

Reclamation: Taking Back Control of Words

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Reclamation: Taking Back Control of Words

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Reclamation is the phenomenon of an oppressed group repurposing language to its own ends. A case study is reclamation of slur words. Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018) argued that a slurring utterance is a speech act which performs a discourse role assignment. It assigns a subordinate role to the target, while the speaker assumes a dominant role. This pair of role assignments is used to oppress the target. Here I focus on how reclamation works and under what conditions its benefits can stabilise. I start by reviewing the data and describing preconditions and motivations for reclamation. Can reclamation be explained in the same basic framework as regular slurring utterances? I argue that it can. I also identify some features that must be a prediction of any theory of reclamation. I conclude that reclamation is an instance of a much broader class of acts we do with words to change the distribution of power: it begets power, but it also requires it.

Keywords: slurs, reclamation, group power, role assignment, parallel speech-acts, game-theory.

1 Introduction

Reclamation is taking back control by targets of words used to attack them.¹ In this paper I will examine the process of reclaiming slurs.² In contrast to other cases of linguistic change, reclamation is a form of socio-political protest that seeks to re-shape oppressive social practices by controlling what can be done with words. A slur derogates the target on the basis of their group membership. Slurs are based on race (“nigger”, “chink”), gender (“bitch”), sexuality (“queer”), nationality (“limey”, “yank”) or other group membership. Some slurs are used to oppress.

In earlier work (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2018) we gave a detailed theory of what oppressive slurs are and how they can be modelled as moves in a conversational game. The key part of the theory is that the move in the conversational game is a speech act. In this speech act a low

¹ Reclamation and (re-)appropriation are often used interchangeably. They are however subtly different. Appropriation falls within the larger phenomenon of cultural appropriation. While reclamation is still a matter of cultural evolution, it captures better the motivation of target group members of taking back ownership over something that is their own, in particular their name.

² Reclamation differs from cases of drift in offence where the out-group initiates a process of amelioration (e.g. in the 1960s “retarded” was used as a new word because previous words to refer to the group were being used as slurs. Yet, by the 1980s, it too was regarded as slurring).

power dialogue role is assigned to the target. This lasts for the duration of the dialogue, but also typically leaks out to colour the target's social role. In (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2018), we suggested that the theory can also be used to explain reclamation. The insight required is that all speech acts have felicity conditions. We proposed that these felicity conditions might not be met by in-group uses. This creates a space within which reclamation might occur.

This, however, isn't a theory in itself, but merely a pointer toward one. In this paper, I clear the ground for the foundations of a theory. Specifically, I make the following contributions. First, I summarise some data about reclamation, both experimental and historical. Second, I use this to set out some preconditions for reclamation. Third, I sketch a game-theoretic account of slur use which can explain some properties of reclamation. Fourth, I identify some puzzles that both this and other theories must account for.

Let's capture the idea in a nutshell. A dominant group repeatedly deploys a slur as a linguistic weapon so as to achieve *power over* a target group. This weapon is a speech-act (*the slurring speech act*) which assigns a low power role to the target. In-group members can disarm this weapon³ by using the slur term to self-refer. By self-labelling in a non-derogatory way they create a new speech act (*the reclaimed speech act*) that is only accessible to in-group members.⁴ This new speech act assigns in-group members a powerful role. Creating and owning this new speech act also creates feelings of empowerment. Another effect of the new speech act is to make it harder for out-group members to use the slurring speech act.

We now turn to empirical data, both experimental and historical, in order to provide data to support these claims.

2 Experimental evidence

The idea of empowerment through self-labelling has been empirically tested by a group of psychologists around Galinsky's lab (Galinsky et al. 2013, Galinsky et al. 2003, Whitson et al. 2017, Wang et al. 2017). In a series of experiments, Galinsky et al. (2013) tested the effect of self-labelling on the perception of both group and individual power and the change in the perception of the force of slur terms. The key finding was that self-labelling with slur terms

³ Not all slurs undergo reclamation, but rather the more oppressive ones do. Thus, a pre-condition for reclamation is a recognition by the target group of their status as oppressed group, and where the motivation is precisely to draw attention to this oppressive character. Slurs addressed to the powerful ("honky", "limey") don't fit this condition, and thus have not undergone any attempts to reclamation (despite being psychologically hurtful for targets). This suggests an important heterogeneity within the broader category of slurs. A different pattern is that not only oppressed groups can be slurred and thus reclaim, e.g. groups that perceive themselves as oppressed or insulted by a word can do so too (e.g. Trump supporters reclaiming "deplorables").

⁴ Occasionally, access to the non-derogatory use might be granted to very close friends of targets, say, in banter (see Technau 2018). But this is a mere extension of the reclaimed use once it received a certain degree of acceptability. Out-group members don't have the right standing to initiate the reclamation process on behalf of target groups. The reason why many friendly out-group uses can backfire is precisely that out-group members can easily evoke a role of oppressor (see Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt 2018).

induces positive effects in targets as well as observers. Targets felt more powerful after self-labelling, and also observers perceived them and their group as more powerful.

Galinsky et al. drew several conclusions from these experiments. First, a sense of *group power* (not individual power) increases the willingness to self-label using a slur term, but with a positive value. Second, positive self-labelling increases both individual and group power, as well as their perceived power by observers. Third, reclaimed slur terms are then perceived less negatively after self-labelling. In a nutshell, taking possession of a slur term previously used exclusively by the dominant group helps challenge the stigma, and thus weaken the term’s stigmatising force for the target group. This attenuation of stigma and the possibility of transforming it into an expression of pride and self-respect is mediated by the *perception of power*—where power is defined as “control over valuable resources” (Magee & Galinsky 2008, Galinsky et al. 2013, 2021).⁵ This led the authors to adopting a simple causal model, represented in Fig. 1 below:⁶

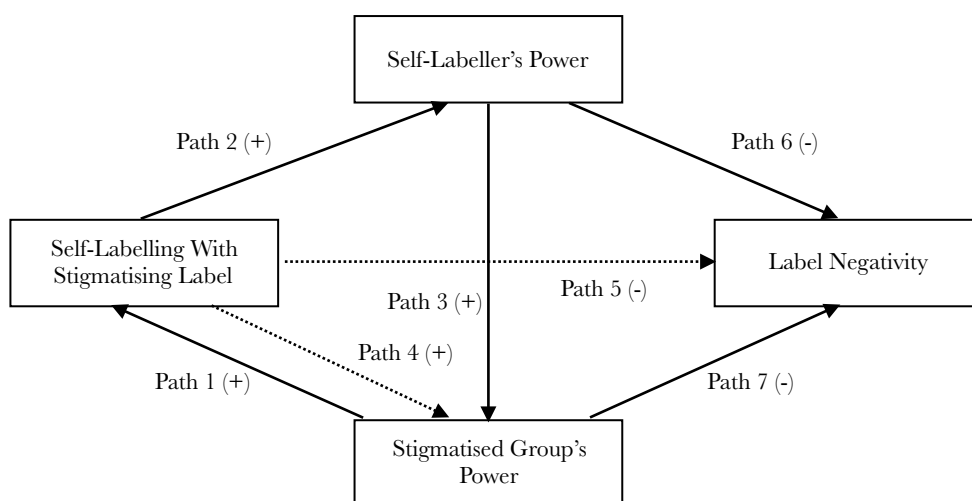


FIGURE 1: From Galinsky et al. 2013 model of reclamation in which *perception of group power* is both a pre-condition for and a consequence of self-labelling.

Central to this model is the individual act of self-labelling with a slur term. This occurs once there is some public awareness of the group strength (Path 1). This in turn can lead to inferences that an individual who self-labels has power (Path 2). This is because self-labelling is perceived as a defying act of taking ownership over the term, and denying the dominant group the use of it. Since self-labelling is connected to agency and in particular to group-

⁵ Interestingly, these effects haven’t been replicated with socially marked descriptive terms (e.g. “woman”), with labels designating the majority-group (e.g. “straight”), or with labels where the associated contempt is perceived as justified (e.g. “Nazi”; “pedophile”), or when the target group is perceived as having too little power.

⁶ The paths marked with “+” signs indicate an increase in power for the individual or group. The paths marked with “-” signs indicate a decrease in the negativity associated with the slur term. Paths are inferences from one node to another: the full arrow is a direct inference, whereas the dotted arrow is an indirect inference.

based identity, inferences of individual power after self-labelling extend to the power of the entire target group (Paths 3 and 4). Further, self-labelling (both in individual and group-acts) challenges the negativity of the slur term (Path 5). Another effect is the perceived power of the self-labeller (Path 6). Further, group power is a negative influence on the negativity of the slur term (Path 7). Thus, the finding supported by data is that by changing others' perception and one's self-perception of group and individual power, reclamation has the potential to reduce the negativity of the slurring label.

This experimental data suggests that *perceived power* is a critical ingredient to enable self-labelling to have an effect on the value of the slur term. It seems to be a positive feedback system. The target group must enjoy some degree of power in order to self-label, and self-labelling in turn reinforces the (self-)perception of group power. In other words, *group power perception* both encourages and is boosted by self-labelling. Thus, self-labelling itself becomes a “form of power because it contests who can use the term” (Galinsky et al. 2013, 2021).

So, reclamation *grabs power back*: it takes ownership over the derogatory label and repurposes it. It also denies out-group members access to the newly repurposed label.⁷

3 Historical evidence

How does the historical data fit with this experimental data? The story is complex. Slurs for different groups have different histories and practices, so reclamation attempts have correspondingly different goals and varying degrees of success. We shall examine the history of two words—“*nigger*” and “*queer*”—to see how reclamation evolved differently in each case.

In the first case, the attempt to reclaiming “*nigger*” by African-Americans is more controversial and arguably has met with more limited success than the reclamation of “*queer*”. In both cases we should draw a distinction between individuals *privately self-labelling* in close-knit groups or communities versus *publicly self-labelling* as part of self-consciously political acts. For example, some of the first recorded instances of public, reclaimed uses of “*nigger*” to self-label post-date the civil rights movement and the achievement of voting and other civil rights reform with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in July 1964.⁸ Public figures such as Dick Gregory, who entitled his autobiography “*Nigger*”, and Richard Pryor were among the first to use the term as a self-label in stand-up comedy, were doing so in public, and as a way of making political statements. This is consistent with the experimental finding that acknowledgment of *group power* encourages reclamation.

⁷ One may argue that reclamation is simply a matter of rebalancing the frequency of use of the slur term. If target groups start using the term more and more often, it will eventually become a more commonplace and thus lose its offensive power as a slur.

⁸ This is not to deny the antecedence of in-group uses in individual interactions prior to the 1960s.

In the case of reclaiming slurs applied to the gay and lesbian communities, the pattern of openly self-labelling as a group with the slur term “queer” also came after a degree of social acceptance had been achieved. At the time of the Stonewall Riots in 1969 members of the gay community had been referring to themselves as “gay”, a term originally developed as a codeword, and so safe to employ later on as a neutral term. Only later, in the 1980s and 1990s, was there a serious attempt at reclamation of “queer”, and subsequently “fag” and “dyke” (Anon 1990). For example, the gay and lesbian publication *Outweek* started in the late 1980s to use “queer” to refer to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community. Later, self-labelling with “queer” was advocated in a flyer distributed at New York’s 1990 Pride as a conscious political act that marks the founding of *Queer Nation*.⁹ The authors noted: “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.” Finally, the confrontational “*We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it*” was a deliberately chosen chant of Queer Nation. What stands out is that the first act of reclamation was a self-consciously political act by a group. It was a *group-act* designed to impose control over the use of the term.¹⁰

What stands out in both the case of “nigger” and “queer” is that the evolution of the reclaimed word, and hence of the associated convention for non-derogatory use, undergoes several stages. To navigate these, we may adopt Galinsky et al.’s (2003, 236) model.

- Level 1 represents *individual acts of reclamation*—where target group members self-label or label other in-group members.
- Level 2 represents *group-acts of reclamation*—where the target group self-labels as a group in order to secure group consciousness such that the label serves as a symbol to rally around.
- Level 3 represents a *successful reclamation* in which out-groups members accept the positive revaluing of the slur term.

The levels are interdependent. Individual acts of reclamation propagate. Once a sufficient degree of group power recognition is reached, then group-acts of reclamation are more likely. This is indeed what we see historically.

⁹ In a section titled “WHY QUEER?” the activists founding Queer Nation wrote: “Well, yes, “gay” is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we’ve chosen to call ourselves queer. Using “queer” is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It’s a way of telling ourselves we don’t have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer. Queer, unlike GAY, doesn’t mean MALE. And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it’s a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy. Yeah, 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.” From Anon (1990).

¹⁰ We can see this as the prerogative of a decentralised group power to enact a top-down change. This enables individual acts of (mocking, self-deprecating) self-labelling to grow organically into a group movement. Thus, the proud identity associated with self-labelling enables a shift in visibility from a closeted space to a public one.

In both projects, early stages at individual level met resistance within the in-group. For example, before male homosexuality was decriminalised in the USA and Europe, there is evidence that many members of the gay community referred to one another using slurs. So that, for example, “queer” was employed self-referentially.¹¹ However, it is not clear whether these were always applied in a non-derogatory manner. For instance, some terms, such as “faggot” or “fairy”, were used by the less conspicuous parts of the gay community to refer to open and flamboyant gay men, and may have been used in both derogatory and non-derogatory ways.¹² Other members of the LGBT community, for example, reject the reclaimed use of “queer” because of the association with the slur from which it is derived.¹³ The fear is that self-labelling reinforces existing stigma.

A similar pattern occurs with the N-word. Early stages at individual level remain local and insular. The term primarily serves to establish a sense of bounding, in-group affection and camaraderie. Other uses are a symbol of (self-)respect so as to remind one another that they are true to themselves (e.g. “He played like a Nigger”; “This is my main Nigger”; “James Brown is a straight-up Nigger”; from Kennedy 2002, 30).¹⁴ However, not all in-group uses are immune to derogation.¹⁵ As Kennedy (2002, pp. 134–135) notes, some African Americans condemn their fellows’ playful, ironic and affectionate uses as “self-defeating” and “hypocritical” because they “create an atmosphere of acceptance”, and thus reinforce the negative perception of white onlookers. This makes it difficult for group-acts of reclamation to organically grow into a group movement.¹⁶

This tension among supporters and dissenters of reclamation is best captured by Tirrell’s (1999) distinction between “reclaimers” and “absolutists”. Though both seek to challenge and undermine the social practices in which slurs are embedded, dissenters think that the slur term can never become non-derogatory, so recommend eradicating the term. Reclaimers, instead, think that the term is deeply intertwined with their identity, and their social and cultural history, and are therefore motivated to own and then change the value of the term.

¹¹ In the early 20th century in the United States, the term “queer” was used as a term of self-reference (or identity category) for homosexual men who adopted masculine behavior (Chauncey 1994, pp. 16–18).

¹² For a detailed history of the evolution of “queer” and further references see Brontsema (2004).

¹³ <https://www.wisegEEK.com/is-queer-a-derogatory-word.htm#comments>

¹⁴ Rahman (2012) notes that reclaiming the slur contributes to nurturing an “identity of survivor”. For McWhorter (2002), reclamation works as a “coping mechanism”.

¹⁵ For different explanations, see Anderson (2018); Popa-Wyatt (2018); Jeshion (2020); Hess (2020).

¹⁶ A notable feature of the African American community is that “nigger” has never been a viable choice for activist groups as a label to revalue. Given that group-membership is a visible, fixed marker, then self-labelling with the N-word doesn’t seem to offer target group members a way of making visible their group-identity. Other slur terms such as “coloured”, “jigaboo”, “spook” have also not been reclaimed, but have either been greeted with social disapproval, leading to decline in use, or have simply died out. What we have instead is the use of the term “Black” as in the slogans “*Say it Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud*” and “*Black is Beautiful*”.

As Kennedy (2002, pp. 38-39) puts it, reclamation is a form of “roping off cultural turf”, “yank[ing] *nigger* from white supremacists, subvert[ing] its ugliest denotation, and convert[ing] *nigger* from a negative into a positive appellation”: “Many blacks also do with *nigger* what other members of marginalised groups have done with slurs aimed at shaming them. They have thrown the slur right back in their oppressors’ faces.” Absolutists reject this approach. For example, Garcia (2003, 94) argues that the stigmatising force of the slur is still implicit in reclaimed uses and can “harden black resentment and a sense of separation.” Absolutists thus question the entire motivation of reclamation: if the dominant group can carry on using the slur in the same way despite target group members reclaiming it and using it proudly, what difference does it make? A better alternative was to replace the troubled N-word with the term “nigga” that belongs to the target group.¹⁷ For example, one of the earliest instances of self-labelling by the rap group NWA—*Niggaz With Attitude*. The reclaimed use as a friendly address was enabled in part by this practice of the alternative spelling and pronunciation.

Having examined some of the empirical data, we turn to some existing explanations of reclamation.

4 Existing accounts

I now quickly note some points about reclamation made in the philosophical literature. As we have seen in the historical and experimental data, we should distinguish between (i) the *outcome* of reclamation (i.e. the nature of the non-derogatory meaning of a reclaimed slur) or (ii) on the *process* leading to a non-derogatory outcome (Jeshion 2013, pp. 326-327; 2020).¹⁸ Explanations focusing on outcome aspire to provide a unique mechanism that applies across the board. Some explain the non-derogatory meaning as an ambiguous or polysemous meaning that is semantically encoded (Hom 2008; Richard 2008; Jeshion 2020), or as a pragmatically conveyed meaning (Bianchi 2014; Cepollaro 2017a/b, Herbert 2015).

Explanations that focus on process instead need to explain how the word progresses through the different stages. The argument goes as follows. First, history cannot be wiped out. Even when a slur term has been reclaimed, there is the memory of oppression. Second, it looks like only in-group members can access the non-derogatory meaning of a slur term. This seems odd if this is a semantically encoded meaning. Third, bigots can still use the slur term contemptuously.

¹⁷ It’s not obvious however whether it is an entirely new word or merely a phonological variant. As Rahman (2012: 138) argues, instead of ending in a hard /r/, the reclaimed “nigga” ends in a schwa, without /r/. This ending grows out of the phonological system of African American English (AAE), which has a rule that can produce a schwa in lieu of post vocalic /r/ in an unstressed final syllable.

¹⁸ See Brontsema 2004; Bianchi 2014; Anderson 2018; Herbert 2015; Cepollaro 2017a,b; Ritchie 2015; Croom 2015, 2018; diFranco 2017; and papers in this special issue, e.g. Jeshion 2020, Burnett 2020, Hess 2020. Others discuss reclamation as part of a general theory of slurs (Saka 2007; Hom 2008; Richard 2008; Anderson & Lepore 2013; Jeshion 2013, 2015, 2018; Camp 2013; Bolinger 2017; Nunberg 2018; Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt 2018).

Therefore, it's important to account for the process of reclamation. This feature is nicely captured by Anderson (2018), who following Eckert (2006; 2012), argues that in-groups vs out-groups of slurs are indexed to different “communities of practice”.¹⁹ When used by in-groups, the term can express camaraderie, sometimes mild derogation, or it can work as a value-neutral descriptor. For example, the non-derogatory value of the N-word arises from its being used as an act of “*addressing*” (i.e. of presenting the target as worthy of praise or recognition), in contrast to its being used in acts of “*calling*” (i.e. of presenting the target as contemptible).

Jeshion (2013, 2015, 2018, 2020) distinguishes the “*pride reclamation*” of “queer” and the “*insular reclamation*” of the N-word. She argues that both cases start with “initial acts of linguistic and non-linguistic innovation and creativity which, after imitation and diffusion, result in a new linguistic convention.” They also share a similar structure including:

- “*polarity reversal*”—the reclaimed use reverses the negative polarity of the term to communicate a positive polarity;
- “*weapons control*”—by self-applying the bigot’s oppressive label but with a positive polarity, targets “take ownership of the word, and thereby diminish its power in the bigots’ hands”;
- “*identity ownership*”—the reclaimed term becomes an identity label which helps to positively shape the group’s social identity.

While pride and insular reclamations have a common structure, they grow out of different practices. For Jeshion, the difference is one of intended visibility.²⁰ For example, pride reclamation seeks to “redefine the group social identity to one deserving of, and demanding, equal respect”. In insular reclamation, in contrast, targets do not consciously try to “transform out-group negative societal attitudes and norms,” but instead seek to establish camaraderie.

I’ll now outline a mechanism that formalises the motivation for reclamation in the former case.

¹⁹ The concepts of “practice”, “social provenance”, and “persona” associated with various communities of practice, are also key in work by Tirrell (1999), Nunberg (2018) and Burnett (2020). For Tirrell, reclamation requires re-organising the inferential structure associated with a slur term so as to empower the targets. For Nunberg, reclamation requires that a new convention of use be defined over a new “social provenance” that is not associated any longer with the speaker’s affiliation to a bigoted group. For Burnett, “persona” is at the heart of reclamation in that personae vary depending on the community of practice such that speakers and hearers may have different personae in their ideologies.

²⁰ I’d like to complement these observations about visibility. In the case of “queer”, the necessity for hiding and the danger of being ‘outed’ is part of the historical means of oppression of homosexuality. The word “queer” is effective as a slur not only because it asserts the existing power imbalance between the oppressor and the target, but also because it exposes the target who otherwise might have been able to ‘pass’. In this context the act of self-labelling in defiance of the oppressive norm of secrecy is therefore empowering. In contrast, in the context of racial oppression secrecy is not part of the dynamic. It has been rare for black people to be able to ‘pass’ as white. The power dynamic has instead played out in terms of very overt physical violence and the threat of such violence. The evolution from mocking, in-group uses to positive self-labelling can still take place with the N-word, but there is not such an organic link between empowered self-labelling and public resistance to oppression.

5 A power theory of reclamation

I propose a speech act theoretic analysis of reclaim. In earlier work (Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt 2018), we argued that a slurring utterance is a speech act and that it can be understood as a move in a conversational game so as to gain advantage for the speaker. Specifically, a slurring act performs a discourse role assignment: it assigns a subordinate role to the target, while the speaker assumes a dominant role. This assignment changes the power dynamics in the conversation. This provides a motivation for the speaker: subordinating the target group accrues power and benefits to the speaker, and ultimately to the group they represent. As a speech act, the role assignment act has felicity conditions. The critical feature of interest for the successful performance of such an act is that the roles assigned in conversation are sufficiently plausible. This may be further broken down into there being: (i) a plausible power imbalance of the right kind between speaker and target, and (ii) a correct identification of the target by the slur as a member of the referenced group.

Can we use this idea of felicity conditions to show how reclamation helps reverse this power imbalance? The idea in a nutshell is that an in-group use of a slur term can permit reclamation by creating the space for slurring acts to misfire. The reclamation process begins with in-group uses through proud acts of self-referral. This is because, as an in-group member, the speaker does not fit the role of the oppressor that a slurring use invokes and requires. And because the role assignments don't fire correctly for in-group uses, this opens up the possibility that the slur term could begin to be used in a different way. But in order to create the space for reclamation, it's important that the community makes repeated uses in circumstances where the felicity conditions underlying the power imbalance are violated. The goal is both to chip away at the convention associated with derogatory uses and to make room for a new convention for non-derogatory usage to be established. When reclamation succeeds, it enables targets to put the slur term to a better use, e.g. so that a different pair of roles can be assigned, say roles with equal discourse rights and camaraderie.

We can thus define an act of reclamation by an in-group member as an act of *proud self-referral* with the slur term, but which is now used to make a different speech act. This creates a *rival speech act* to the derogatory speech act underlying a slurring use. Its purpose is to ensure positive in-group uses that serve to reinforce the social identity of in-group members and boost their sense of self-respect.

So, having established what speech act a slurring utterance performs, can we posit what a reclaimed use is doing? Let's posit that it creates a *parallel speech act, with a new role*—one that is full of positive attributes, and which crucially, has power. When the word is proudly self-applied to the target group, it assigns that powerful role to in-group members. This is where the role of *group power* is important. A group standing together in defiance has an inherent power. It is necessary to have this group power expressed at the point of first self-application.

A person of an oppressed minority, proudly self-labelling on their own, is not going to have the power necessary to create the new role and thereby the convention tracking the new speech act. So, the in-group group members *act together*, they *self-label together*, and the power they have as a group *creates a new powerful role*. A new speech act of role assignment is thus created and filled with this powerful role.²¹

So, during the process of reclamation, we can identify two parallel speech acts, each with different felicity conditions and each uttered by different types of speakers. The first speech act is the original oppressive speech act, useable by bigots, which assigns the low power role to target group members. The new self-labelling speech act, useable by target group members in reclaimed uses is the speech act which assigns a powerful role to in-group members. Thus, each utterance performs a single speech act.

6 Puzzles and problems

There is a puzzle that arises out of this observation that there are two speech-acts in existence after reclamation. The disempowering speech act can still be applied by out-group members. We are then forced to ask, what is the motivation, as expressed within the theory, for the creation of the new speech act?

Here, we can make appeal to a simplified game-theoretic formulation that includes the notion of advantage (reward) and disadvantage (cost). We need to explain the motivation for creating and using a new speech act. In game theory, motivations are explained in terms of maximising rewards. Thus, we need to consider the game in terms of the reward structure. Can we construct a game that makes sense of the data?

Let us think about a simple game in which each party can apply the slur term or not. The target can self-apply the term proudly or not. The oppressor can apply the term derogatorily or not. What reward structure seems appropriate?

Here, let us suppose that the game has what we shall call *differential rewards*. In other words, rewards represent a change to a power level such that this increments/decrements an existing stock of reward—i.e. there is already some accumulated reward over previous versions of the game. The rewards here represent an increment or decrement to that stock for each player. This also reflects that a speech act is made in a context and this has the potential of altering the flow of power either in favour of the oppressor or in favour of the target.

²¹ This holds in the following possible configurations, though different goals are pursued: (i) self-labelling in in-group uses where the target and speaker are in-group and the goal is to bond together; (ii) self-labelling in mixed company where the role for the speaker is defined in relation to that of the oppressor and where the goal is to rebalance the power dynamics; (iii) self-labelling in response to a slurring act where the goal is to defy the oppressor. This requires more elaboration than I have the space here, but I'll briefly touch on some of these configurations in §6.

Let us suppose a case where a slurring act is made by the oppressor and there is no self-labelling by the target. Then let the reward be (+1) for the oppressor and (-1) for the target. This reflects the power shift from target to oppressor. Then, suppose a situation in which there is a proud self-labelling act by the target, but no slurring act by the oppressor. In this case there is a shift in power in favour of the target. If neither player chooses a speech act, the power relations stay as previously. This fills out three of the four possible move combinations. But to complete the game we need to allocate a reward function to the case where both the target and the oppressor choose to use the slur term as part of the same game, yet to perform different acts with different goals. This requires that we consider what might actually happen in such a case.

Let's take a situation where there is a self-labelling speech act with "Queer" at a Gay Pride march: 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it'. Perhaps a homophobic audience member shouts the slur "Queers!" at the LGTB marchers. What happens then? I suggest that the self-labelling speech act trumps the simultaneous slurring speech act. Why? One reason is the differential in group power in support of one speech act rather than another. In this context there is a majority of target group members using the term to self-label in a proud manner rather than to disempower, so the majority wins out. This is clearly modulated by the power accorded to individuals by their institutional status. For example, suppose the homophobe is a policeman. He has power on account of his institutional role. But is that sufficient to overcome the group? Perhaps he can use his power to arrest a member of the group, but alone he cannot arrest them all. Thus, the actions with which he can follow up the slur are limited. Clearly, the group is in a stronger position than a lone target group member when confronting the bigot, whether that bigot is powerful or not.

Let's take a second example, in a different context. Suppose a gay man attends an event with a friend in which a person uses the slur "queer", such as "At least there's no queers here." To which he responds: "I'm here, I'm queer, get used to it." Is there a blocking effect of the initial slur? Arguably, there is one. Clearly, the bigot may continue in their attack, but the response is a speech act that disables the slur. It performs a second role allocation using the same name but a different role. Thus, it seeks to overwrite the initial role allocation. Clearly, the attempt by the bigot to role allocation may continue, and which party triumphs now depends, at least in part on the reactions of other audience members. In this second case, the action is one of defence against an initial attack, whereas in the first case there is an initiative to seize conversational power. Note however that individual acts of challenging or pushing back have less traction in making an impact on the community than when they are supported by a wider community.

These two cases suggest that there is indeed a reward function for the case where both speech acts occur in the same game such that the speech act of the reclaimed use blocks or diminishes the role assignment of the slurring act. Thus, we suggest a reward function that is

either (+1) or (0) for the target, and a corresponding (-1) or (0) for the oppressor. We can lay out these possibilities in a payoff matrix in Fig. 2:

		Target	
		Self-labelling act	No self-labelling act
Oppressor	Slurring act	(-1,+1) or (0,0)	(+1,-1)
	No slurring act	(-1,+1)	(0,0)

FIGURE 2: Payoff matrix of combination of weaponised vs reclaimed slur uses. The payoffs for the row player (oppressor) are listed first in the parenthesis; the payoffs for the column player (target) come second.

Now, let's consider the rational action for each actor. Suppose that the oppressor utters the slur term, then under either payoff matrix the target is better off to use the self-labelling speech act. Suppose equally that the oppressor doesn't slur, then the self-labelling act is still preferable for the target to remaining silent. So, in either case the dominant strategy for the target is to self-label.

Consider then the way that the payoff matrix changes for the oppressor depending on whether the self-labelling act is either absent or present. If present and the target uses it, then the rational action for the oppressor is to use the slurring speech act if the payoff is (0,0). But its effect is diminished when there is push back from the target group. If, on the other hand, the self-labelling speech act is absent, it is rational for the oppressor to use the slurring act because they get the upper hand in conversation, and in the long run accrue social benefits for themselves. This holds if there is no resistance from the target group or sympathetic bystanders, and as long as the social structures supporting the power imbalance are maintained in place. So, in either case the dominant strategy for the oppressor is to slur.

But what if the payoffs for simultaneous slurring and reclaimed uses are (-1,+1)? This reflects the idea that using the self-labelling act wins out against the slurring act, and that the power shift caused by the self-labelling act is in favour of the target. In this case there is no advantage to the oppressive slurring act at all.

But, critically for the argument here, in either payoff matrix the dominant strategy for the target is to self-label proudly and to use that self-label to draw on group power in order to improve their role status in the conversational game. This result is compatible with the empirical data from Galinsky et al (2013) to the extent that feelings of group power encourage acts of self-labelling in the first place, and in turn acts of self-labelling yield both a self-perception of power and observers' perception of the group's power.

7 Conclusion

I have only briefly sketched some issues in the process of reclamation and how a theory based on speech acts and conversational power might explain how reclamation works. Several things became evident. First, the process of cleansing and detoxifying slurs is not limited to reclamation. Reclamation is only a part of a larger process of resistance and taking back control. It is not only necessary to create a new speech act that is proud and defiant, but also to create a social cost for employing the other derogatory speech act. Second, the experimental data points to the idea that you have to have some power to take back power over the labels used to refer to you. Reclamation begets power, but it also requires it. Third, reclamation may vary from case to case depending on the social gains that target groups have been able to secure so far. Sometimes reclamation is not attempted at all. Sometimes it succeeds, sometimes it fails. The process of reclaiming each slur word must be understood in terms of a specific history of oppression and in terms of the political goals of the community.

If the speech act theory of power grab is correct, and I believe that it has merit, it turns some of our ideas of language around. We intuitively tend to see language as something we use to describe the world, including its power structures. Austin (1962) and others extended this by showing that language is also used to change the world. We come full circle with the realisation that language not only reflects power, but moves it around and that it does so in the real world by shifting power around in conversation. What we see in reclamation is the tussle for control over words that are then used to grab power in conversation. This conversational power leaks out into power shifts in the real world. Thus, reclamation gets right to the heart of why it is that words have power, and thereby why we care about the words used to name us and name ourselves so much.

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