

CHAPTER 2

Call me by my name

Hate speech and identity

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to examine social labels not only as tools of *description* of social identity but also as means of *construction* of our and other people's identities. I will endorse an Austinian, *performative* perspective on social labels, and focus on a particularly hateful kind of labels, namely slurs. Rather than analysing what slurs mean or *say*, I will devote my attention to what speakers *do* with slurs—and to the different kinds of speech acts that they allow speakers to perform. Firstly, I will characterise how standard, derogatory uses of slurs contribute to shaping toxic and harmful identities for both their targets and their speakers, as well as their non-targeted addressees. Secondly, I will show how appropriated, non-derogatory uses of slurs can help to constitute

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positive identities for targets, setting the boundaries of groups and communities. While slurs reinforce oppressive social norms and hierarchies, and may even legitimate discriminatory actions against targets, appropriation is a way to disrupt such unfair norms and hierarchies, to subvert the subordinate position imposed on targets, and to reclaim strong, positive, proud identities. From this perspective, language is a powerful tool of exclusion, oppression, and discrimination—but, hopefully, also of inclusion, emancipation, and self-determination.

Keywords: slurs, identity, speech acts, appropriation, derogation

1. Introduction

In the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, 16-year-old Callie Stephanides goes to the New York Public Library and looks up in Webster's Dictionary the word used by her doctors to describe her condition:

Hermaphrodite -1. One having the sex organs and many of the secondary sex characteristics of both male and female... See synonyms at MONSTER.

There it was, *monster*, in black and white, in a battered dictionary in a great city library. A venerable old book, the shape and size of a headstone, with yellowing pages that bore marks of the multitudes who had consulted them before me ... Here was a book that contained the collected knowledge of the past while giving evidence of present social conditions ... she stared down at that word. *Monster*. Still there. It had not moved. And she wasn't reading this word on the wall of her old bathroom stall ... the synonym was official, authoritative; it was the verdict that the culture gave on a person like her. *Monster*. That was what she was. (Eugenides 2002: 430–431)

Words are tools that allow us to communicate with others, to describe objects and individuals inhabiting the world. At the same time, we use words to give a certain order to reality: we assign names to objects and people, and classify them into categories and groups. Most of the time, we have the impression that we are merely reflecting a reality that is given to us; even with regard to social reality, we think of language as a mirror of individuals and groups that exist independently of us. By endorsing an Austinian, *performative* perspective on language (Austin [1962] 1975), I will show that language does not just mirror reality—but *shapes* and transforms social reality, and especially social identities, groups, and hierarchies. That is why people have the right to choose what they wish to be called, either as a group or on an individual basis: they have the right to be called by their name.

The aim of this chapter is to examine social labels not only as devices of *description* but also as means of *construction*, of our and other people's social identities. I will focus on a particular kind of hateful social labels, namely derogatory epithets, or *slurs*. Rather than analysing what slurs mean or *say*, I will turn my attention to what speakers *do* with slurs—to the different kinds of speech acts that they allow speakers to perform. On the one hand, I will characterise how standard, derogatory uses of slurs contribute to shaping toxic and harmful identities for both their targets and their speakers, as well as non-targeted addressees. On the other, I will show how appropriated, non-derogatory uses of slurs help to constitute positive identities for targets and target groups, setting the boundaries of groups and communities.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I will show how category labels and slurs function as devices of social management, and of social control. In Section 3, drawing on Austin's speech acts theory, I will introduce the performative perspective on hate speech and slurs. In Section 4, I will provide some examples of how slurs help to construct a strengthened dominant group for the speakers and their addressees, and a weakened group for the targets, hence contributing to 'outgrouping' targets and 'ingrouping' addressees. In Section 5, I will present *appropri-*

ated uses of slurs, namely non-derogatory uses, typically by members of the target group, that are intended to foster camaraderie and to display power and a sense of belonging. In Section 6, I will illustrate how, while standard uses of slurs reinforce oppressive social norms and hierarchies and may even legitimate discriminatory actions against targets, appropriation is a way to disrupt such unfair norms and hierarchies, to subvert the subordinate position imposed on targets, and to reclaim positive identities—both for individuals and groups. From a performative perspective, language is a powerful tool of exclusion, oppression, and discrimination—but, hopefully, also one of inclusion, emancipation, and self-determination.

2. Social labels and slurs

Words are key devices of social control. We classify people and groups with the help of social labels, which we then use to justify and legitimate our beliefs, emotions, and actions towards individuals and social categories. Labels, indeed, influence our expectations of individuals and our behaviour towards them, while also projecting stereotypes and prejudices. They are a sort of *lens* through which we see and interact with others, and through which we learn to see ourselves. In this sense, social labels are ways in which we control and discipline individuals. For example, once a label such as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ has been applied to someone, we expect particular appearances, feelings, attitudes, and behaviours from them; non-conformity with such expectations will be acknowledged, condemned, and sometimes even punished. Part of the function of social labels is to make classifications seem natural, obvious, and rational, and to conceal their contingency and historicity, hence suppressing the need to either justify or criticise such categorisations (on social labels, see inter alia Rothbart and Taylor 1992; Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst 2000, 2002; Bastian and Haslam 2006; Haslam and Levy 2006; Prentice and Miller 2007; for an overview, see Leslie 2017).

This normative dimension of language is especially evident for forms of expression that fall under the label of ‘hate speech’. The definition of this term is highly contentious. Hate speech concerns ‘insulting, degrading, defaming, negatively stereotyping or inciting hatred, discrimination or violence against people in virtue of their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, for example’ (Brown 2017, 419–420), and may include a wide variety of expressive forms, ranging from words to gestures, from sounds to images, and from symbols to communicative behaviour. Here I will deal only with an uncontroversial instance of hate speech, that constituted by slurs. Slurs are particular social labels (such as ‘dyke’ or ‘wop’) targeting individuals and groups of individuals on the basis of race, nationality, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and so on.

Since the start of the 21st century, scholars working on slurs have identified a number of features that characterise their linguistic behaviour (see for example Hornsby 2001; Hom 2008; Potts 2005, 2007; Richard 2008; Croom 2011, 2013; Camp 2013; Anderson and Lepore 2013a, 2013b; Jeshion 2013a, 2013b; Bianchi 2014a, 2014b, 2021; Jorgensen Bolinger 2014; Nunberg 2018; Cepollaro 2020; for a [more](#) recent overview, see Hess 2022). Here I will address only those features of slurs that make them powerful devices for the construction of social identities—in both negative and positive ways.

First, slurs convey hatred of and contempt for their targets, displaying unique derogatory force. Indeed, most scholars consider slurs to be more offensive than non-slurring pejoratives (terms like ‘stupid’ or ‘idiot’, targeting individuals rather than groups of people). As Robin Jeshion puts it, ‘Slurs are widely regarded as extraordinarily pernicious, far more so than many other pejoratives like “jerk” or “idiot”—harming their target’s self-conception and self-worth, often in ways that are common to the social group as a whole’ (Jeshion 2013b: 314). Indeed, while pejoratives only express the negative attitude of the speaker towards a particular individual, slurs target an entire social category: ‘That explains how the impact of a slur can be more explosive and threatening

than any expression that merely gives voice to the speaker's point of view, however charged it is or how emphatically it is uttered' (Nunberg, 2018: 286).¹ Slurs denigrate the members of a target group *because* they are members of that group, thereby exemplifying the social aspect of hateful language: unlike insults, which denigrate individuals because of something that they *do*, slurs denigrate individuals because of something that they *are*—their (real or perceived) social traits.

Another feature characterising slurs is that their derogatory force *evolves* over time, reflecting the values and dynamics of the society: expressions that were once neutral (such as 'Negro' or 'Coloured') have become derogatory, while expressions that were once insulting (like 'gay' or 'Tory' and 'Whig') are no longer perceived as offensive. Chris Hom, for example, points out, that

As target groups gradually integrate into the dominant society, and active discrimination subsides, the derogatory content of the corresponding epithets will typically fade. Examples of gradual decline might include epithets for Irish immigrants such as 'mic' or 'paddy' (for American English), terms that were much more antagonistic one hundred and fifty years ago in the United States. (Hom 2008: 427–428)

1 The intuition that slurs are more offensive than non-slurring pejoratives has recently been experimentally confirmed by Cepollaro, Sulpizio, and Bianchi (2019). Their pilot study showed that, on average, slurs are indeed perceived as more offensive than non-slurring insults, but only when presented in isolation ('wop' versus 'idiot'). In fact, when slurs occur in atomic predications of the form 'Claudia is a wop', they are perceived as less offensive than when they occur in isolation. According to them, a *decrease* in offensiveness in atomic predications could be explained in terms of the *information* provided by slurs. In addition to denigrating and dehumanising, slurs, unlike insults, also function to *describe* the subject, to provide factual information regarding features such as nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and the like. On the contrary, a non-slurring insult like 'asshole' does not provide any specific descriptive information about the subject; it simply expresses a negative attitude.

Additionally, slurs inflict long-lasting *harm* not only on their targets but also on bystanders. Empirical studies show that racial insults and slurs cause physical or psychological damage to targets: such damage ranges from nightmares and post-traumatic stress to hypertension, psychosis, and suicide (Delgado [1982] 1993; D’Augelli 1992; Swim et al. 2001, 2003; Cowan and Mettrick 2002). Slurs also increase the gap between targets and dominant groups, even as far as non-racist group members are concerned. The non-racist members of the dominant group feel relieved not to have to undergo similar abuse, while members of the target group treat even non-racist members of the dominant group with hostility and suspicion (Matsuda [1989] 1993). Moreover, empirical studies by Greenberg and Pyszczynski show that slurs have a detrimental impact not only on targets but also on bystanders: ethnic slurs prompt *negative evaluations* of the target group by those who overhear the slur (Greenberg and Pyszczynski 1985; Kirkland, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 1987).

More recent findings go even further. Experimental studies by Carnaghi and collaborators investigate the effects of homophobic slurs on the self-perception of heterosexual males, showing that when exposed to homophobic slurs they are motivated to underline their masculinity and claim a distinctly heterosexual identity by distancing themselves from homosexuals: ‘derogatory language not only activates prevalently negative images about gays but also triggers identity-protective strategies in heterosexual males, thereby creating an even stronger gap between heterosexuals and homosexuals’ (Carnaghi, Maass, and Fasoli 2011: 1663; see also Fasoli, Maass, and Carnaghi 2015).

3. How to do things with slurs²

We said in Section 1 that words are devices not only of *description* but also of *construction* of social reality. This is in line with John Austin’s performative perspective on language, which focuses not

² I borrow the title of this paragraph from Croom (2013).

on what words *say*, but on what speakers *do* with them. According to Austin's speech acts theory, we must distinguish three different acts within the same total speech act—for example, the uttering of a sentence like

(1) Shoot them!

The *locutionary* act is the act of saying something, the act of uttering certain expressions that are well formed from a syntactic point of view and are meaningful. The *illocutionary* act corresponds to the particular force that an utterance like (1) has in a particular context (order, request, entreaty, challenge, and so on): by uttering a sentence we can bring about new facts, undertake obligations and legitimate attitudes and behaviours, institute new conventions, and modify social reality. The *perlocutionary* act corresponds to the effects brought about by performing an illocutionary act, and to its consequences (intentional or non-intentional) on the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the participants.

Although it does not explicitly address relations of power imbalances and inequalities, Austin's analysis provides the theoretical framework to clarify issues of oppression and subordination. Drawing on Austin's work, Rae Langton draws on the speech acts account in order to understand hate speech (Langton, Haslanger, and Anderson 2012). Hateful labels such as slurs are expressions used not only to describe but also to *do* things, to perform certain speech acts: indeed, slurs do not merely *mirror* phenomena of racism, sexism, and homophobia, or *cause* occurrences of racism, sexism, and homophobia, but do themselves *constitute* forms of racism, sexism, and homophobia. In a speech acts framework, we may conceive of acts performed using slurs in three different ways:

- i) as *locutionary* acts that *represent* discrimination and oppression;
- ii) as *perlocutionary* acts that *cause* discrimination, and produce changes in attitudes and behaviours, including oppression and violence;

- iii) as *illocutionary* acts that *constitute* racial or gender discrimination, legitimate beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of discrimination, and advocate oppression and violence: ‘Austin’s distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts offers a way to distinguish speech that *constitutes* racial oppression, and speech that *causes* racial oppression’ (Langton, Haslanger, and Anderson 2012: 758; see also Bianchi 2014a, 2018, 2021).

Here I will narrow my focus to the illocutionary perspective on slurs, to their distinctive performative and normative power: they are clear examples of how we can evaluate, assault, harm, and even subordinate individuals with words. Following Catharine MacKinnon (1987: 202), and drawing on her previous work on pornography as a form of hate speech (Langton [1993] 2009: 35), Langton identifies three distinctive kinds of illocutionary acts: a) subordination; b) assault; c) propaganda (Langton, Haslanger, and Anderson 2012: 758).

a) *Subordination*. The first class of illocutions that a speaker can perform by using hate speech and slurs includes authoritative acts of subordination. While insults hurt people by communicating one person’s dislike, displeasure, or disapproval of another, slurs inflict harm—they do something, they have normative power: in addition to changing beliefs about their targets, they subordinate their targets. Slurs are connected with networks of subordination and help to enact wide-ranging systems of oppression or more local policies, as in

(2) Fagots stay out!

—the infamous (misspelt) sign installed in the 1940s at Barney’s Beanery and displayed there for decades. Acts of subordination such as (2) are directed at both target and non-target addressees: with slurs we *classify* people as inferior, *legitimate* racial, religious, or gender discrimination, and *deprive* minorities of powers and

rights.³ Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla) holds a view similar to Langton's:

slurs exercise power by positioning the interpellator above the one interpellated on some sort of hierarchy, at least locally. I can insult someone as an equal ('Wow, you're being an asshole!') but I can't slur someone as an equal; the use of the slurring name not only *reflects* but *constitutes* a kind of subordinating speech, which positions the one slurred in a less empowered position than the one using the slur. (Kukla 2018: 20–21; see also Maitra 2012; McGowan 2012; Nunberg 2018)

b) *Assault*. A second class of illocutions that a speaker can perform by using a slur includes assault-like speech acts such as *persecuting* and *degrading*. Assault-like speech acts are typically (but not exclusively) performed with *second-person* uses of slurs (see Jeshion 2013a, 2013b), as in

(3) Wop!

By using slurs, speakers may directly attack, persecute, or degrade their targets. Slurs are weapons of verbal abuse: the focus is on the targeted group and individuals. By uttering (3), the speaker is not merely *asserting* something, but is performing an illocutionary act of persecuting, degrading, or threatening—an act directed towards both a particular individual and all Italians.

c) *Propaganda*. The third class of illocutions that a speaker can perform by using a slur includes propaganda-like speech acts such

3 Following Austin's taxonomy, Langton classifies authoritative subordinating speech acts as verdictives or exercitives. In the class of verdictives Austin includes acts (formal or informal, and concerning facts or values) of giving a verdict, estimate, or appraisal (such as acquitting, reckoning, assessing, diagnosing). In the class of exercitives Austin includes acts of exerting powers, rights, or influence (such as appointing, voting, ordering, warning). In Langton's view, slurs are used to classify people as inferior (verdictives) and to legitimate racial oppression, religious or gender discrimination, and to deprive minorities of powers and rights (exercitives).

as *inciting* and *promoting* racial or gender discrimination, hate, and violence. They are typically (but not exclusively) performed with *third-person* uses of slurs, as in

(4) Claudia is a wop.

Shifting the focus from targets to addressees, the speaker's utterance of (4) may be regarded as an act of propaganda, an act that incites and promotes discrimination: the act of propaganda is primarily addressed to 'prospective haters' (Langton, Haslanger, and Anderson 2012: 758). Some uses of slurs, in other words, come with an invitation to assume a certain perspective—they shape the interlocutors' responses and guide their thinking—but also allow speakers to claim an *affiliation* with a particular group, their beliefs and their attitudes, their discriminatory and sometimes even violent behaviours.⁴

When we use a slur third-personally with the members of our own group against a target group, we aim to create or reinforce both the target's subordinated identity and our own dominant identity. At the same time, we attempt to shape the identity of our *addressees*: we present them not only as being outside the target group and inside the dominant group, but also as willing to share our derogatory stance against the target group. As Kukla points out:

Slurring others *together* is a special kind of speech act that enforces and constitutes ingroup boundaries and memberships. It powerfully positions not just the one uttering the slur, but also the audience who hears and recognizes the slur within the ideology that gives the slur its primary force and meaning. (Kukla 2018: 22–23)

In the following section, I will present some examples of the complex performative dimension of gender and racial slurs—with which we contribute to establishing group membership and to setting boundaries on acceptable beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours.

4 On affiliation with dominant groups, see Jørgensen Boling (2015) and Nunberg (2018).

4. In and out

We said earlier that from a performative perspective, slurs are tools of social management: they police beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, and legitimate discriminatory speech and physical acts. This social control function is particularly evident in slurs targeting women, where it usually takes a highly sexualised form. Indeed, when women are the object of hate speech, the words used to assault them are usually variations of ‘slut’: the reference to women’s sexual conduct is evidence of how strongly our societies monitor women and their sexual behaviour—and also evidence of how women tend to be reduced to their body and their sexuality. Moreover, this kind of slur targets not only women who are not behaving ‘properly’ in the sexual domain, but more generally women who do not conform to gender norms and expectations— primarily women who participate in the public sphere.⁵ Sexualised and violent messages, death and rape threats have the ultimate goal not only of condemning women’s opinions but also of undermining their presence in the public sphere.

Moreover, such *assaultive* words have a sort of *propaganda* boomerang effect on ‘good’ women who are merely bystanders. As Lynne Tirrell writes:

Sometimes ... a [slur] is used by a member of the dominant group to a hearer who is a member of the subordinate group as a way of labeling the third person with a label that boomerangs from the target back to the hearer. For example, Fred and Ethel see Lucy do something silly, and while Ethel laughs, Fred scornfully says, ‘Lucy is such a bimbo.’ ‘Bimbo’ is a gendered term, and its use here sets boundaries on acceptable and unacceptable female behavior ... [Fred’s] use of the derogatory term sets gender boundaries for

5 Some examples of hate campaign targets, with death and rape threats, are Kamala Harris, vice president of the USA; Laura Boldrini, former president of the Italian parliament; Michela Murgia, Italian author and activist; and Caroline Criado Perez, British author, journalist, and activist who, in fighting for the Women’s Room project, aimed to increase the presence of female experts in the media.

Ethel even though he was hurling the term at Lucy. (Tirrell 2012: 192)

In a similar vein, Kukla points out that a word such as ‘slut’ not only helps constitute the identity of its target as an ‘object’ woman who is sexually available (‘just a thing that has sex’)—and in this way *outgroups* her—but at the same time contributes to constructing the identity of ‘good’ women ‘who do not desire or take pleasure in sex’—and in this way *ingroups* them. Interestingly, according to Kukla, ‘slut’ carries with it a third identity:

men who are always ready for sex and will take sex when they can get it—because the concept of a ‘slut’ requires that there be plenty of men available to have sex with them, even though they are object. Such men are not themselves particularly object or objectified; they are just acting as men *naturally* do. (Kukla 2018, 27)

Unsurprisingly, slurs may be used to police the appearance and behaviour of members of target groups even by individuals who belong to the same oppressed group. Some slurs—such as ‘Banana’, ‘Oreo’, ‘Apple’, ‘Coconut’ and ‘Bounty Bar’—are meant to criticise what is perceived as ‘racial betrayal’. ‘Banana’ is a word targeting Chinese Americans perceived as having yellow skin and a white heart; ‘Oreo’ targets African Americans perceived as having black skin and a white heart; ‘Apple’ targets Native Americans who are allegedly white on the inside; ‘Coconut’ targets those Desis,⁶ Latinos, and Afro-Caribbeans who are perceived as being brown outside but white on the inside; finally, ‘Bounty Bar’, as in the coconut-filled chocolate bar, is a slur targeting Black people in positions of authority in England. Once more, this kind of slur aims to outgroup actual members of the target group who do not behave properly.

6 According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a Desi is a ‘person who comes from or whose family comes from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh but who lives in another country’ (s.v. ‘desi (n)’, last updated 7 May 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/desi>).

The most forceful example of the performative power of slurs is provided by Lynne Tirrell in an article titled ‘Genocidal language games’. Tirrell studied the changing speech practices in Rwanda in the years prior to the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi, focusing on the performative force of slurs such as ‘snake’ or ‘cockroach’—deeply derogatory terms licensing extermination and murder (on the role of hate speech during the Rwandan genocide, see *inter alia* Chretien et al. 1995; Des Forges 1999; Sibomana 1999; Thompson 2007).⁷ Racist propaganda was broadcast throughout the country, primarily by the Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLNC). The role of language before and during the genocide was recognised by the UN war crimes tribunal in 2003: the tribunal charged the RTLNC leader, Ferdinand Nahimana, with genocide, incitement to genocide, and crimes against humanity.

According to Tirrell, slurs display the *functional variation feature*—that is, they allow the performance of various speech acts, serving many different functions: enacting power, inciting crime, and rationalising cruelty. Furthermore, slurs reinforce unjust networks of power and help to constitute subordinate identities. In other words, slurs express the *insider/outsider function*: ‘Using such terms helps to construct a strengthened “us” for the speakers and a weakened “them” for the targets, thus reinforcing or even realigning social relations’ (Tirrell 2012: 174–175). Moreover, the negative message communicated by slurs concerns an allegedly essential (sometimes even biological) aspect of the target, and thereby creates and enforces a hierarchy (*essentialism condition*). Finally, slurs are *action-engendering* within a context: they delineate what kinds of treatments are permissible with respect to those who are classified in this way.⁸

7 The Rwandan genocide occurred between April and July 1994. During this period of around 100 days, members of the Tutsi minority ethnic group, as well as some moderate Hutu, were killed by armed militias. The most widely accepted scholarly estimates range from around 500,000 to 662,000 Tutsi deaths.

8 André Sibomana, a survivor of the massacre, powerfully describes how slurs helped erase the Tutsis’ identities as human beings: ‘Soon it was

Tirrell remarks that slurs are most effective when they are *connected to networks of oppression* and discrimination, with the weight of history and social censure behind them, but underlines that this connection to practices of subordination need not be conscious or acknowledged by the speakers enacting the practice:

When a ten-year-old boy in the USA calls one of his classmates ‘fag,’ he is unlikely ... to think about, much less have mastery of, the broader social context of homophobia and hate crimes against homosexuals. Just the same, that child uses a term that brings a heavy social history and oppressive apparatus to bear on his classmate ... Although this speaker is a child, many adults speak with similar epistemic limitations, day in and day out. Few of our words lead to genocide, but we must consider our own diction and ask what apparatuses of power we invoke to control or harm others. (Tirrell 2012: 206)⁹

not even necessary to encourage the population to kill. Violence feeds on violence, like a fire. People went mad and lost all points of reference. They killed and killed and killed. Or rather, they stopped killing to “work”. They weren’t crushing skulls with their rifle butts anymore; they were stamping on vermin. The meaning of words changed and language adjusted to this new concept of life which identified different levels in the human species. Tutsi and their Hutu accomplices were really no longer viewed as human beings, but as things, dirt which had to be eliminated, poisonous snakes which had to be destroyed, whatever their age’ (Sibomana 1999: 57–58).

- 9 To give an example of such networks of oppression against homosexuals, according to ILGA, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, a worldwide federation of more than 1,700 organisations from over 160 countries and territories campaigning for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex human rights, ‘As of December 2020, 69 States continue to criminalise same-sex consensual activity. There are currently six UN Member States (Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen) that impose the death penalty on consensual same-sex sexual acts. In five additional UN member states (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar, Somalia, and the United Arab Emirates) ‘certain sources indicate that the death penalty could potentially be imposed for consensual same-sex conduct, but there is less legal certainty on the matter’ (ILGA 2020).

5. Non-derogatory uses: appropriation

Slurs are emblematic of social practices of subordination and discrimination. Yet they can sometimes be used in non-derogatory ways. Most scholars agree that in certain contexts the derogatory force of slurs is, to a certain extent, neutralised or at least diminished (for a survey on non-derogatory uses of slurs, see the special issue of the *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, edited by Cepollaro and Zeman 2020).¹⁰ *Reporting* slurs, for example, is generally perceived as less offensive than *using* them (see inter alia Potts 2005; Schlenker 2007; Langton et al. 2012; Anderson and Lepore 2013a, 2013b; Wieland 2013; Anderson 2016; Capone 2016; Bach 2018).¹¹ In addition, it is a matter of debate whether slurs occurring in fictional contexts (such as novels, films, and songs) maintain their derogatory power. Another interesting example are fictional slurs, namely slurs made up by writers to target fictional groups or individuals, such as robots or vampires.¹² Finally, according to some

10 Nevertheless, some authors defend a prohibitionist view according to which the mere phonetic realisation of slurs triggers a reaction of offence in *any* context. Anderson and Lepore, for example, take a *silentist* stance and suggest removing slurs from use until their offensive potential fades away, and avoiding any use or mention in any context: ‘we insist upon *silentism* as policy. A use, mention, or interaction with a slur, *ceteris paribus* ... constitutes an infraction ... We cringe when confronted by slurs *because* they usually admit of no tolerable uses’ (Anderson and Lepore 2013a: 39).

11 Some empirical studies on the perceived offensiveness of slurs and non-slurring insults (‘jerk’, ‘asshole’, etc.) in direct and indirect speech found that the speaker who utters a slur in a report is perceived as less offensive than a speaker using an unembedded slurring utterance such as (3), but to some degree offensive nevertheless. Additionally, quotation marks (as in ‘Mary said: “Claudia is a wop”’) can *seal* part of the derogatory import of slurs (Cepollaro, Sulpizio, and Bianchi 2019).

12 The web site *Tropedia* (2021) lists a large variety of fictional slurs. To provide just a few examples, in the comic book *Top Ten*, robots are sometimes referred to as ‘clickers’, a term that carries the same connotations as the N-word (robots prefer to be called ‘Ferro-Americans’ or ‘Post-organics’); in the TV show *Battlestar Galactica* robots are called ‘toasters’, and in the movie *I Robot*, ‘canners’ (presumably short for ‘can

scholars, slurs can occur in non-derogatory contexts such as *pedagogical contexts*, where the speaker is objecting to discriminatory discourse, as in:

- (5) Institutions that treat Chinese people as chinks are racist (Hom 2008: 429).

All these cases are more or less contentious. There are contexts, however, which are unanimously considered as non-derogatory, namely contexts of appropriation (or reclamation). Appropriation of slurs is the phenomenon whereby speakers (typically but not exclusively in-groups) use a slur for non-derogatory purposes, usually to express intimacy and solidarity, and sometimes as an empowering tool of social and political struggle. The best-known examples are the appropriation of ‘Black’ by the African American community in the 1960s, of ‘queer’ by the homosexual community in the 1990s, and the more recent appropriation of ‘nigga’ by the African American community.¹³ Such uses are usually (but not always) taken to convey solidarity rather than hatred or contempt, and are often employed to help achieve political goals and fight oppression.¹⁴

Two broad types of appropriated contexts are usually identified:

opener’). In the *Harry Potter* series, ‘Mudblood’ is a slur frequently used for Muggle-born wizards, a word implied to be on par with the N-word in terms of nastiness. In the movie *Blade* vampires are usually called ‘suckheads’, while in the TV show *True Blood* they are called ‘fangs’.

13 Appropriation is a well-documented practice in sociolinguistics: there are examples of appropriation of slurs targeting race (‘nigga’), gender (‘bitch’, ‘slut’), sexual orientation or gender identity (‘gay’, ‘queer’), ability status (‘deaf’), and so on.

14 There is little consensus on the best account of appropriation. Several alternative theories have been proposed: the ambiguity account (Potts 2007; Hom 2008), the echoic account (Bianchi 2014b), the expressivist account (Richard 2008; Jeshion 2013a, 2020), the indexical account (Ritchie 2017), and Anderson’s account in terms of communities of practice (Anderson 2018).

- a) friendship contexts—where the non-derogatory use has no conscious political, social, or cultural intent: the slur is used as a term of endearment, or to express camaraderie and solidarity as a form of banter and mock impoliteness;¹⁵
- b) political appropriation contexts—where civil rights groups or artists (writers, poets, comedians, song lyricists) reclaim the use of the slur as a tool of deliberate political and social fight. The slur ‘queer’ has undergone such a process of conscious political appropriation: ‘QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe’s hands and use against him’ (Anonymous 1990).¹⁶

Appropriation may be an effective instrument for fighting discrimination, allowing in-groups to demarcate the group, showing a sense of intimacy and solidarity and reminding targets that they are objects of discrimination. In Hom’s words, appropriation

is a means for the targeted group to recapture political power from the racist group by transforming one [of] its tools, it is a means for ‘toughening up’ other members of the targeted group by desensitizing them to uses of the epithet, it is a means of in-group demarcation to bring members of the targeted group closer together and to remind members of the targeted group that they are, indeed, a targeted group. (Hom 2008: 428)

Through appropriation, targets assume a critical stance against derogatory uses of a slur and attempt to disrupt entrenched sociocultural norms—they do not merely replace or erase offensive

15 On banter and mock impoliteness, see Leech (1983) and Culpeper (1996).

16 See Bianchi (2014b) and Anderson (2018). Jeshion (2020) identifies two types of appropriation: ‘pride reclamation’ and ‘insular reclamation’, respectively.

uses, but *subvert* them.¹⁷ An appropriated slur, then, ‘is the same word, with the same history, but with a new future’ (Tirrell 1999: 60).¹⁸

Appropriation subverts the perception of both targets and slurs. Experimental studies by Galinsky and colleagues (2003, 2013) show that self-applying a slur results in in-groups feeling more powerful, and being perceived as more powerful by both targets and non-targets. Further empirical works show that appropriation changes the perception of a slur: self-ascribing a slur reduces its perceived negativity (Galinsky et al. 2013).

This reduction of perceived negativity may eventually lead to the *neutralisation* of the slur: certain words appear to have lost their slur status as a result of a process of appropriation. The best-known example is the slur ‘queer’, mentioned above. At the beginning of the 1990s, the gay community started a process to take control over the term. Gradually, appropriated uses of the slur became widespread, weakening the connection between the word and the oppressive norms governing it. Eventually, they extended to out-groups: academics were the first to start using the term ‘queer’ in ways licensed by the gay community, with expressions referring to research fields such as **queer studies** and **queer theory**. The term became customary in general culture, and has become a neutral label for gender non-conforming people (see Brontsema 2004).

A similar process of (non-linguistic) appropriation and neutralisation has involved a symbol, the downward-pointing pink

17 See Hornsby (2001: 134): ‘they trade on the fact of the word’s having had its former hateful or contemptuous element. Where words are appropriated for a new use, old non-descriptive meanings are not brushed away: they are subverted.’

18 In a similar vein, Adam Croom emphasises the function of ‘normative reversal’ of appropriated uses: ‘the non-derogatory in-group use of slurs is especially prevalent in communities highly influenced by “counter-culture” norms (i.e., norms adopted in opposition to, and for the purpose of subverting, other entrenched sociocultural norms that a group contests), such as those associated with hip-hop culture’ (Croom 2013: 191).

triangle that was placed on the shirts of gay men in Nazi concentration camps—to identify and dehumanise them. In the 1970s and 1990s, activists reclaimed the symbol as one of liberation: the upward-pointing pink triangle has since become a symbol of gay power and pride (see Jensen 2002).¹⁹

6. Conclusion

My aim was to examine slurs as means of construction of our and other people's social identities. Rather than analysing what slurs mean or say, I have endorsed an Austinian, performative perspective, and focused on what speakers *do* with slurs—to the different kinds of speech acts that they allow speakers to perform, in a negative and in a positive way.

On the one hand, I have characterised how standard, derogatory uses of slurs contribute to shaping toxic and harmful identities for both their targets and their speakers, as well as non-targeted addressees. Indeed, derogatory uses of slurs both draw on and reinforce networks of oppressive identities in complex ways, and unfairly set the boundaries of groups and acceptable in-group behaviour.

First, slurs help hate-speakers to *outgroup* targets, and constitute their identities as subordinated subjects, by ranking them

¹⁹ There are concerns about the process of appropriation: see for example Herbert (2015), Anderson (2018), and Herbert and Kukla (2016: 594): 'a term undergoing reclamation, when used by the wrong person in the wrong way, can have the opposite effect: when used by an outsider it reverts to being a slur or a pejorative ... this is complicated by the fact that part of what is at issue and unsettled in such reclamation projects is often the boundaries of "the" community. There are no strict and stable rules for who counts as the right person or what counts as the right kind of use ... This makes the project of repurposing traditionally subordinating, outgrouping speech especially dangerous (Herbert 2015). "Bitch" used skilfully by someone in the right position can be hilarious and empowering; used just an indefinable bit off-key, it can reinforce sexism and be alienating and hurtful'. On 'nigga', see Kennedy (2003) and Rahman (2012).

as having inferior worth, legitimating discriminatory behaviour towards them, and depriving them of powers and rights.

Additionally, they help hate-speakers to constitute their own identities as members of a dominant, powerful, and intimidating group: ‘The [N-word] can turn a bigot from a hapless, inconsequential “I” into an intimidating, menacing “we”’ (Nunberg 2018: 286). Slurs are devices for displaying both distance from the target group and membership in a dominant group.

Finally, slurs help hate-speakers to *ingroup* non-targeted hearers, and constitute their identities in harmful ways. By using slurs, bigots present their addressees not only as having the ‘right’ identity (the speaker’s own social identity) but also as likely to hold the same derogatory attitude towards the target group. This is why slurs often evoke a feeling of complicity in their hearers. Liz Camp observes that ‘it seems that any standard form of engagement with the slurring utterance threatens to make us complicit in the bigot’s way of thinking, despite our finding it abhorrent’ (Camp 2013: 330). Adam Croom concurs: ‘the racial slur “nigger” is explosively derogatory, enough so that just hearing it mentioned can leave one feeling as if they have been made complicit in a morally atrocious act’ (Croom 2011: 343).

On the other hand, I have shown how appropriated, non-derogatory uses of slurs help to constitute positive identities for targets and target groups, setting the boundaries of groups and communities. Appropriated uses of slurs may derail standard harmful dynamics of identity construction—and actually initiate an opposite, subverted, positive dynamic. When members of a target group use an appropriated slur, they repurpose the word and perform a variety of potentially positive speech acts.

First, appropriated slurs help targets to *display* insider status, and to constitute their own identities as members of a powerful and proud group.

Additionally, appropriated slurs help targets to *recognise* someone else’s insider status, or even to *invite* someone into a group—that is, they help targets to *ingroup* relevant hearers. By using appropriated slurs, targets present their addressees as having the

‘right’ identity (the speaker’s own social identity), or at least the ‘right’ insider status.²⁰ In Herbert and Kukla’s words:

This process does not just *reflect* the realities of community membership but also helps to *constitute* it ... Part of being an insider is being recognized as one. Crucially, the relevant sort of recognition is not mere passive, conscious acknowledgment, but the kind of recognition that is built into practice. (Herbert and Kukla 2016: 584)

Of course, appropriated uses of slurs sometimes display an oppositional nature: they may be used to *set* the boundaries of the group, and to *outgroup* non-targets, by constituting their identities with hostility and suspicion.²¹

From a performative perspective, language is a powerful tool of exclusion, oppression, and discrimination—but, hopefully, also one of inclusion, emancipation, and self-determination. A theoretical comprehensive awareness of such complex dynamics of identity construction will hopefully help to highlight not only the harms of hate speech, but also the outcomes of processes of self-empowering initiated by oppressed individuals or groups. Slurs are usually connected to unfair systems of social power; they help to reinforce oppressive social norms and to license unjust and even violent actions against their targets. Appropriation is indeed a way of destabilising oppressive social norms and systems of this sort: through appropriation, in-groups disrupt and subvert the subordinate position that has been imposed upon them, and claim for themselves a strong, positive identity. A hateful instrument of

20 See Herbert and Kukla (2016: 583): ‘*displaying* insider status, *inviting* someone into a group, *settling* the boundaries of a group and the norms it shares, *recognizing* someone else’s insider status, *closing ranks* against someone and thereby outgrouping them, and so forth.’

21 This goes partially against Herbert and Kukla (2016: 588): ‘Peripheral speech can provide tools for building a positive (in the sense of nonoppositional, not necessarily in the sense of evaluatively good) identity, and this is an ethically and theoretically important function that language can serve.’

injustice and subordination is turned against the oppressors, and transformed into an expression of power and pride.

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