



Slurs and stereotypes for Italian Americans: A context-sensitive account of derogation and appropriation

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Abstract

Recent research on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs has offered insight into several important facts concerning their meaning and use. However, prior work has unfortunately been restricted primarily to considerations of slurs that typically target females, homosexuals, and African Americans. This is problematic because such a narrowly focused attention to slurs in prior work has left theorizing of how slurs generally function relatively uninformed by facts of actual language use. As a result, theoretical accounts of slurs that have so far been proposed have largely failed to accurately reflect actual usage, account for the empirical findings about slurs and general pejoratives from the social sciences, and offer any informative predictions to help guide future research. At this time more empirically oriented homework on the variety of ways that different slurs have been used in different cases would be helpful for theorists to consider so that they can proceed to develop more nuanced and empirically informed theories about slurs, their usage, and their effects. Accordingly, since no account of slurs for Italian Americans has so far been offered, this article provides a systematic and empirically informed analysis of slurs for Italian Americans that accounts for both their derogatory and appropriative use. Further, this article demonstrates that the family resemblance account of slurs maintained here has major advantages over previous accounts insofar as it is flexible yet robust enough to accommodate both the derogatory and appropriative use of slurs, can explain many of the psychological effects that slurs actually have on both their users and targets, and is more in accord with the real rather than ideal nature of our organic human psychology.

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1. Introduction

Slurs such as *guido*, *gook*, *wop*, and *whore* are linguistic expressions that are primarily used and understood to derogate certain group members on the basis of their descriptive features (such as their race-based or sex-based description) and expressions of this kind have been considered by many to pack some of the nastiest punches natural language has to offer. In “Expressivism and the Offensiveness of Slurs,” for example, [Jeshion \(2013b\)](#) asks, “What explains slurs’ deep offensiveness, their capacity to derogate, to dehumanize?” (p. 308) and so prior work on slurs has unsurprisingly focused largely on the projection behavior of their derogatory force across various linguistic contexts, including those involving questions, negations, disjunctions, conditionals, modal operators, event quantifications,

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presuppositions, and indirect reports (Croom, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2014a; Hom, 2008, 2010, 2012; Potts et al., 2009; McCready, 2010; Hedger, 2013; Hom and May, 2013; Whiting, 2013; Cepollaro, 2015). Yet the potential offensiveness of slurs is not only evidenced from considerations of their projection behavior across various linguistic contexts, but is further demonstrated by the fact that their use has often been implicated in derogatory acts, verbal threats, physical violence, and hate-motivated homicide (Fitten, 1993; Hoover, 2007; Shattuck, 2009; Nappi, 2010; Guerriero, 2013; Beswick, 2014; Jackson, 2014). So one basic fact about slurs is that they are among the most potentially offensive linguistic expressions afforded by natural language.¹

Even if all slurs may be offensive due to their being commonly used and understood as slurs, it is nonetheless clear that not all slurs felicitously apply to all targets indiscriminately. Instead, as Croom (2014a) points out, the “application of a particular slur in context does not occur at random, but instead based on considerations of their systematic differential application-conditions, which concern descriptive features of targets such as their racial or sexual identity” (p. 228; see also Croom, 2015b,c). Evidently then, it is because slurs are commonly used and understood to felicitously apply toward some targets yet not others that language users are able to systematically distinguish between relatively *broader* categories of slurs (such as the racial slur *guido* from the sexual slur *whore*) and how speakers are able to systematically distinguish between relatively *narrower* categories of slurs (such as the racial slur *guido* from the racial slur *gook*) within those broader categories (p. 228). In fact, Anderson and Lepore (2013a) have pointed out that there are actually a wide variety of slurs in natural language “that target groups on the basis of race (‘nigger’), nationality (‘kraut’), religion (‘kike’), gender (‘bitch’), sexual orientation (‘fag’), immigrant status (‘wetback’) and sundry other demographics” (p. 25). So another basic fact about slurs is that they are commonly used and understood to felicitously apply toward some targets yet not others.

Although some writers such as Arthur Piccolo have expressed the view that “the very term Guido is so offensive that it ought never to be uttered, much less studied and discussed, by an Italian American, not even a scholar trained to analyze social facts” (quoted in Viscusi, 2010; see also Hedger, 2013, p. 229),² other first-person reports from in-group speakers, along with recent empirical studies from the social sciences, have now demonstrated that slurs are often flexibly employed such that they may also (at least in some restricted contexts) be used non-derogatorily to convey affiliation among in-group members, or to diminish the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried (Hom, 2008; Richard, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Croom, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014a; Bianchi, 2014). For instance, Bianchi (2014) writes in “Slurs and Appropriation” that “targeted members or groups may appropriate their own slurs for non-derogatory purposes, in order to demarcate the group, and show a sense of intimacy and solidarity” (p. 37). Johnson (2009) also explains in “Educators Find that Teens Use Ethnic Slurs Affectionately,” that many teens and entertainers, among others, “are doing what linguists call “melioration” – reclaiming a word meant to sting by removing its barb.” As Conley (2010) further points out in *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult*, “most of these [slur] terms can be used ironically or even as terms not of abuse but of endearment – depending, of course, on the situation or scenario” (p. 21). So another basic fact about slurs is that they are often flexibly employed and of potential use, not only derogatorily to convey offense toward out-group members, but also non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members, or to diminish the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried.

Although recent work on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs has offered insight into several important facts concerning their meaning and use – including that slurs are commonly used and understood to felicitously apply toward some targets yet not others, that slurs are among the most potentially offensive linguistic expressions afforded by natural language, and that slurs are often flexibly employed and of potential use, not only derogatorily to convey offense toward out-group members, but also non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members, or to diminish the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried – previous research has unfortunately been restricted primarily to considerations of slurs that typically target females, homosexuals, and African Americans. One reason why this is problematic is because such a narrowly focused attention to slurs in prior research has left prior theorizing of how they *generally* function relatively uninformed by facts of actual language use. Consequently, theoretical accounts of slurs that have so far been proposed have largely failed to accurately reflect actual usage, account for the empirical findings about slurs and general pejoratives from the social sciences, and offer any informative predictions to help guide future research. At this time more empirically oriented homework on the variety of ways that different slurs have been used in different cases would be helpful for theorists so that they can proceed to develop more nuanced and empirically informed theories about slurs, their usage, and their effects. Accordingly, since no account of slurs for Italian Americans has so far been offered, the purpose of this article is therefore to provide a systematic and empirically informed analysis of slurs for Italian Americans that accounts for both their derogatory and appropriative use.

¹ For other recent empirical work exploring the offensiveness of slurs and general pejoratives see also Jay and Jay (2015), O’Dea et al. (2014), and Saucier et al. (2014).

² Hedger (2013) has for instance argued that “Slurs express contempt regardless of the attitude or particular use of the speaker” (p. 229).

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