supplied a few years ago by the Hollywood actress Gwyneth Paltrow (see Weiner (2012)). Paltrow is friends with the rapper Jay-Z and in June 2012 attended a concert by him and Kanye West in Paris. Jay-Z's and Kanye's well-known song "Niggas in Paris" was played during the concert, which apparently prompted Paltrow to tweet a photo of herself on the stage with a caption that contained the words: "Ni**as in Paris for real". The context - *nigga* being a word ubiquitous in hip-hop music and culture - and the publicly known friendship between her and Jay-Z leave no doubt that she had no derogatory intention, and was referencing the title of the hugely popular song to express her excitement at taking part in the event. And she even took care to mitigate any possible offence by a strategic use of asterisks. None of that helped, and a brief twitterstorm of indignation ensued. Crucially for my purposes, despite apparently best intentions and a favorable context, Paltrow's attempt at a *non-derogatory* use of a slur failed - and clearly it failed because of the fact that she is herself not a member of the target group (Jay-Z or Kanye West can use the word in a non-derogatory way after all).

In response to examples like this, one could argue that given the pervasiveness and ubiquity of discriminatory practices which slurs symbolically encapsulate, in the case of out-group speakers there is always a residual doubt whether or not their use expresses a genuinely non-derogatory attitude towards the slur's targets. Cepollaro (2017) for instance, seems to suggest this, writing that "since slurs are taboo words with a strong social load, for appropriated uses to be admissible it must be completely unquestionable that the speaker is

[8] I am grateful to anonymous referees for pointing out that this may be more common in non-lexical linguistic categories. For instance, the uptake of a speech act may essentially depend on the speaker's identity. Register may also be sensitive in this way, e.g. when rudeness or coarseness is neutralized by familiarity or camaraderie. On slurs and register, cf. Pullum (2018); on slurs and speech acts, cf. Anderson, Haslanger, and Langton (2012) and Camp (2018); both topics invite further study.

strongly and honestly fully opposed to the negative evaluation that slurs encode, to such an extent that appropriated uses are initially only available to in-groups". This line of thinking could seem to apply to cases like Paltrow, and especially to the "good bigot" examples (1)-(3). The problem with this explanation, however, is that even in-group speakers may fail in an attempt at a non-derogatory use of a slur, despite their best intentions.

This is aptly illustrated by an episode of the popular ABC sitcom *Black-ish*.[9] Jack, the Johnsons' 8-year old son (the whole family is, of course, African American) performs at a school talent show with Kanye West's song "Gold digger". Faithful to the text of the song, he utters the lyrics: "Now I ain't sayin' she a gold digger/ But she ain't messin' with no broke nigga". Everyone present is immediately mortified, and later school authorities decide to expel Jack, judging that he has violated their "zero-tolerance" policy for hate speech. It is therefore clear that an utterance of *nigga* made by an in-group speaker in a situation where no malicious intent could reasonably be suspected - we're talking about an 8-year old! - still failed to be non-derogatory. The matter is slighlty complicated by the fact that a child might be taken to be a less-than-fully competent speaker, and the context of a school performance institutes special rules of decorum. But the episode provides an even better illustration of the problem. Bow and Dre Johnson learn about their son's impending expulsion from a Black principal during a meeting in his office. Dre assumes a friendly rapport with the principal and calls him "my nigga" - but is met only with a silent stare of indignation. His slur-use also fails to be non-derogatory, despite the fact that it is a face-to-face conversation, in which all parties are in-group speakers, and despite the fact that Dre's intentions are obviously not only non-malicious, but "fully opposed to the negative evaluation" that the slur otherwise encodes - his point is precisely that this is a word to be used as a mark of solidarity between Blacks.

One can easily imagine many other such examples, and many can be encountered in real life. A gay politician may refer to her wife as *dyke* in a non-derogatory way in a speech at a gay-rights rally - but not during a state dinner or a TV interview commenting on latest coalition talks. A Jewish comedian's use of *kike* to refer to himself may be ironically self-deprecating, but his use of the same word in a temple would be offensive to other Jews. These distinctions have little to do with the speaker's intention, and a lot to do with the (extra-linguistic) context. But simply saying that a use of a slur can be non-derogatory given suitable context would not be sufficient. In the Paltrow case, the context seemed to be exactly right: she was on stage after a concert, referencing a song that had been performed, in the company of the artists involved, and with manifestly good intentions given her public

[9]Season 2, Episode 1 "The Word", first aired on September 23, 2015. The episode was praised for its sensible approach to the topic and taking a moderate stance (see Hope (2015)), which suggests that it accurately represents 'mainstream' social consciousness regarding this issue. Note also that throughout the episode the slur is beeped out and even the lips of whoever utters it are blurred.

friendship with the song's author. Her use of the N-word should have counted the same as Jay-Z's - except that he is a member of the group targeted by the slur, and she is not.

To explain the possibility of ND uses of slurs and to account for their uniquely limited distribution, one needs a concept that captures the specific constellation of extra-linguistic context and social identity required for a slur to not be derogatory. I propose the concept of *practice* for this task and I will argue that ND uses of slurs are possible insofar as they are acts of a non-derogatory practice, as opposed to their default status as acts of bigotry. The difference between Jay-Z's and Gwyneth Paltrow's uses of *nigga* or between the two uses of *dyke* by the imaginary gay politician is that some of those uses would fail to instantiate the right kind of practice. Crucially, I will suggest that non-derogatory practices of slurs are at their core practices of subversion or reclamation and as such they may be unavailable to out-group users. This has nothing to do with intentions and attitudes, however, but with the fact that the identity of a practice is *constitutively* dependent on the social identity of the agent. Thus, when an out-group speaker performs a superficially similar act of slur use, it may in fact fail to exemplify the same practice. To put it simply, it is important *what* one is doing when uttering a slur - but what one is doing, may depend on *who* they are. Before I elaborate on these remarks, in the next section I will briefly outline a general understanding of the nature of slurs.

3 Expressive commitments and acts of bigotry

The philosophical literature on slurs is for the most part concerned with the nature and mechanisms of the derogatory content of slurs.[10] As I have already suggested, my focus here is rather on what one *does* with slurs. For this reason, and to save space, I will not engage in a discussion of any theories of the meaning of slurs;[11] instead, in this section I will outline a conception of slur utterances as acts of specific social practices, which will be embedded in a general theory of practices described in section 4. What I say here should be mostly uncontroversial and I shall assume that it is largely true independent of any particular theory of the meaning of slurs.

[10]For an overview, see Hess (forthcoming). On different theories, the derogatory content may be directly expressed by the slur (Hom 2008) or conveyed as a presupposition (Cepollaro 2015) or conventional implicature (McCready 2010); it may express pejorative evaluations and stereotypes (Camp 2013) or non-cognitive attitudes (Whiting 2013; Jeshion 2013), etc. Non-content-based theories of slurs focus rather on the sources of their offensiveness than on their meaning; cf. Anderson and Lepore (2013) and Bolinger (2017), and in so doing they give some answer to the question of what one does when uttering a slur (e.g. for Anderson and Lepore what one does is violate a norm), but the account of Nunberg (2018) provides the most natural starting point for my argument.

[11]I will therefore also omit any critical discussion of rival accounts of non-derogatory slurs. Cf. Bianchi (2014), Cepollaro (2017), and Ritchie (2017) for important contributions that assume a content-based theory of slurs. I take it that my practice-oriented account can at least importantly complement, if not substitute those approaches.

Geoff Nunberg (2018) argues that what one does in uttering a slur (in a basic, derogatory use) is, to put it very simply, to side with the bigots. When using, e.g., the word *kike* instead of *Jew*, one is taking the side of anti-Semites, by *speaking like they do*. This is, on his account, the source of the derogatory meaning of slurs: "In a nutshell: racists don't use slurs because they're derogative; slurs are derogative because they're the words that racists use". Nunberg frames this as a special kind of conversational implicature: roughly, by using a slur instead of a neutral counterpart, the speaker implies that they belong to a community in which this is the preferred way of speaking. It is important to note however that such implicatures should be independent of speaker's intentions, as we have already seen that relying on intentions would be a problem for an account of non-derogatory uses. For this reason I prefer to use the notion of *commitment*.[12]

By uttering a slur instead of a neutral expression, a speaker undertakes a commitment to this being the right way of speaking - to the slur being an appropriate term for the given referent. This commitment, which can be called 'expressive', is in a way trivial - a speaker is by default committed to the appropriateness of all expressions they use. For instance, one can be committed to calling a given piece of furniture a *couch* or a *sofa*. (For a discussion of (expressive) commitments in this sense, see Harris (2014) and Hess (2018). The concept of "expressive commitment" as used here is borrowed from Brandom's (1994) inferentialist theory of language.) In another way, the commitment is far from trivial or innocuous, because slurs, unlike words for pieces of furniture, are linked to practices of discrimination and injustice. They are, indeed, tokens of those practices. By undertaking a commitment to the effect that the slur is an appropriate expression, one is *ipso facto* committing oneself to it being appropriate to denigrate and offend the people who are the slur's targets, because that is the load that the slur carries. The connection between slurs and discrimination is a conceptual one: a given word is a *slur*, a toxic, offensive expression, because it is part of practices of bigotry.[13] While injustice and discrimination have many different faces, some more sinister than that, verbal abuse is definitely one of them. Speaking like a racist (as Nunberg describes it) is not just that, and it's not just siding with racists, it is, of course, *being racist*.

It is surely uncontroversial that a speaker using a slur (in a standard, derogatory way) is participating in a practice of bigotry. My main claim in this paper will be that ND uses of slurs are possible insofar as the speaker, in their slur-use, is able to participate in an *alternative practice*. Whether or not a given slur-use may count as exemplifying an

[12]Gwyneth Paltrow certainly did not intend to align with racists, and did not mean to derogate anyone, so it does not seem adequate to describe the derogatory effect of her slur-use as an implicature. It may be that the issue is merely terminological, and I substantially agree with Nunberg, but the term 'commitment' works better to capture the responsibility of the speaker for the words uttered.

[13]The closeness of the connection is evidenced by the fact that a given word's status as slur is part of linguistic competence: a competent English speaker must know what kind of word *nigger* or *faggot* are.

alternative, non-bigoted practice, may in turn depend on the social identity of the speaker. To substantiate this claim, a suitable theory of social practices is needed - the next section will be devoted to that.

Nevertheless, the concept of commitment introduced here already does a lot of explanatory work. For the essential property of commitments is that they are largely independent of speaker's intentions.[14] By using a slur, a speaker undertakes commitment to the slur being an appropriate or adequate expression. The significance of such a commitment, and the derogatory force of the slur, stem from the practices of discrimination and injustice that are associated with such expressions. Thus, the speaker cannot simply disavow the derogation as long as they are committed to the slur-use, even if they have no intention to derogate. In this way expressive commitments account for *failed* attempts at ND uses, such as the examples in (1)-(3), and the Paltrow and *Black-ish* cases. The speaker's good intentions are not enough to override the associations carried by the word they chose to use.

The only straightforward way to disavow an expressive commitment is by *not using* the slur, but only mentioning it. This is why in examples (4)-(7) the speaker may avoid derogating or offending in any way - because they are only quoting or meta-linguistically referring to the slur. Therefore, they are not undertaking an expressive commitment to its appropriateness. These are non-derogatory mentions of slurs, rather than uses, and as such they are not very interesting and not directly relevant to my topic.

4 A theory of social practices

For an account of social practices, I will rely on a recent proposal by Kevin McMillan (2018). who develops a theory that could serve as an empirically adequate conceptual framework for social sciences. For my purposes, however, that goal is not as important as the fact that at its core the theory is simple, intuitive and based on Donald Davidson's well-known theory of action.

McMillan's theory has three basic tenets. First, social practices are contingent, historical things. Second, and closely related, practices are deeply *contextual* things; without specific material, institutional and conceptual conditions in the broader context, a given practice would not come into being. Moreover, "the relationship between a practice and the key elements of its context is constitutive in nature." What this means, is that it is not possible

[14] This is easy to see in the case of assertoric commitment, i.e. commitment to the truth of what one asserts. In asserting that p, a speaker is undertaking a commitment to anything that is entailed by p, whether or not they intend to do so. (A speaker's commitments are something quite different than what a speaker communicates.) Expressive commitments of the sort involved in the use of slurs share the nature of assertoric ones, but they are commitments to something else - to the appropriateness of an expression, not to the truth of a proposition.

for an individual to engage in an action that would instantiate a given practice if the context is not appropriate - even if they can physically perform an action that is similar in some ways, it can fail to be an act of that specific practice. Third, practices are *kinds of regular actions*, where actions are understood in a Davidsonian manner as events under an intentional description. (Cf. Davidson (1980).) They are not anything implicit, anything "grounding" or "determining" actions, like norms, rules, principles or habits, but they are also not just regularities of behavior. They are, so to say, regularities of behavior under an intentional description. And thus whether or not a certain behavior (even regularly repeated one) may instantiate a given practice depends on the availability of a suitable intentional description.

McMillan's nuanced discussion of intentional descriptions and their constitutive role in individuation of practices, may be simplified here as follows. An intentional description in the required sense is a description with the use of such concepts as may be the content of human intentions. A person's repeated hitting of a block of wood with an axe may be described in purely physical terms referring only to the movements of their body parts and the resulting movement of the axe etc., or it can be described as "chopping firewood", or "letting off steam". The latter two are intentional descriptions in the required sense (one action can be both those things), because they are things that someone may intend to do. The same applies to social practices on McMillan's construal: there are ways of describing regularities of human social behavior that may be objects of someone's intention, as opposed to non-intentional descriptions (e.g. on a subpersonal, or on a statistical level). A given practice exists in a society in question only if people in this society are in possession of an explicit concept of such a practice, so that they may intentionally engage in it. Note that this is a general condition, and it does not require every individual engaging in the practice to do so consciously and deliberately or even to be fully aware of the appropriate description (this point will be of some importance later).

More importantly for my purposes, even if the description exists, a given action or piece of behavior may fail to instantiate the right practice, if the key elements of the context are not adequate. There are many factors at play - many ways the context could be such that it would fail to constitute the given practice - but the one most relevant to my argument is the identity of the agent. If, for instance, someone who is not a registered voter performed an action superficially identical to voting - went into the voting place, filled out a ballot, put it into the box etc. - they would not actually be engaged in the specific practice of voting.

Importantly, this is independent of the individual's intentions - they could have been convinced they are on the voter list and had no illicit plans, but still would fail to perform an act of the right practice. The intentional-description condition refers to practices as

kinds of actions not to individuals' intentions. A reverse situation is therefore also possible - one may in fact perform an act of a practice, even though they did not intend their action as such, and possibly are not even aware of the adequate description. The individual in my example may have engaged in the practice of voter fraud, without knowing or intending to do so, or even being aware that it is an illegal action.

What I have presented here is a very rough sketch of a theory of social practices, but it is entirely sufficient for my main purpose, which is to explain the possibility of ND uses of slurs. Different uses of slurs may instantiate different practices - and this difference may be sensitive to the identity of the agent-speaker, which is a key constitutive element of the context.

5 Practices of slur-use

Default, basic uses of slurs are acts of bigotry, injustice and discrimination - they exhibit a social practice which is shameful and reprehensible, but definite and robust. Their status as instances of such a practice is independent of the intentions of the speaker on a given occasion. A speaker using a slur instead of a neutral and respectful expression is responsible for it and thereby committed to the slur being appropriate; and it is only "appropriate" insofar as it serves as a token of prejudice and derogation.

That slurs are acts of such a practice depends on the conditions which make this practice possible - the material and ideological underpinnings of discrimination and hate based on perceived differences between social groups - but also on the fact that the relevant intentional descriptions exist. We have indeed the (more or less definite) concept *slur* which refers to words that are not just pejorative, but toxic and unacceptable because of who, how and why they pejorate. As Nunberg (2018) observes, *slur* is itself a thick term, mixing categorization and evaluation, unlike terms such as *pejorative*. Not all pejoratives are reprehensible in the way that slurs are.

A corollary of this is that pejoratives which are not associated with practices of injustice and discrimination - and therefore are not objectionable in the same way - are not considered slurs. *Asshole* is not a toxic slur, because there is no systematic practice of disdain towards assholes as a demographic category. There is of course no reason to suppose that the distinction is clear-cut. Whether or not terms like, say, *junkie* or *prostitute* are toxic and reprehensible in the same manner as racist or homophobic slurs may be a matter of controversy and shifting social attitudes. While theories of slurs may entail that specific terms should be classified one way or another, it is also important to note that such questions are often a matter of differences of opinion in a society and of public debate.

To sum up my argument so far, by uttering a slur - in the default kind of use - one

is participating in a hateful practice. It is through association with such practices that slurs possess their uniquely toxic derogatory force. Pejoratives that are not (perceived to be) associated with robust practices of injustice are not (perceived to be) as offensive as slurs. I can now articulate what I have already advertised as my main claim: a use of a slur may be non-derogatory only insofar as it exhibits an *alternative practice* of slur-use. In other words, if a speaker is not to participate in a practice of bigotry when uttering a slur, they must be participating in another, definite and identifiable practice. In the next few paragraphs I will elaborate on this, and then show how my approach lets us make sense of both successful and unsuccessful attempts at ND uses as illustrated by the various examples in earlier sections.

For an utterance of a slur to be non-derogatory, there must exist a practice of such non-derogatory uses. According to the picture I drew in the previous section, based on McMillan's theory, this requires, first, that people actually do engage in a kind of regular action that can qualify as such a practice, and second, that an adequate intentional description - a concept of just such a practice - exists. If one looks around for a kind of regular non-derogatory slur use that meets those criteria, the most prominent example is the actual practice of *re-appropriation* of slurs.[15] The concept of such a practice - of using slurs by in-group speakers in order to reclaim and disarm those words - is undoubtedly present in the social consciousness; re-appropriation is widely debated both in public discourse and in academic scholarship. Moreover, people actually do engage in such a practice - members of targeted groups re-take and re-adapt slurs used against them in subversive ways to denounce the injustice they face and to fight back. The two most important contexts of robust practices of slur re-appropriation have been on-the-streets political activism and comedy (in stand-up, film and TV). In the case of one slur in particular, hip-hop music and subculture was equally important. It is from those contexts that the most familiar and unambiguous instances of non-derogatory slurs discussed in the literature come from. Besides the N-word, the slurs that have most prominently been subject to widespread practices of re-appropriation are homophobic slurs such as *dyke*, *faggot*, *queer*, or *gay*. These slurs can be successfully used by in-group speakers in a non-derogatory way because their uses may be recognized as performances of a distinct practice, acts of subversion, not derogation (I discuss out-group uses and not-apparently-subversive ones below).

Importantly, slurs that are not embedded in robust practices of this kind appear to be much more difficult to use non-derogatorily. Many, perhaps all slurs, can in favorable conditions be felicitously used self-referentially, especially with a tone of self-deprecating irony, but that does not often extrapolate to uses referring to other members of the target

[15]Below, I will mention other practices of non-derogatory slur use which are not as explicitly political, but I propose treating re-appropriation as the core practice, from which - if it is successful - other kinds of use may evolve.

group. While slurs for homosexuals and African-Americans in particular have been a topic of strategic debate and often objects of more or less organized collective action in the target communities for decades, many other routinely slurred groups have not engaged in any widespread efforts at re-appropriation. This is likely due to the fact that most such social groups do not possess the sort of collective identity, embedded in a set of collective discourses, organizations, and practices, that African-American and LGBTQ communities do. There are arguably no adequate material and political conditions for the targets of, say, *wetback*, *hajji* or *retard*, to build strong practices of re-appropriation; and it seems in fact difficult to find examples of non-derogatory uses of these slurs. These facts provide important corroboration to my main claim that non-derogatory uses of slurs are possible insofar as they are acts of a determinate practice of re-appropriation.[16]

Beyond the existence of an appropriate practice, however, another condition has to be met for a given individual use of a slur to be non-derogatory: the circumstances in which it happens must be appropriate, including especially the identity of the speaker. Just like in the example of voting, an individual action will not instantiate the practice of voting if it is not performed in the right place, on a specific day etc., or if it is performed by someone who is not a registered voter. Practices of subversion and re-appropriation of slurs are not codified in the same way as voting laws, of course, but they do impose specific conditions on their performance. Even if a slur is uttered with no derogatory intention, its use will not always reasonably count as an act of subversion or an attempt at re-appropriation. It has to be done in a specific context - political activism and artistic expression are the most natural environments for such acts - and by someone who is in a position to act subversively. The latter condition can normally be met only by a member of the group that is the target of practices of bigotry and discrimination associated with the slur in question. An out-group speaker would simply not be doing the same thing with their use of the slur. This is a statement of a constitutive relation: an utterance of a slur by an out-group speaker does not constitute an act of re-appropriation. And therefore it is not a non-derogatory use. Given the uniquely offensive status of slurs and the strength of the taboo attached to them, their interpretation may tend to be binary - a use of a slur either is derogatory and offensive, or it is positively non-derogatory and subversive, with little neutral ground in-between - and to lean by default heavily towards the former.

In section 2 I noted that slurs exhibit a special kind of context-sensitivity, so that whether or not they convey a derogatory meaning may depend on the social identity of the speaker. According to the picture presented here, however, it is not a matter of meaning

[16]Note that even with respect to the same target groups, not all slurs seem to have the same status. Other slurs for Blacks, such as *spook* or *coon* do not seem to be often used non-derogatorily, if ever. On my view, this is because they have never been targets of strategic re-appropriation the way that the N-word is. The reasons for that are for social historians, rather than philosophers of language, to investigate.

so much as of what one does with the utterance of a slur. And regardless of a speaker's possible intentions and genuine attitudes, the strength of the association between slurs and social practices of bigotry and discrimination is so strong, that what one does with a slur is normally an act of derogation. Only insofar as a given use of the slur may be positively and reasonably associated with a different practice, can it be taken as non-derogatory. That alternative practice should normally be a practice of subversive re-appropriation of the slur, and as such it is only available to those who have something to subvert, i.e. to the members of the target group.

These last statements require an immediate qualification, because to some extent the conditions imposed on non-derogatory uses of slur may be relaxed. Not all non-derogatory uses are explicitly subversive acts, as they often are in political or artistic contexts. In particular, both racist and homophobic slurs can be used in a friendly, non-malicious way in conversations between members of the target groups. These uses are arguably non-derogatory, even though there is no overt political purpose. Bianchi (2014), for instance, calls them 'community uses' and distinguishes from deliberate (re-)appropriation. From the perspective I suggest here, the non-malicious uses of (some) slurs among in-group speakers - to address each other or to refer to other members of the group - also constitute a distinctive, robust social practice. They can be construed as a way of fostering shared communal identity and are socially regulated: they are not accepted in every context and by any speaker (out-group speakers are still typically excluded). Slurs used like this are often accompanied with a conscious, and sometimes explicit, assumption that "we can say it, but they can't" - which is both a condition on acceptable uses and a way of defining and strengthening a sense of "we". But even if they're used entirely non-deliberately, and even mindlessly, these slur-utterances may still be acts of such a practice: the understanding of practice I propose here based on McMillan's theory does not require that an agent's actions are consciously and deliberately performed as acts of a given practice to actually be such acts.[17] In other words, practices of non-derogatory slur-use may include ones that are not explicitly subversive, but they follow the same logic.

One can imagine an evolutionary trajectory that leads from the overtly subversive uses of slurs to those less purposeful, but still loaded community uses, which would possibly not exist without the prior explicit work of re-appropriation, and beyond that to uses in social practices that are broad enough that they may allow out-group speakers to participate. The best example of this is the word *queer* as used in the context of an academic discipline of *queer studies*. With regard to that context, uses of *queer* (which may otherwise still be used as a homophobic slur) are essentially always non-derogatory, independent of the social

[17] Asim (2007) explicitly connects the uses of *nigga* incorporated into everyday speech with the more poignant and deliberate uses in early rap, although he does not fully approve of either.

identity of the speaker. If the picture I am presenting here is correct, that is because the practice of which those uses are instances - the practice of the academic discipline in question and the broader public discourse that refers to it - is one that imposes no particular condition on its participants. Anyone's use of *queer studies* can be non-derogative. Notice, however, that in such uses and contexts, the word *queer* is largely deprived of both its derogatory, and its subversive potential. Essentially the same is the case, to a large extent, with *gay*, and possibly other older slurs like *Mormon*. Although the process of their neutralization was not mediated through academic discourse, it seems that in all such cases the broadening of the scope of practices in which they can be used - of the different things one can do with them - in a non-derogatory way, went hand in hand with the loosening of requirements on the social identity of those who would attempt to use them in such a way, as well as with evaporation of derogatory meaning (and without derogatory meaning there is also no subversive use). *Gay* appears to be more and more the preferred respectful term for its referents, and requires special malice to even be used as an insult. It may be well on its way to achieving the status of *Mormon*, an entirely neutral word in present-day English, whose origins as a term of ridicule are largely forgotten.

Now that I have explained in detail how I propose to understand the relation between the (non-)derogatory status of slur-uses and the social practices in which they are implicated, let me briefly show how this approach can account for the success and failure of the different attempts at ND uses that were discussed in earlier sections. Examples (1)-(3) of the "well-meaning bigot" variety do not require much comment. Even if one of these is uttered with the best intentions, if it is said by an out-group speaker (as it obviously is in each of the three cases), the slur will carry its full derogatory and offensive force. That is because there are no grounds to construe such an utterance as an act of any positive non-derogatory practice - such practices being in principle only available to in-group participants - and the strength of the default association with the practice of disparaging and insulting homosexuals is overwhelming. A competent speaker of English can be expected to know this and to avoid using offensive language if they really do not intend to derogate - otherwise, they are committed to the choice of vocabulary that stands in for a hateful practice and therefore their utterance is itself an act of that practice.

Largely the same has to be said about Gwyneth Paltrow's misguided tweet. The association between the casual use of the N-word in 21st-century hip-hop and any positive practices of subversion or community-building may be often quite weak, but it is clearly still strong enough to make non-derogatory uses of the slur only possible for those who could participate in such practices, that is, only to Blacks. Or to put it differently, the popular, very casual use of the slur with not much attention paid to its either derogatory or subversive potential has itself evolved into a robust social practice (of a scope much wider than

hip-hop culture), which may be all the more important for Black speakers and communities. (Cf. Carroll (2016).) Whether or not someone is allowed to say the word is a constitutive aspect of being an in-group or out-group agent. It is therefore almost tautological that a white person such as Paltrow cannot use the word, and if she does attempt to, she may be perceived as usurping a right that she does not have, possibly making the offense even worse.

The situation is very different, obviously, in the case of Jack and Dre's failed attempts at non-derogatory uses of the same word in the episode of *Black-ish*. They are both in-group speakers and thus ND uses may in principle be available to them (it is revealed in another scene of the episode that all the adults in the family use the word casually and frequently), but the social identity of the speaker is not the only element of the context that is important and that may be critical for the (im)possibility of engaging in a practice of ND uses of slurs. And thus, a school talent show is simply not an adequate setting for young Jack to try to repeat Kanye's use of the N-word. Similarly in the case of Dre and his exchange with the school principal. Dre attempts to use the N-word to establish a friendly rapport with the principal (which, if successful, could be an act of a community-building practice of re-appropriation), but only offends him precisely because the situation is not friendly and does not make room for this sort of relationship between them. The practices of non-derogatory slur use cannot be instantiated in all situations (which appears to be also the main point of that episode).

Finally, let us return to the list of different ND uses from section 2 (ignoring (4)-(7) which involve meta-linguistic uses). The uses of slurs in each of (8)-(12) are properly understood as acts of one of the practices discussed in this section: subversive re-appropriation in stand-up comedy (8) and in political activism (11), implicit re-appropriation in 'community uses' (9-10), or neutralization in academic discourse (12). In each but the last case, the utterance may be non-derogatory only if the speaker belongs to the relevant target group. This is perhaps more complex in the case of "Dykes on Bikes" - it is a public, well-known organization, and arguably anyone can refer to it with its proper name without effecting any derogation and offense. But the crucial factor here seems to be who and why chose the name - that choice was an act of subversive re-appropriation of a slur. It's not just what is said, it's who says it that matters for the identification of the relevant practice.

6 Conclusion

Non-derogatory uses of slurs are limited in their distribution, theoretically puzzling and socially controversial, but their existence is both a fact of language use and an object of public consciousness. I have argued that there are good reasons to think that the non-

derogatory status of some slur-utterances is dependent on the social identity of the speaker, and not on their intentions, and my main aim in this essay was to develop a theoretical account that helps us make sense of this peculiar kind of context-dependence that slur-uses exhibit. To achieve this, however, it was necessary to recognize that the speaker's social identity is not a directly decisive factor, but rather the (non-)derogatory status of slur-uses depends on what kind of social practice they exemplify. The role of speaker's identity is that of a constitutive condition - some practices are such that only members of certain social groups may successfully engage in them; non-derogatory practices of slur-use by and large belong to this kind. And thus, non-derogatory uses of slurs reveal an important truth about language - speakers are not in full control of what their words mean.

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