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Words in Motion: Slurs in Indirect Report

1. Introduction

Slurs are pejorative epithets that express negative attitudes toward a class of individuals sharing the same race (e.g., *nigger*, *chink*), country of origin (*dago*, *flip*, *wop*), sexual orientation (*faggot*), religion (*kike*, *fenian*), health status (*mongo*, *spaz*), and other group-based identificatory properties. Although slurring utterances usually target a specific individual, they derogate the whole category to which the individual belongs.

The peculiarity of slurs is that they do not only refer to some individuals, but simultaneously express a negative attitude or a negative feeling toward them. Although not all scholars agree on this point, it can be said that slurs comprise a “dual” meaning: a referential meaning and a connotative¹ meaning. The referential component is the part of the meaning through which a slur refers to a class of persons. The connotative component is the part of the meaning that expresses the negative attitude of a speaker who uses the slur toward somebody. Let us compare the terms *nigger* and *Afro-American*. These expressions refer to the same class of individuals on the basis of a certain property: the extension of both *nigger* and *Afro-American* seems to be the set of dark-skinned people, while the intension appears to be made up of the properties of being a person and being dark-skinned. Nonetheless, these two terms differ substantially, as the first one denigrates dark-skinned people while the second one does not. Indeed, the connotative component of *nigger* conveys at code level the (negative) emotions, feelings, and assessments displayed by the speaker by means of that very term, whereas *Afro-American* is a “neutral” term.

Slurs, and pejoratives in general, can cause offense for many reasons (see Frigerio & Tenchini, 2019, pp. 152–154). The most obvious one is that they express the speaker’s negative attitude toward the addressee and consequently toward the whole class of persons to which the addressee belongs. Scholars using different approaches from various disciplines, but also “common” speakers in an intuitive way, agree in attributing to the utterer of a direct slur the responsibility for the derogatory act and its performative effects. Indeed, the use of slurs seems to signal an affiliation with racist practices

¹ Following Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1977, 1980), I call this component of the meaning “connotative.” Other scholars use different labels, the most common of which is “expressive.”

(on this point see, for instance, Nunberg, 2018 and Butler, 1997), which unfortunately are widespread, common, and reiterative. Thus, if a speaker says, “X is a nigger,” she is likely to be considered responsible for the offense,² which cannot be canceled by simply adding “but I’m not a racist” or by using a similar tactic of disavowal.

The interpretation of the matter becomes more complicated when slurs are reported. Indeed, it is unclear whether and to which degree reporting a slur can be offensive in the same way as in “direct,” non-reported uses. As a matter of fact, reporting a slur involves quoting not only the content but also the commitment and attitudes of the original speaker. Therefore, on the one hand, in reporting a slur the reporter may be seen as not expressing contempt toward the target for the fact that she is simply reporting what others have said; but, on the other hand, reporting a slur may also be interpreted as a form of association with the original speaker’s attitude.

Different theories about the derogatory component of the meaning of slurs provide different predictions about the preservation of their offensive potential in reporting contexts. This being the case, one means of verifying which theory is (or which theories are) more capable than others to explain the actual perception of the phenomenon consists of comparing theories with empirical data. To this end, the paper will present the data collected from a questionnaire.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 will briefly sketch out the main theoretical positions regarding the derogatory content of slurs. Section 3 will discuss the different predictions provided by the abovementioned theories about the preservation of slurs’ offensive potential in reporting contexts. Section 4 will present the results of a questionnaire aimed at verifying whether a slur maintains its offensive potential in reported speech and to what degree the addressee of a reported speech attributes to the speaker—be she the original speaker or the reporter, both of them, or neither—the responsibility for the slurring. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. The Main Theoretical Positions Regarding the Derogatory Content of Slurs

One of the most debated issues in Linguistics and Philosophy of Language concerns the status of slurs’ derogatory content. Depending on the assumption that the derogatory content of slurs does or does not exist, different theories have been advanced regarding the status of such a connotative component of the meaning.

² Here, I do not account for and do not discuss the position of Butler when she claims that “[t]he racial slur is always cited from elsewhere, and in the speaking of it, one chimes in with a chorus of racists, producing at that moment the linguistic occasion for an imagined relation to an historically transmitted community of racists. In this sense, racist speech does not originate with the subject, even if it requires the subject for its efficacy, as it surely does. Indeed, racist speech could not act as racist speech if it were not a *citation of itself*” (Butler, 1997, p. 80, emphasis in the original).

The literature is vast and often located at the intersection of different disciplines. In this section, I simply review some of the studies that have contributed the most to characterize the research on this issue (for a survey, see Frigerio & Tenchini, 2014, Tenchini & Frigerio, 2016). Such theories can be divided into three large classes, the last of which can be further subdivided into several subclasses of its own.

The first approach is that of the scholars who claim that slurs do not have any derogatory content. It is a minority position whose main representatives are Anderson and Lepore (Anderson & Lepore, 2013a, 2013b; Anderson, 2016). According to this deflationary position, slurs are taboo terms that cannot be used or mentioned in any context. Slurs “are prohibited words not on account of any content they get across, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition” (Anderson & Lepore, 2013a, p. 26). Consequently, their use is always offensive, even in semantically vacuous sentences like “‘nigger’ means nigger” (Anderson & Lepore, 2013a, p. 38). Nunberg (2018) maintains a similar position. Adopting a social perspective, he holds that slurs have no derogatory content or meaning (Nunberg, 2018, p. 244) but are derogatory because they signal the speaker’s affiliation with a group that uses slurs with derogatory intentions. He points out that “if slurs are marked, it’s because their use is a pointed conversational transgression—a departure from the norms that would ordinarily govern referential practice in that situation” (Nunberg, 2018, p. 264).

According to the second position, the derogatory content of slurs is part of their literal meaning – that is, of the truth conditions of the sentences containing them. This literalist approach is represented by Hom (2008, 2010, and 2012) and Hom and May (2013, 2018). Specifically, Hom and May maintain that the semantic content of a slur is identical to the conjunction of the neutral and the derogatory content. For instance, *nigger* would mean the following: “Afro-American and despicable because of it.” This approach incorporates the connotative component into the intension of the term. In addition, Hom and May (2013) argue that the extension of a term such as *nigger* is empty, as is that of any other slur (the thesis of “null extensionality” and “semantic innocence”), because no person is both Afro-American and despicable for being Afro-American.

According to the third position, which includes a variety of approaches, both pragmatic and semantic, the connotative content does exist but is not part of the truth-conditional meaning of slurs. The different approaches diverge on the nature of the connotative component. Some scholars—for example, Schlenker (2007) and Cepollaro (2015)—identify the derogatory content of slurs with a kind of presupposition triggered by slurs. Provided that presuppositions are defeasible—in the sense that it is possible, over the course of a conversation, to contradict the presupposition triggered by an item without rendering the

sentence infelicitous—this theory has difficulties in explaining why the contradiction of the derogatory content in “X is a nigger, but I have no prejudice toward black people” causes infelicity.

By contrast, a number of scholars claim that derogatory content is part of the semantic content. Some argue that it is a conventional implicature (CI) conveyed by the sentence containing a slur (Potts, 2005, 2007; Williamson, 2009; McCready, 2010; Whiting, 2013), serving “to indicate the speaker’s attitudes and commitments” (McCready, 2010, p. 50). Potts states the following: “Here [in expressives], more than anywhere else, the idea that CI items comment upon an asserted core, providing a means for a bit of editorializing on the part of speakers, seems apt” (Potts, 2005, p. 153).

Others claim that the derogatory content is either an expressive content comparable to a gesture (Hornsby, 2001, p. 140) or a connotative component conveyed by the term simultaneously with the referential component in a double speech act, at the same time representative and expressive (Frigerio & Tenchini, 2014, Tenchini & Frigerio, 2016). The central idea of the double speech act account is that a speaker, in uttering a sentence containing a slur, performs two different speech acts: a representative act, by which the slur contributes with the same content as the corresponding neutral term, and an expressive act, by which the speaker expresses her attitude toward the extension of the slur.

Since Potts (2005), many scholars have observed that the derogatory component of slurs is preserved even when slurs are embedded in conditional, interrogative, and negative contexts, as in the following examples:

- (1) Paul is a nigger.
- (2) If Paul is a nigger, I do not want to deal with him.
- (3) Is Paul a nigger?
- (4) Paul is not a nigger.

So, sentences (2)–(4) denigrate Afro-Americans as much as (1) does. In light of this, one may ask whether also reporting/reported contexts preserve the offensive component of slurs. In fact, although the reporting context seems to be the most favorable to push the derogatory content into the scope of the reporting operator, this operation cannot be taken for granted.

3. Slurs in Reported Speech

When reporting a slur, the core questions concern the persistency of slurs’ derogatory component in reported speech and the attribution of the responsibility for the slurring. Does the reporting speaker X in the following utterances derogate Afro-Americans by means of her act or not?

(5) X: “Ann said, ‘Paul is a nigger’.”

(6) X: “Ann said that Paul is a nigger.”

On one hand, the answer may be that she does not: one might argue that the reporter of (5) and (6) does not use but merely *mentions* the slur. If so, the speaker does not express any contempt toward Afro-Americans but simply attributes the derogation to Ann (this is, at least, one of the possible interpretations). Consequently, (5)–(6) would not have any offensive potential in the ongoing reporting context.

Nonetheless, if the use of the derogatory expression in direct reported speech as (5) may seem to be quite undoubtedly Ann’s responsibility (and prosody may help to disambiguate), it is not so clear whether the slur’s use must be attributed to Ann in (6). Ann might have stated, “Paul is an Afro-American,” and the reporter might have reported Ann’s words as in (6) because she herself hates people of color. So, in the case of indirect reported speech, the attribution of the derogatory attitude is unclear.

But even in uttering (5), the reporter is not completely free of responsibility. She could have chosen a neutral term instead of the slur when reporting Ann’s words. She could have specified, commented, or glossed that it was Ann who had used an offensive term in referring to Afro-Americans. She could have used other precautions—for example, the “N-word” euphemism, the gesture of quotations marks, or particular prosodic contours.

Hence, in both (5) and (6) one might believe that the reporter adheres to Ann’s opinions, at least to a certain degree.

How can we explain such double interpretation? It depends to a large extent on the nature of reported speech.³ Using reported speech, the speaker usually shares information with somebody about what someone else has said (in this paper, we assume that somebody has effectively said something at a previous time).

The basic condition of all forms of reported speech is a displacement of the utterance plans that should be perceived by the hearers/addressees. This is reflected in the sometimes different, sometimes coincident, but nonetheless distinct voices, narrative perspectives, and consequent (re)organization of the deictic centers, evaluative perspectives, illocutionary forces, and perlocutionary effects. “Multi-voicedness” and “double-voicedness” are the notions used by Bakhtin (1963/1984) to explain the persistence of the words of others in any utterances: “Someone else’s words introduced into our own speech inevitably assume a new (our own)

³ The literature on reported speech is vast and interdisciplinary. In this paper, I only mention the few contributions that are relevant to our topic. For a recent review of the scholarship on reported speech, see Brendel, Meibauer, and Steinbach (2011); Arendholz, Bublitz, and Kirner-Ludwig (2015); Capone (2016); Capone, Kiefer, and Lo Piparo (2016); Capone, García-Carpintero, and Falzone (2019).

interpretation and become subject to our evaluation of them; that is, they become double-voiced. All that can vary is the interrelationship between these two voices” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 195). Alessandro Capone describes indirect reports as “segments of speech involving a dialogic dimension” (Capone, 2019, p. 3). The issue of “report” is thoroughly summed up by Keith Allan as follows:

X’s report is never exactly identical with Z’s utterance; even if the same words are captured, the context is different, the voice will be different, the speaker’s intentions may be different, the medium may be different. Often X will choose to render the report more coherent by rearranging what was said, and/or more vivid by embellishing the original to attract and/or maintain audience attention. When X’s report ρ is compared with Z’s utterance υ , the accuracy of ρ depends on whether or not Z’s message in υ can be reconstructed from it. In other words, the content of ρ is dependent on the content of υ . An accurate report ρ re-presents the illocutionary point of the source utterance υ . (Allan, 2016, p. 211–212)

“Never exactly identical ... even if the same words are captured” means that *every* kind of report displays a sort of indirectness or *obliquitas* (see Tenchini, 2003). “An accurate report ρ re-presents the illocutionary point of the source utterance υ ” implies that reporting a slur may constitute a problem because of the connotative component of its meaning. In reporting a slurring utterance, one reports its illocutionary force and maybe its perlocutionary effects. Therefore, here the main problem is, on the side of the reporter, how to keep the voices distinct, and, on the side of the addressee, how to perceive this distinction. Defining “footing” as the alignment of an individual to a particular utterance or projected self, Goffman (1981, p. 128) observes a case of constant “shift footing” in reported speech:

When a speaker employs conventional brackets to warn us that what he is saying is meant to be taken in jest, or as mere repeating of words by someone else, then it is clear that he means to stand in a relation of *reduced personal responsibility for what he is saying. He splits himself off from the content of the words by expressing that their speaker is not he himself or not he himself in a serious way.* (Goffman, 1974, p. 512, emphasis mine)

As a matter of fact, there are several strategies that can perform the task of marking alterity: syntactic, lexical, prosodic, vocal (voice quality), gestural, or narrative-stylistic. But when a slur is reported, shifting footing and distinguishing the voices becomes a particularly complex operation because the connotative component of the slur conveys an attitude that has moral implications on the side of the reporter. Is there way to prevent the reporter from having to bear the responsibility for somebody else’s speech?

3.1 The main theoretical positions about slurs in reported speech

The different theories presented in Section 2 make different predictions about the offensiveness of slurs in reported speech.

Anderson and Lepore's silentist position is quite "extreme," and the answer within their theoretical framework is categorical: any use or mention of a slur in any context has the potential to offend, and thus the violation of the prohibition also concerns the reporting of slurs uttered by other speakers. In the sentence

(6) Ann said that Paul is a nigger

the offensiveness should be doubtlessly ascribed to the reporter and not to Ann "as part of what she said" (Anderson & Lepore, 2013a, p. 35) because the reporter has violated the prohibition on uttering a taboo-word, such as a slur. Therefore, this theory predicts that (5)–(6) denigrate Afro-Americans as much as (1)–(4).

The literalist position, as we have seen, maintains that the semantic content of a slur is identical to the conjunction of the neutral and derogatory content and that both contents are part of the truth conditions of the sentence in which the slur occurs. So, *nigger* would mean "Afro-American and despicable because of it (for being Afro-American)." This position creates some problems when it has to explain why the pejorative content necessarily takes wide scope in some contexts (modal, temporal, conditional, and report). Indeed, according to Hom the derogatory content of slurs is displaceable or "narrow-scoping" (Hom, 2008, p. 424–426; 2012, p. 387). "Displaceable" or "narrow scoping" means that the truth-conditional contents remain confined within the scope of any operator. In other words, they do not scope out of the domain of any negative, conditional, interrogative, and report operator. This condition is fundamental for explaining the attribution of responsibility⁴ for the slurring. Thus, this theory predicts that slurs are not offensive when reported because when X says that Ann said that Paul is a nigger, X is saying that Ann said that Paul is Afro-American and despicable because of it. In such a case, it is Ann and not X who is always responsible for the act of slurring because conjunctions do not scope out. The fact that the meaning of a slur is literal (i.e., the denotative and the derogative content are conjoined) prevents the reporting speaker from being charged with the derogation.

The theories of the third group mentioned in Section 2 agree in treating the derogatory content of slurs as an independent component of the meaning. Nonetheless, they approach the question of the attribution of offensiveness and responsibility in an act of slurring differently.

⁴ On the non-displaceability of evaluative commitments, see the analysis of different possible scenarios presented in Taylor (2019, pp. 69–72).

According to Schlenker's and Cepollaro's presuppositional approach, besides providing the same contribution to the truth conditions of the sentence as the neutral term, a slur triggers a presupposition that conveys the derogatory content toward the target group. Consider the following sentence:

(1) Paul is a nigger.

The utterer of (1) states that Paul is Afro-American and presupposes that Afro-Americans are despicable for being such. One of the (main) features of presuppositions is that they project outside of the conditional, question, and negation scopes, and this explains why (2)–(4) denigrate Afro-Americans as much as (1) does. Instead, (5)–(6) should not express any offensive content by the reporter because the standard theory of presuppositions claims that *verba dicendi* are “plugs.”⁵ Accordingly, slurring expressions do not scope out in reporting contexts. In order to solve this aporia, Schlenker, among others, tries to amend this prediction by resorting to the so-called condition of “perspective dependence.” He glosses this condition as follows: “expressive content is evaluated from a particular perspective. In general, the perspective is the speaker's, *but there can be deviation if conditions are right*” (Schlenker, 2007, p. 239, emphasis mine). On this basis, he maintains that the presuppositions activated by slurs are “sometimes *shiftable*,” which means that “the context of evaluation need not be the context of the actual utterance” (Schlenker, 2007, p. 237, author's emphasis). Thus, Schlenker seems to suggest that the original speaker is not always responsible for the slur's derogatory content although *verba dicenda* are plugs: the responsibility depends on the context of the utterance.

“Perspective dependence” plays a key role also for those theories that consider the derogatory content of slurs as a CI. When an expressive is used, “it is tempting to assume that the perspective encoded in the expressive aspects of an utterance is *always the speaker's*” (Potts, 2007, p. 173, emphasis mine). The feelings and attitudes expressed are usually to be ascribed to the speaker within the ongoing utterance situation rather than at a different time or place. Therefore, when the slur is embedded in some kind of reporting context, the responsibility of the slurring should be ascribed to the reporting speaker. Nonetheless, this reading does not exclude the opposite case, namely that the responsibility may sometimes be attributed to the original speaker. Indeed, Potts claims that the perspective need not coincide with that of the reporter (Pott, 2007, p. 175–176), although this “non-speaker-oriented reading” must be supported by “a special intonation contour” or, in print, by quotation marks (Potts, 2005, p. 160). He concludes that “it is worth stressing

⁵ Plugs are “predicates which block off all the presuppositions of the complement sentence [examples include ‘say’, ‘mention’, ‘tell, ask’]” (see Karttunen, 1973, p. 178).

that, though quotative utterances can give rise to what appear to be embedded readings, a general analysis should treat them as scopeless” (Potts, 2005, p. 160).

The predictions of the double speech act account (Frigerio & Tenchini, 2014, Tenchini & Frigerio, 2016) are similar to those of Potts: in reported speech, the derogatory content should be attributed *prima facie* to the reporter because she uses the slur and then performs the double act, the expressive act included. Nonetheless, this theory acknowledges shifting cases, especially when the contexts of the utterance and the deictic centers are clearly distinct. This depends on the features of reported speech whose peculiarity, as stated above, consists in the displacement of the utterance plans. The shifting of the responsibility for connotative expressions from the reporting context to the reported one can therefore be considered a live possibility. Indeed, different contextual cues and clues can favor one of the two possible readings. But even though the narrow-scope reading of the derogatory content is possible, in many cases the speaker who reports a sentence containing a slur avoids quoting it so that its derogatory content cannot be ascribed to her if she does not feel any negative attitude toward the target group.

This short excursus should have shown the difficulties inherent in attributing responsibility for an act of slurring. The possible predictions can be summed up as follows: prohibitionsits claim that every report of a slur is offensive and that the reporter is responsible for the derogatory content and the subsequent offensiveness. Conversely, the literalists claim that offensiveness is to be attributed to the original speaker. The other scholars we have considered (the pragmatists and the expressivists) are more flexible in attributing the responsibility for the slurring. It can be attributed either to the original speaker (in this case the reported speech is not derogatory) or to the reporter (and in this case the reported speech is slurring). This being the case, to verify which theory is (or which theories are) more apt to explain the actual perception of the phenomenon on the part of the addressee of the reported speech, it seems to be necessary to compare theories with empirical data.

4. Empirical Verification

In this section, I briefly survey the results of an anonymized online questionnaire that was prepared by a student during the writing of her undergraduate thesis (“*Gli slurs nel discorso riportato*”, academic year 2017–18, unpublished) under my supervision (for details about composition, participants, materials, and procedures, see Tenchini & Frigerio, 2020, Section 6).⁶ The study’s participants comprised 121 Italian undergraduate students who were tested

⁶ For previous studies empirically testing the offensiveness of slurs and other pejoratives in reported speech, cf. Panzeri and Carrus (2016), Cepollaro, Sulpizio, and Bianchi (2019).

about their perception of the degree of offensiveness of pejoratives in general and slurs in particular in different utterance contexts. The different input utterances were intentionally presented without any description of the paraverbal component,⁷ as the questionnaire was intended to test the offensiveness conveyed by the very term per se in relation to the speaker. Here, I extrapolate only the data referring to slurs and not other pejoratives. The questionnaire was designed in Italian; the slur under consideration was *frocio* (an Italian slur designating homosexuals, similar to “faggot”). The questionnaire was divided into five sections, with each section consisting of five questions containing some recurring terms. For the purposes of this study, it is enough to review the following three cases:

Situation (a) (which serves as the basis for comparison): attribution of the term to a third person with the indication of the name of the speakers (Y: “X is *t*”). The participants were asked to evaluate the offensiveness of Y toward X in:

(7) Ann: “Paul is a faggot” (Y: “X is *t*”).

Five different answers were possible: yes, very much; yes; moderately; not much; not.

Situation (b): indirect reported speech (Z: “Y has said that X is *t*”). The participants were asked to evaluate the offensiveness of the reporter Z toward X in:

(8) John: “Ann has said that Paul is a faggot” (Z: “Y has said that X is *t*”).

The same five different answers were possible: yes, very much; yes; moderately; not much; not.

Situation (c): indirect reported speech (Z: “Y has said that X is *t*”). The participants were asked to evaluate which of the speakers they perceived as more offensive, the reporter or the original speaker, in the same context:

(8) John: “Ann has said that Paul is a faggot” (Z: “Y has said that X is *t*”).

In this case four different answers were possible: Y is more offensive; Z is more offensive; neither of them is offensive; and both are offensive.

Tables 1–3 present the results of the questionnaire (percentages are rounded up to the nearest unit):

Situation (a) Y: “X is *t*.”

Situation (b) Z: “Y has said that X is *t*.”

Situation (c) Z: “Y has said that X is *t*.”

⁷ On the role of phonetics in the disambiguation of the performativity, see for example Bonacchi and Andreeva, 2017.

Table 1. Is Y offensive toward X?

Yes, very much	Yes	Moderately	Not much	No
46%	38%	12%	3%	1%

Table 2. Is Z offensive toward X?

Yes, very much	Yes	Moderately	Not much	No
11%	23%	21%	12%	33%

Table 3. Who is more offensive towards X? Y or Z?

Y is more offensive	Z is more offensive	Neither is offensive	Both are offensive
66%	4%	1%	29%

4.1 Discussion

The results of the questionnaire point out that the data do not support one theory over the others. These results are the perfect reflection of the difficulties inherent in the interpretation of a reported slur.

The data are problematic for the silentist theory. Indeed, this approach claims that the mere mention of slurs is offensive, regardless of whether these terms are directly attributed or reported. However, the percentage of perceived offensiveness drops significantly when the slur is embedded in a reporting context: 33% (Table 2) instead of 84% of the participants (Table 1) consider the slur to be offensive or very offensive. Moreover, the percentage of the participants who do not consider the slur to be offensive increases from 1% to 33% (Table 2).

The data are problematic for the literalist theory too. According to this theory, slurs embedded in reported speech are attributed to the reported speaker, but 34% of the participants also consider the reporter as offensive or very offensive, and 21% as moderately offensive (Table 2). With regard to the data collected in Table 3, this theory does not account for the 29% of the participants who consider both speakers offensive and the 4% who considers the reporter more offensive.

The theories of the third group are more “flexible” and hence more apt to account for the data. Indeed, although based on different assumptions, they all account for the possibility of shifting, which can explain why one-third of the participants judged the slur embedded in reported speech as very offensive or offensive, one-third as moderately and not very offensive, and one-third as non-offensive (Table 2). Concerning the attribution of responsibility (Table 3), these flexible theories could explain why the vast majority of the participants (66%) attributed the offensiveness to the original speaker, and also why 29% believes that the reporter shares the responsibility with the original speaker.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine the offensiveness of slurs in reported speech. After having presented the main theories about the semantic status of these expressions and the persistency of their offensiveness in reported speech, their predictions have been assessed by means of a questionnaire aimed at registering the intuitive judgments of the addressees of a reported speech about the degree and attribution of offensiveness. This paper used only a part of the entire data gathered by the questionnaire, specifically the data on slurs. As the data have shown, the participants' judgments were not uniform, and the findings suggest that only the theories defined as "flexible" seem to be equipped to explain the variety of participants' reactions. On the contrary, the silentist and the literalist approaches do not account for addressees' judgments because they predict that the derogatory content should be entirely attributed to either the reporter or the original speaker, excluding shifting cases. This would seem to demonstrate that, in the absence of evident strategies of mitigation or distancing by the reporter, the interpretation of the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects of a reported slur/act of slurring depends to a large extent on the addressees' sensitivity and attitude. Consequently, no single theory can provide a conclusive statement on this matter.

The results presented here concern only Italian subjects and Italian language. It would be worth involving in future investigations people belonging to other cultures and other languages to ascertain whether and to what degree these results could be confirmed. Indeed, the nature of verbal aggression acts and the perception the offensiveness of certain actions is—at least partly—culturally dependent, as Bonacchi's culturological approach effectively highlights (see for instance Bonacchi, 2012, 2013).

Summary

Slurs are pejorative epithets that express negative attitudes toward a class of individuals sharing the same race, country of origin, sexual orientation, religion, and the like. The aim of this paper is to show what happens in communication when slurs are reported. It focuses on the derogatory content of such expressions and on the persistence of their performative effects in reported speech. In this respect, the question concerning the attribution of responsibility for the derogatory content conveyed by the slurs is relevant. Indeed, reporting a slur involves quoting not only the content but also the speaker's personal commitment and (negative) attitude. Different theories on the status of the derogatory component of slurs make different predictions about their offensiveness in reported speech and about the speaker's "responsibility" for the attitude and feelings conveyed by that word, be she the original speaker or the reporter. The results of a questionnaire show empirically that no single theory can provide a conclusive statement on this matter.

Keywords: slurring, reported speech, performative effects, responsibility attribution.

Zusammenfassung

Slurs sind abwertende Bezeichnungen, die eine negative Einstellung gegenüber den Eigenschaften ausdrücken, die den betreffenden Personen oder Gruppen auf der Basis der Rasse, der Herkunft, der Religionszugehörigkeit usw. zugeschrieben werden. Dieser Beitrag zielt darauf ab, zu zeigen, was in der Kommunikation passiert, wenn *slurs* wiedergegeben werden. Im Fokus stehen der abwertende Bestandteil der Bedeutung solcher Ausdrücke und die Wirkungsdauer ihrer performativen Effekte in der Redewiedergabe. In dieser Hinsicht wird auch die Frage der Zuschreibung von Verantwortung bezüglich der abwertenden Bedeutung, die das verunglimpfende Wort vermittelt, relevant. Verschiedene Theorien über den Status des abwertenden Bestandteils der *slurs* treffen unterschiedliche Vorhersagen über deren Offensivität in der Redewiedergabe und über die Verantwortung des Sprechers (sei er/sie der originale oder der wiedergebende) für die durch den Ausdruck vermittelte negative Einstellung. Anhand einer empirischen Umfrage wird gezeigt, dass keine Theorie eine eindeutige Erklärung dafür liefern kann.

Schlüsselwörter: abwertende Ausdrücke, Redewiedergabe, performative Effekte, Verantwortungszuschreibung.

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