



Social acceptability of sexist derogatory and sexist objectifying slurs across contexts

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ABSTRACT

In one study, we investigated how Italian men and women generally evaluate and socially accept two classes of sexist slurs, namely Sexist Derogatory Slurs (e.g., *bitch*) and Sexist Objectifying Slurs (e.g., *hot chick*). Moreover, we examined whether social acceptability of these classes of slurs change across different types of relationships (i.e., work-related context or affective relationship) and as a function of the gender of the user (i.e., man or woman). Results showed that Sexist Derogatory Slurs were rated as more offensive and less socially acceptable than Sexist Objectifying Slurs. Moreover, in an affective relationship the latter were more acceptable than the former. In the working-relationship, Sexist Derogatory Slurs were always unacceptable whereas Sexist Objectifying Slurs were less acceptable when used by a man than a woman.

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1. Introduction

In the few last years, several episodes of sexist derogation have hit the headlines, especially when they involved politicians. This was the case for Silvio Berlusconi when he suggested renaming his political party *Forza Gnocca* (“Go Pussy” in English; Ceccarelli, 2011, October 7), as well as the case of Patrick Devedjian, who called a female opponent *salope* (i.e. “bitch”; “Sarkozy ally says sorry for ‘unspeakable’ insult”, 2007).

Several studies conducted mainly in the United States have highlighted frequent use of sexist language (Swim et al., 2001; Swim et al., 2004). In a daily-diary study (Swim et al., 2001), it has been found that 75% of women reported sexist hassles within three days. These emerged especially in the form of verbal comments targeting participants themselves, other women or women in general. Specifically, the most common offenses fell into three main categories: comments referring to traditional gender role prejudice and stereotyping (e.g., “you are a woman, so fold my laundry”), demeaning and derogatory comments (e.g., “bitch”), and sexually objectifying remarks (e.g., “that’s a nice boulder holder”). In addition to frequency, studies in the United States have investigated which are the most offensive comments that men and women use to address a woman. The results showed that both men and women equally pointed to sexist slurs that portrayed women as sexually loose, such as “bitch”, “slut”, and “cunt”, regardless of the user’s gender (James, 1998; Preston and Stanley, 1987). In a similar study conducted in different cultures (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008), the results attested that the majority of terms addressing women were sexist slurs and that female participants overall perceived the insults to be more offensive than men did.

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In the present study, we aim to extend this line of work on the evaluation of sexist slurs in several respects. First, differently from previous studies, we focused on two different classes of sexist slurs. As pointed out by Swim and colleagues (Swim et al., 2001), sexist comments can be differentiated on the basis of their content. We focused here on the same sexist derogatory slurs that were considered in previous studies (Preston and Stanley, 1987; Swim et al., 2001; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008), but we also extended our analysis to sexual objectifying slurs. Second, we examined not only the offensiveness, but also the social acceptability of these two classes of slurs. Social acceptability refers to the extent to which a slur that targets an individual member or a group is (or is not) at odds with social norms of nondiscrimination concerning that group (see the concept of acceptability of prejudice introduced by Crandall et al., 2002). Hence, while offensiveness points to the negative, detrimental tone of the slur *per se*, social acceptability refers to the extent to which using such a slur to label a target is condoned (or condemned) by society. Third, we examined the influence of different social contexts, beyond the gender of participants and of the target, on the social acceptability of both sexist derogatory and sexist objectifying slurs. The present research highlights the interplay between language and context on the acceptability of such slurs and contributes to the understanding of the potential reactions and consequences of being targeted by and of being exposed to sexist language.

1.1. Sexist slurs between derogation and sexual objectification

While “women” is a descriptive term used by the speakers and listeners to identify individuals or groups in an affectively neutral manner, slurs point to “members that possess certain descriptive features [...] to derogate them on that basis” (Croom, 2013a, p.4). Sexist slurs then are not purely category or descriptive labels, but they refer to women in a disparaging and pejorative manner. As other classes of derogatory labels, slurs may vary on their evaluative tone as well as on their content (see the distinction between valence and complexity; Mullen, 2001; Mullen and Johnson, 1993; Mullen et al., 2000).

Previous research has mostly focused on slurs such as “bitch” or “slut” (Preston and Stanley, 1987; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). However, these slurs are not the only frequently used women-bashing terms. As suggested by the study of Swim et al. (2001) in addition to derogation, sexism can verbally manifest itself through sexual objectification. Notice that previous works on racist slurs have also put forward the distinction between derogatory and non-human, objectifying slurs (Croom, 2008, 2013b). In the present research, we suggest that sexist slurs can be differentiated into at least two classes. On the one hand, there are *sexist derogatory slurs* (SDSs; see also Swim et al., 2001). These are terms (e.g., “bitch,” “whore”) that derogate women by stressing hostile stereotypes of women along with a dimension of promiscuity and sexual looseness in which women’s morality is denied (Coyne et al., 1978; Preston and Stanley, 1987). Likely this type of slur goes hand in hand with a distancing motivation and negative emotions, such as contempt and disgust, toward women. On the other hand, there are *sexist objectifying slurs* (SOSs). By contrast, these are terms (e.g., “hot chick,” “pussy”) that stress women’s physical appearance and attractiveness rather than promiscuity (Allen, 1983). This second class of sexist slurs communicates the subordinate status of women with respect to men’s sexual desires and reduces women to objects of men’s sexual interest. Thus, SOSs likely underline an approaching motivation, although it is limited to a sexual goal (Gruenfeld et al., 2008).

In this study, we analyzed the offensiveness as well as the perceived social acceptability of a series of slurs that are exemplars of SDSs and SOSs in the Italian language. In particular, we examined how these two classes of slurs are appraised when decontextualized (i.e., not embedded in a social context). Given the distinct content and the different motivations underlying these two classes of sexist slurs, we expected SOSs to be judged as less offensive (Hypothesis 1a) and more socially acceptable than SDSs (Hypothesis 1b).

1.2. Contextual factors and sexist slurs

Research on sexist slurs has devoted limited attention to investigating whether the evaluation of sexist slurs varies across contexts. To our knowledge, only the gender of the person making women-bashing comments has been empirically examined (Preston and Stanley, 1987; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). It has been shown that the gender of the user did not matter, as both men and women use similar sexist slurs to address women. Notwithstanding the importance of these studies, our work aims to investigate the impact of other contextual factors beyond the gender of the user. The importance of the context has been stressed by a different but related line of work, which is the research on taboo terms (Jay, 1992, 2009; Jay and Janschewitz, 2008). Specifically, in this line of research it has been shown that slurs such as “cunt” are judged to be more offensive and less appropriate when used in a public situation (i.e., an office) rather than in a private situation (i.e., a college dorm), and when used by a person of high status (i.e., a dean) rather than of low status (i.e., a janitor).

Sexist episodes may emerge in a variety of specific social settings and relationships (e.g., friendship, love relationship, workplace, etc.; Klonoff and Landrine, 1995; Matteson and Moradi, 2005), and it is likely that people’s evaluation and reactions differ across contexts. Hence, we examined the acceptability of SDSs and SOSs when used in a relationship. In particular, we varied the gender of the user and compared the acceptability of sexist slurs when used in the course of an affective relationship or in a working relationship in which the user of the slurs holds a position of either higher-status or equal-status to the target.

We reasoned that the use of derogatory language could be considered more inappropriate in non-intimate rather than in intimate relationships (see Nussbaum et al., 2005), assuming that the use of slurs in an intimate relationship is more likely to take place in a private situation. Moreover, slurs used by a friend or a partner could be reframed in the light of a positive intimate relationship, thus leading to a higher rate of acceptability (Croom, 2011; Kleinman et al., 2009). Conversely, the use of

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