

## Processing reclaimed slurs

**Reclaimed slurs.** Philosophers increasingly study slurs – derogatory terms targeting groups based on gender, ethnicity, etc. Scholars agree that slur uses are not always derogatory. The clearest case is reclamation, when members of a targeted group self-apply slurs to express pride, solidarity, or resistance<sup>[1,2]</sup>. Reclaimed uses are often said to neutralize or even invert slurs' negativity<sup>[3]</sup>. But does reclamation remove a slur's sting, or does some derogatory element persist? Empirical work remains limited, and philosophical theories, while offering some predictions, provide only restricted guidance. Preliminary studies<sup>[4]</sup> show that self-labeling reduces perceived offensiveness, but largely rely on off-line measures (rating tasks) that capture reflective judgment rather than real-time comprehension. Crucially, we do not yet know whether reclaimed slurs are processed as less offensive *as language unfolds*. We present the first experiment investigating online processing of reclaimed slurs, asking whether pejorative potential disappears or merely weakens when reclaimed.

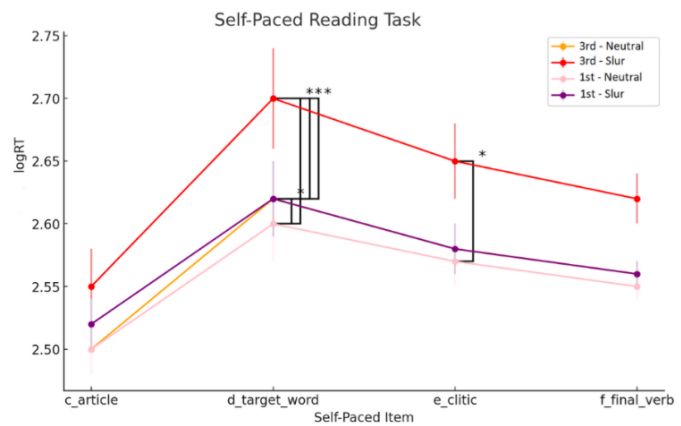
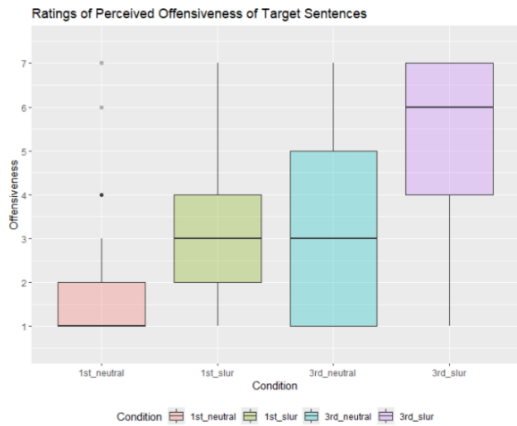
**Experiment.** Thirty-seven Italian native speakers<sup>MA = 22.46, SD = 2.63; 23F/13M/1 other</sup> completed a Self-Paced Reading task. Each trial included a context sentence followed by a target sentence presented word-by-word. We manipulated *target word* (slur vs. non-slur) and *usage* (1st-Reclaimed vs. 3rd-person<sup>Non-reclaimed</sup>). Examples: *Marco è un frocio* ("Marco is a faggot," 3rd-slur); *Marco è gay* (3rd-non-slurring); *lo sono un frocio* (1st-slur); *lo sono gay* (1st-non-slurring). Following Galinsky et al. (2013), 1st-person self-use cues reclamation; 3rd-person uses are interpreted non-reclamatorily. After each target, participants rated offensiveness (1-7)<sup>Tab. 1</sup>. Sixteen Italian slurs were used in a Latin Square design (32 target + 32 fillers). Dependent variables: offensiveness ratings and log-transformed word-by-word reading times.

**Results.** *Offensiveness.* Mixed-effects models showed the lowest ratings in 1<sup>st</sup>-non-slurring ( $\beta = 1.26$ ), followed by 1st-slur ( $\beta = 1.61$ ) and 3rd-non-slurring ( $\beta = 1.70$ ), with 3rd-slur highest ( $\beta = 3.79$ )<sup>Fig. 1a</sup>. All contrasts were significant ( $p < .001$ ) except between 1st-slur and 3rd-neutral. *Reading times.* Slurs slowed processing at critical positions (slurring vs non-slurring label). 1st-person slurs were read faster than 3rd-person slurs but slower than 1st-person neutral terms. 3rd-person slurs showed the longest reading times<sup>Fig. 1b</sup>.

**Discussion.** Non-reclaimed slurs were judged most offensive, while 1st-person non-slurring uses were least offensive. Reclaimed slurs patterned in between, not differing from 3rd-person non-slurring labels. Our data support two conclusions. First, reading times paralleled offensiveness ratings: slurs produced the largest slow-downs, non-slurring terms the smallest, and reclaimed slurs fell in between. This provides the first direct evidence that reclaimed slurs are *immediately* processed as less derogatory, rather than being initially interpreted as derogatory and subsequently "sanitized." In other words, reclamatory mitigation emerges during online comprehension rather than through post-hoc reinterpretation: the weaker evaluation arises incrementally as the utterance unfolds. Second, the fact that reclaimed slurs occupy an intermediate position – both behaviorally and temporally – supports a weakening-rather-than-deletion view of reclamation: the pejorative component is dampened but not erased. This challenges accounts according to which reclamation either fully neutralizes or leaves untouched the derogatory nature of slurs. Our findings are compatible with an echoic account of reclamatory uses<sup>[5,6]</sup>, on which speakers evoke a derogatory stance only to reject and subvert it from within the targeted group, thereby backgrounding – but not eliminating – its evaluative force. Alternatively, derogatory and non-derogatory readings may be co-activated due to shared form, yielding an intermediate processing profile. Determining whether attenuation arises compositionally or from competition between overlapping representations remains an open question. Future research should clarify whether reclamation merely attenuates derogatory force or can establish a genuinely positive counterpart (contra<sup>[3,7]</sup>).

Context Sentence	Condition	Context Sentence	SPR Target Sentence	Offensiveness Rating
Marco is homosexual. After attending an event, he hangs out with other participants at dinner. Suddenly,	<i>1st_neutral</i>	Marco utters	I am a gay you know it.	how offensive do you consider what was said?  1 2 3 4 5 6 7
	<i>1st_slur</i>	Marco utters	I am a faggot you know it.	
	<i>3rd_neutral</i>	One participant utters	Marco is a gay you know it.	
	<i>3rd_slur</i>	One participant utters	Marco is a faggot you know it.	

Condition	Self_Paced Item					
	a_character	b_verb	c_article	d_target_word	e_clitic	f_final_verb
<i>1st_neutral</i>		Sono	un	gay	lo	sapete.
<i>1st_slur</i>	"I am a gay you know it."					
		Sono	un	frocio	lo	sapete.
<i>3rd_neutral</i>	Marco	è	un	gay	lo	sapete.
	"Marco is a gay you know it."					
<i>3rd_slur</i>	Marco	è	un	frocio	lo	sapete.
	"Marco is a faggot you know it."					



**Figure 1.a.** Boxplot perceived Offensiveness Ratings  
**Figure 1.b.** Effect Plot of logRT with significant contrasts

## References

- [1] Anderson, L. (2018). Calling, addressing, and appropriation. In Sosa, D. (ed.), *Bad words*. OUP: 6-28. [2] Jeshion, R. (2020). Pride and prejudiced: On the reclamation of slurs. *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 97(1), 106-137. [3] Ritchie, K. (2017). Social identity, indexicality, and the appropriation of slurs. *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 17 (50), 155-180. [4] Galinsky, A. D., Wang, C. S., Whitson, J. A., Anicich, E. M., Hugenberg, K., & Bodenhausen, G. V. (2013). The reappropriation of stigmatizing labels: The reciprocal relationship between power and self-labeling. *Psychological Science*, 24(10), 2020-2029. [5] Bianchi, C. (2014). Slurs and appropriation: An echoic account. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 66, 35-44. [6] Cepollaro, B., Sulpizio, S., Bianchi, C., & Stojanovic, I. (2024). Slurs in quarantine. *Mind & Language*, 39 (3), 381-396. [7] Rappaport, J. (2019). Communicating with slurs. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 69 (277), 795-816.