



# Slurs, insults, (backhanded) compliments and other strategic facework moves



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## ABSTRACT

*Slurs* such as *nigger* tend to function as “disparaging remarks”: that is, they are an attempt by speakers (S) to deliberately deprecate a target – or targets (T) – in some way (Croom, 2011). Accordingly, they can be seen to share the same pragmatic space as other verbally aggressive acts such as insults, put-downs, snubs and backhanded compliments (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000). Mention of backhanded compliments, in turn, serves as a useful reminder that compliments can be seen as representing the positive end of a larger pragmatic space relating to the speaker’s evaluation of the addressee, with slurs and insults representing the negative end (Taavitsainen and Jucker, 2008) and back-handed compliments, a positive/negative blend. In this paper, I introduce a facework scale that serves to capture face-enhancing and face-threatening strategies (and combinations thereof). It can thus explain various uses of terms such as *nigger*: for example, its use in order to slur or negatively frame another (Croom, 2011); its use (by in-group members) to express affection for or approval of another (Smitherman, 2006); and unsuccessful cases of (re-)appropriation (Bianchi, 2014) such that an utterance meant to build camaraderie between S and T ultimately serves to offend T. The facework scale can also explain additional facework moves, such as S’s use of strategic facework strategies which afford them some plausibility deniability (Archer, 2011; Leech, 1983). Although paradigmatic slurs are not likely to be (strategically) denied by S, given their overt use in insulting, injuring, threatening the face of, or otherwise imposing a negative identity on T (Croom, 2013: 178), facework which is strategically ambivalent in some way(s) can be an effective means of S manipulating others’ views of T without explicitly “doing” impoliteness (Archer, 2011). This work thus contributes to the field of im/politeness research as well as to the growing body of (pragmatic) research focussing on slurs.

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## 1. Introduction

In line with the overall aim of this particular volume of work, one of my objectives in this paper is to take a substantive step forward in capturing the facework involved in (strategically) slurring, insulting, injuring, threatening the face of, or otherwise imposing a negative identity on a given target (T). Consider slurring for example. The uttering of *nigger*, *faggot* and *slut* in order to slur constitutes an overt strategic denigration of T (Croom, 2011). Indeed, like abusive swearwords (*fucker*, *shit*) and other more general pejoratives, *nigger*, *faggot* and *slut* offer speakers (S) ‘a uniquely expressive resource with which to convey their

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subjective feelings, perspectives and emotions' about T (Croom, 2013: 178). Unlike swearwords, however, slurs constitute more than just an emotional outburst on S's part. This is because the paradigmatic aim of slurs is to *associate T negatively with an ethnically-/gender-loaded descriptive feature X* – where X (from S's perspective) might be T's inferior ethnicity, decadent sexual orientation, excessive sexual activity, etc. It is this directed focus that also makes slurs different to more general pejoratives like *loser* and *idiot*, of course (Croom, 2014: 232–236); especially in respect to restricting the potential for S to claim plausible deniability (Leech, 1983) should they wish to deny the implicature of their utterances. It is possible to use some slurs derogatively but non-paradigmatically, nonetheless. *Faggot* tends to be regarded as a sexist slur (associated with homosexuality), but can also be used in certain contexts to signal other negative attributes (Croom, 2013: 190): for example, that, from S's perspective, T is an "idiot", "loser", etc. It is possible, in addition, for in-group members to use terms such as *faggot* and *nigger* non-derogatively. Bianchi (2014) provides the example of two gay friends talking about a new colleague, and one uttering: *I'm sure Tom is a faggot* (2014: 40). Important points made by Bianchi, in this case, include that S was committing himself to the belief that Tom is homosexual, but not to the offensive content expressed or conveyed by *faggot* when used as a slur by members of the "dominant community". The gay friends were also speaking privately. Similarly, Croom (2013: 190–94) highlights a plethora of studies where *nigger* has been appropriated by certain groups such that its in-group meaning(s) signify a level of social intimacy (Brown and Levinson, 1987), banter (Leech, 1983; Culpeper, 1996), teasing (Drew, 1987) or even what Croom (2013) has labelled verbal rough-housing. What all of these studies emphasise, however, is that having the right *in-group status* is crucial if terms such as *nigger* are going to be heard/understood non-offensively. This is evident in Smitherman's (2006: 58) other-focussed claim that many 'from the Old Skool [sic]...have heard or use *nigga* [sic] in everyday conversations with *other Blacks*' (my emphasis) as well as in Clinton Brown's self-focussed claim below (cited in Smitherman, 2006: 58):

(1) J. Clinton Brown, 'In defence of the N word' (1993)

I have heard the word niggah (note the spelling, dig the sound) all of my life. Many of my elders and friends use it with phenomenal eloquence. They say it to express amusement, incredulity, disgust or affection. These people are very much about being themselves—proudly, intensely, sometimes loudly (my emphasis).

(1) is thus very different to (2), involving Emily Parr. Emily (a white woman) was taking part in Series 8 of the British version of the *Big Brother* reality TV show. During a conversation with two female participants, with whom she appeared to be on very friendly terms, Emily referred to Charley Uchea (a black woman) using the term, *nigger*:

(2) *Big Brother*, Series 8, 6th June 2007

- 1 Charlie: I hope I'm not pregnant I-  
Emily: ohh, you're pushing it aren't you nigger  
Z:  
[audible intake of breath heard, accompanied by sounds and gestures depicting surprise/shock]
- 2 Charlie: [leaning close to Emily] [you're in trouble  
Emily: I'm so- don't don't make a meal out of it  
Z: -Emily, I can't believe you [said that
- 3 Charlie: you're in trouble I know you were but you are in some  
Emily: though I was joking  
Z:
- 4 Charlie: serious shit sorry. oh my god I'm not even saying anything  
Emily: why? I was joking  
Z:
- 5 Charlie: -SHUSH [oh my god. do you know how many  
Emily: I was jok[ing  
Z: no. just don't talk about it-
- 6 Charlie: viewers are watching out there there's [probably going to be [xxx] big [xxx]  
Emily:  
Z: [don't make a big deal out of it
- 7 Charlie: fancy you saying that [xxxxx] no way  
Emily: someone's already used that word in this house  
Z:
- 8 Emily:  
Charlie: near me? I'm a nigger I am one. oh. fancy using it in here. maybe  
Z: [suppressed laugh]
- 9 Emily: [xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx]  
Charlie: you see it in rap songs or something or maybe your uni friends  
Z:

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