

Testing Theories of Slurs¹

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Abstract

There have been many articles written within the field of linguistics about slurs and how they work theoretically, but there have been very few papers that look at these theories from an empirical lens in more realistic situations. This paper seeks to start closing that gap. I identify four different theories or assumptions that are common in the literature surrounding slurs: embedding/reported speech, use vs. mention, derogatory meaning, and ignorant speaker. I conducted an online survey with the LGBT+ community as my case study to ask real people how/what they think about slurs. In this paper I argue that these theories should be backed up and tested with empirical data. I also argue that the data that I collect influences how academics should think about the theories that they propose surrounding slurs. This paper gives empirical results supporting an analysis of slurs in which derogatory meaning is part of the meaning of the word. Participants in my survey found slurs in embedded/reported contexts to be offensive, and well as slurs that are mentioned instead of used in a sentence. They found overall that the derogatory meaning of slurs is contained within the word itself. Lastly, participants indicated that in at least some contexts slurs are offensive when used by an ignorant speaker.

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1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, theoretical research conducted about slurs and other derogatory terms² has grown into its own subfield of linguistics. Linguists want to know what makes the meaning and usage of slurs so offensive and how they work syntactically. Even though there are many articles written on the topic of slurs and how they work theoretically (Anderson and Lepore 2013, Bach 2018, Camp 2018, Cepollaro 2015, Croom 2013, Hom 2008, Jeshion 2013, Jorgensen Bolinger 2017, Lepore and Stone 2018, Lo Guercio 2021, Nunberg 2018, Pullum 2018, Richard 2018, Whiting 2013), there are no studies that I could find that look at these theories and assumptions empirically. It is easy for academics to theorize about something and believe that it is correct, but without looking at how these words are used in the context of the real world, it is hard to know for sure. My research strives to start closing that gap. I hope to give more nuance into how academics think about slurs and how they function. In my thesis I will argue that these theories are worth testing and that the data I collect is conclusive and is a valuable resource for other academics in the field. There is no point in discussing a theory if that theory doesn't apply to the real world.

Overall in this paper I argue that data should be collected to test these theories in more realistic contexts so that academics can provide a better analysis of the meaning and functions of these words. In the process of making this argument I collect data relating to four categories of theories that I have identified in the literature: embedding/reported speech, use vs mention, derogatory meaning, and ignorant speaker. For each category I show how my data could influence the literature written on that specific theory or assumption. I conducted an online survey that asked members of the LGBT+³ community about these theories. It was important to me that a community that is actually affected by these words participate in my survey because I

² An example of a derogatory term would be an insult or a swear word.

³ I use the term "LGBT+" instead of "LGBTQ" or "Queer" as a label for the community consistently throughout this paper and my survey because in this paper I talk about instances where "queer" is used as a slur and I didn't want to use it in the term that I used to describe the community because I do not want to appear biased in my portrayal of the word or offend any readers.

believe that communities should have authority over the words that are used to describe them. As Sally McConnell-Ginet says in her book *Words Matter: Meaning and Power*: “ultimately, authorizing [word meaning] arises within communities as the result of a variety of processes, among which deference to recognized experts is only one.” (McConnell-Ginet 2020, 243-244)

The results of my survey do have implications for many of the theories of slurs that I have identified. For the category embedding/reported speech participants were asked if slurs in an embedded/reported context were offensive, and participants in my survey did find slurs in embedded/reported contexts to be offensive. Similarly, For the category use vs. mention participants were asked if slurs were offensive when they were only mentioned in speech, and participants did find that mentioned slurs are offensive. Next, for the category of derogatory meaning which asked participants if the offensive meaning of a slur is contained in the word itself or in the usage of the word, they generally found that the derogatory meaning of slurs is contained within the word itself. For the category of ignorant speaker, which asked participants if slurs are still offensive when spoken by an ignorant speaker, participants indicated that in at least some contexts slurs are offensive when used by an ignorant speaker. Lastly, I analyse some of the demographic data that I collected in my survey.

I will now give a brief overview of this paper. In section 2, I give a short content warning for the rest of this thesis. In section 3 I give an overview of the literature within the field. In section 4 I outline the methods I used in my survey and analysis and also talk about the demographics of my participants. In section 5 I discuss my results and have an analysis of those results. In section 6 I talk about limitations to my survey. In section 7 I describe further research that can be done in the field. Finally, in section 8 I have my closing arguments and some further analysis of my data.

2 Content warning

Before I discuss my research, I would first like to give a content warning to readers. My research concerns slurs that target the LGBT+ community. It is not possible to discuss this research without mentioning slurs or using them in my examples. I understand that these words can be very harmful to listeners and readers. I will attempt to limit my usage of slurs to a minimum. Studying these words is a worthy endeavor because it gives us greater insight into how and why they hurt people. By inserting community engagement into my research, through collecting my data from speakers in the LGBT+ community, I am allowing real people to have a say in what and how academics think about these words. The communities that these words target are the only ones who will truly understand their offensiveness, and therefore should have a say in the conversation that this paper is contributing to. I will now talk about some prominent theories regarding slurs.

3 Literature review

Before I discuss more contentious theories, I want to first talk about what many academics agree upon. The most common definition of a slur is that it is a word that a group or groups of people use to derogate against a group with a shared identity such as race, religion, sexuality, gender, disability, nationality, etc. (Anderson and Lepore 2013, 25-26, Bach 2018, 61, Cepollaro 2015, 36, Diaz-Legaspe 2020, 1400, Hom 2008, 426, Jorgensen Bolinger 2017, 440, Nunberg 2018, 239). This group-referencing meaning of slurs is what sets them apart from a normal insult. Insults are still offensive, but they do not reference a specific group of people. For example, if someone has a stain on their shirt they might be called a “slob”, but there isn’t a group or community of people that identify with having stains on their shirts, so therefore “slob” is not a slur, it is just an insult.

Slurs are also commonly known to have a neutral counterpart (Anderson and Lepore 2013, 26, Hom 2008, 417, Jeshion 2013, 234). A neutral counterpart references the same group

that a slur does, but it is not offensive; for example, the slur “dyke” would have a neutral counterpart of “lesbian.” Both “lesbian” and “dyke” refer to a group of people that identify as women who are attracted to other women, but “dyke” is an offensive term for this group whereas “lesbian” is not⁴.

In general, theories on slurs can also be split up into two categories: semantic and pragmatic⁵. A pragmatic reading of slurs generally states that the derogatory nature of slurs comes from their usage in context: slurs *do* bad things (Anderson and Lepore 2013, Nunberg 2018, Jorgensen Bolinger 2017, Lepore and Stone 2018), and a semantic reading of slurs states that the derogatory nature of slurs comes from their meaning: slurs *mean* bad things (Hom 2008, Jeshion 2013, Bach 2018). Even if these readings of slurs differ on how slurs offend, it is generally agreed upon, however, that slurs, in the majority of cases⁶, do offend and harm the listener even if that listener is not the intended target of the slur (Boeckmann and Liew 2002, 377-379 Feldman Barrett 2017, Saha et al. 2019, 260, Tynes et al. 2008, 568).

Offensiveness does also depend on the context. There are reclaimed uses of slurs which are typically non-offensive when used in the right context e.g. reclamation⁷. Reclamation is a process by which a slur is used in a positive context or as an identifier by the group that the slur targets (Bianchi 2014, 36, Brontsema 2004, 1, Herbert 2018, 1, Jeshion 2020, 107). The term “queer” is a good example of reclamation; it used to be only used as a slur, but today it is a more positive word and identifier (Brontsema 2004, 4-5). Even though a word like “queer” has been reclaimed by many people within the LGBT+ community, some still consider the word offensive (Steele 2019, 6); this is true of many recently reclaimed slurs.

⁴ Neutral counterparts of slurs can of course be said in an offensive manner, but in this paper all of the neutral counterparts I mention are intended to be non-offensive.

⁵ These categories are also sometimes called “truth-conditional” and “non-truth-conditional”, but I will be using “semantic” and “pragmatic” in this paper because they are more common terms.

⁶ An exception would be a reclaimed use of a slur.

⁷ This is also called “appropriation”, “linguistic resignification”, or “reappropriation”, but I will be using “reclamation” in this paper because it is the most common.

I have identified some common theories/assumptions in research on slurs: embedding/reported speech, use vs. mention, derogatory meaning, and ignorant speaker. Embedding/reported speech, use vs. mention, and ignorant speaker are all related to more general assumptions academics make when talking about slurs, and the topic of derogatory meaning more specifically looks at the pragmatic/semantic debate surrounding offensiveness and how slurs offend. I will now briefly discuss these theories and assumptions.

3.1 *Embedding/Reported Speech*

Slurs, like many other words, can be a part of a reported speech act. An utterance is embedded or reported when one speaker quotes another speaker, like in (1)-(3).

- (1) Sam said, "Mary is tall."
- (2) I heard Lucy say that she likes Sarah.
- (3) Tom said that Alex is a dyke.

The speakers in (1)-(3) report what someone else said, not their own thoughts or opinions. Some, like Cepollaro (2015), Lepore and Stone (2018), and Anderson and Lepore (2013), believe that slurs in reported speech, like "dyke" in (3), are offensive: "A peculiarity of these words [slurs] is that their offensive content tends to scope out of semantic embeddings like negations, conditionals, modals or questions" (Cepollaro 2015, 37), while others, like Horn (2008) believe that slurs in reported speech are not offensive because the speaker is not endorsing the words of the person whom they are quoting.

Many theorists use this type of example to support their main argument. For example, Anderson and Lepore (2013) and Lepore and Stone (2018) argue that "the *only* distinctive status in language that slurs as a class share is that it is prohibited to use them ... any utterance of [a slur] is a violation [of social construct], and potentially objectionable and offensive" (Lepore and Stone 2018, 133), and if, as Lepore and Stone (2018) say, any utterance of a slur is offensive then any embedded slur is also offensive.

3.2 *Use vs Mention*

Use vs. mention is another topic with two clear sides. Similar to embedding, to some, just mentioning a slur is not offensive. Some cases of mentioning, such as simply defining a term, are necessary to understand why a particular slur is offensive in the first place (Jorgensen Bolinger 2017, 442-443). The other side argues that mentions of slurs are offensive in at least some cases (Bach 2018, 62). The definition of use vs. mention is sometimes vague, but for my purposes, mentioning a word means that the sentence or utterance focuses on the word itself. For example, in (4), “cat” is being used in the sentence because the sentence is talking about “cats” as a thing in the world, but in (5), “cat” is being mentioned because the sentence is only giving us information on the word “cat” itself, e.g., that it contains three letters.

(4) A cat is an animal.

(5) The word “cat” has three letters.

This use vs. mention distinction is important because slurs and other forms of hate speech are mentioned all the time in dictionary definitions, the classroom, academic articles, workplace harassment trainings, etc. If mentions of slurs are always offensive then it might be hard to teach people about these words without causing offense.

3.3 *Derogatory Meaning*

As outlined in section 3, there are two main ways that academics think about derogatory meaning: either it is part of the meaning of the word (semantic) or it is part of how people use the word (pragmatic). In this section I will briefly outline some assumptions that can be made about slurs depending on if the argument is pragmatic or semantic. These sections are all looking at the argument surrounding how meaning is conveyed. I have separated them here because they are all coming at this argument from a slightly different angle.

3.3.1 Negation

The topic of negation covers an assumption I have observed from articles on slurs. Firstly, among many definitions of slurs, especially among semantic readings of slurs, there is an understanding that slurs have two different parts: offensive/derogatory meaning and group-referencing meaning (Camp 2018, 49-51, Diaz-Legaspe 2020, 1413, Jeshion 2013, 234, Lo Guercio 2021, 378, Richard 2018, 157, Whiting 2013, 364-365). The offensive component naturally makes the word derogate, offend, or hurt the listener, and the group referencing component references the neutral counterpart associated with the slur. Here are some examples of negation:

(6) John is not a fag.

(7a) Lucy is a dyke.

(7b) No, she isn't.

When discussing negation, some work, such as Camp (2018), argues that negating a slur, as in (6)-(7b), only negates the group referencing component of the slur: “the default interpretation of (2) [‘Isaiah is not a kike.’] does deny that Isaiah is Jewish while endorsing the derogating perspective on Jews as a whole” (Camp 2018, 54). This argument from Camp (2018) aligns with a pragmatic view of slurs. If Camp (2018) is correct that negating a slur only negates its group referencing component then it stands to reason that any use of a slur can be offensive even if it is negated. If negating a slur negates the group-referencing component of the slur, then a slur and its neutral counterpart must agree in content. Therefore, the derogatory meaning is not a part of the word’s meaning. On the other hand, a semanticist might argue that when a speaker negates a slur they are negating both the offensive meaning and the group referencing meaning.

3.3.2 Inherent Derogatory Meaning

Inherent derogatory meaning is a major argument from many semantic accounts of slurs (Hom 2008, 416, Lo Guercio 2021, 378). As outlined in section 3.3.1, some semanticists argue that slurs have two components: an offensive or derogatory component, and a group-referencing component. This offensive component of a slur is what I will call the inherent derogatory meaning. This offensive content cannot be separated from the meaning of the word.

3.3.3 Synonyms

If slurs have an inherent derogatory meaning that sets them apart from their neutral counterparts, then the opposite could also be true. A pragmatic reading of derogatory meaning (Anderson and Lepore 2013, Jorgensen Bolinger 2017, Lepore and Stone 2018, Nunberg 2018) states that the derogatory meaning of slurs comes from the usage of a slur and not from their meaning. Therefore if slurs do not have an inherent derogatory meaning, then the only aspect of their meaning is the group-referencing component. If a slur's meaning only references its neutral counterpart, then a slur and its neutral counterpart must be synonyms (Jorgensen Bolinger 2017, 440, Nunberg 2018, 244), which are purely semantic. Consider (8a) and (8b):

(8a) Sarah is a lesbian.

(8b) Sarah is a dyke.

“Lesbian” and “dyke” reference the same group of people: women who are attracted to other women, but “dyke” is clearly offensive. Some argue that this view minimizes the offensiveness of slurs (Jensen 2019, 20-21).

3.4 Ignorant speaker

So far, I have only talked about cases where the speaker knows what they are saying when they say a slur, but what if the speaker is a child or someone who is not speaking in their native language? There are many cases where someone who utters a slur does not understand

what they are saying or how offensive it is. According to Jorgensen Bolinger (2017), this type of utterance is not offensive: “Our intuitions about offensiveness are guided not only by what seems to warrant offense, but also by our judgments concerning when hearers would be licensed or reasonable in taking offense. Ignorant slurring is a perfect example: ... the use of a slur by someone who has no idea that the term is a slur doesn’t seem to warrant offense” (Jorgensen Bolinger 2017, 449). If a child were to say (9) to another child but it is clear that the child doesn’t know what they are saying, according to Jorgensen Bollinger (2017), it would not be offensive.

(9) “You’re a fag!”

In this situation the context of the utterance of a slur is very important. People say ignorant things all the time. Sadly, sometimes the only word someone knows for a certain group of people is a slur.

4 Methods

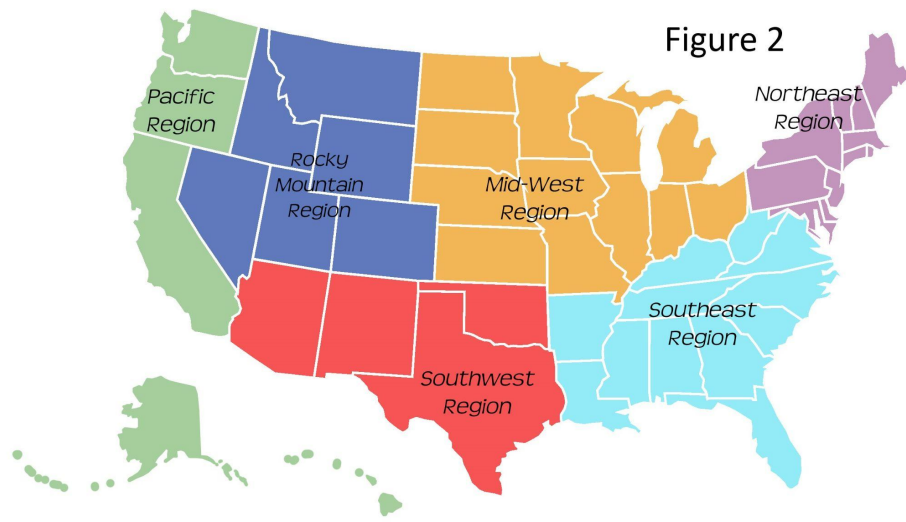
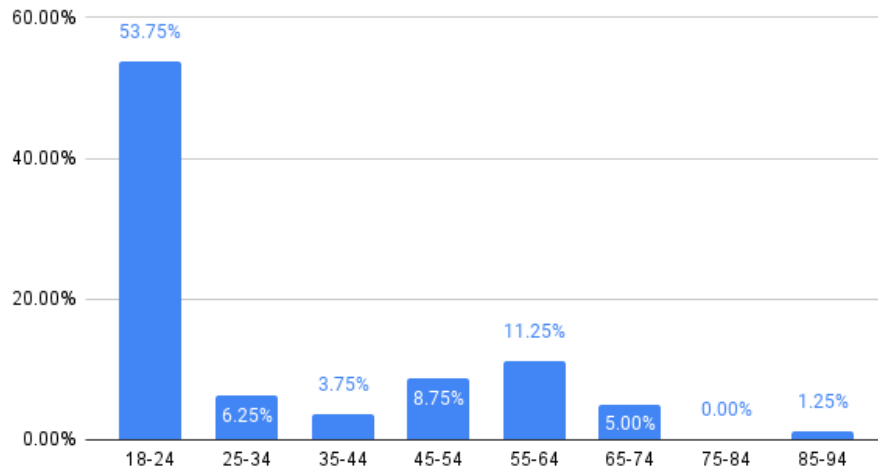
In this section I will discuss the online survey that I made in order to test the theories I identified in section 3. My data was collected via an anonymous online survey over a month long period of time. To reach a diverse group of participants, I contacted many LGBT+ centered establishments, organizations, and businesses around the United States. I found these establishments through an online LGBT+ centered travel website⁸. Participants were also found via word-of-mouth. The sample consisted of 101 people, 71 of whom completed the survey. I will still include responses from incomplete surveys in my analysis. Participants were allowed to skip questions of the survey if they wanted. The terms I asked about in my survey are offensive to most people and could be triggering, so participants were allowed to skip questions if they felt uncomfortable. Participants in my survey ranged from age 18 to 90 (figure 1). Participants came from many different regions of the United States: 41.77% were from the Northeast, 39.24% from

⁸ <https://www.travelgay.com/destination/gay-usa/>

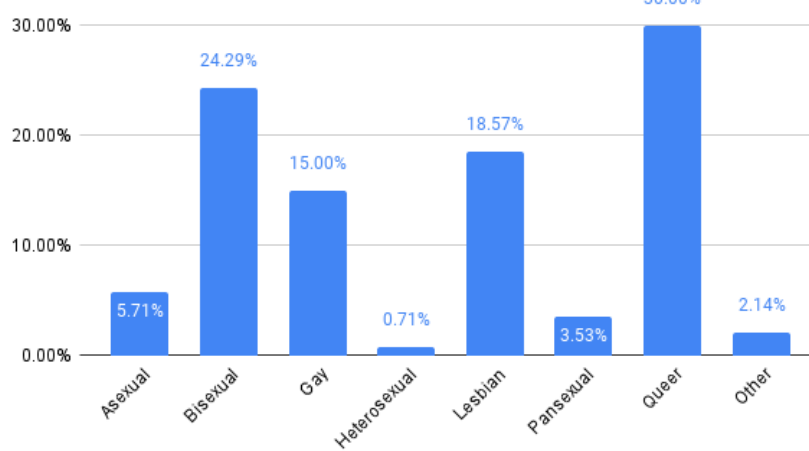
the Midwest, 15.19% from the Southeast, 2.53% from the Pacific region, and 1.27% from the Rocky Mountain region (figure 2). Participants were asked about what labels they used to identify their sexuality. Participants were allowed to choose more than one sexuality label because they often intersect or overlap (figure 3). Participants were asked about what labels they used to identify their gender. Again, participants were allowed to choose more than one sexuality label because they often intersect or overlap (figure 4). Finally, participants were asked about their level of education: 2.47% chose high school (some or all), 72.84% chose undergraduate (some or all), and 24.69% chose post-college.

For my survey, I have defined six different categories of theories or assumptions that I am testing. I also have a section of control questions. I ask participants about the terms “dyke”,

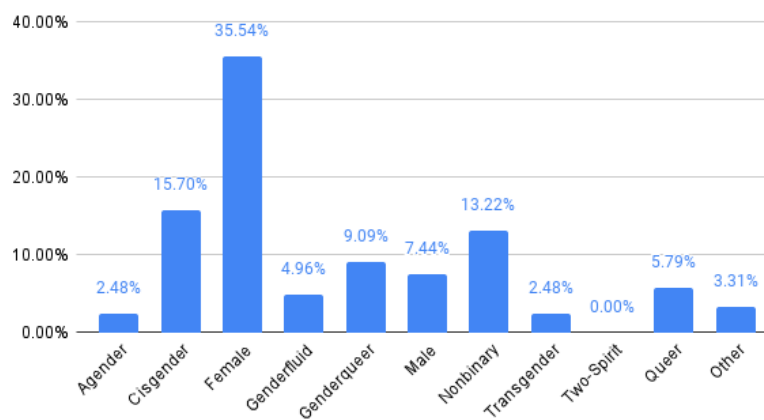
Age of Participants (figure 1)



Sexual Identities of Participants (figure 3)



Gender Identities of Participants (figure 4)



“fag/faggot”, and “a queer⁹” in my survey because these terms have been used as slurs for a long time, and they are widespread. In half of the questions that ask participants about a slur being used in a specific context, the speaker is a member of the LGBT+ community. This is again to provide contrast. To analyse my data I use descriptive statistics, one sample t-tests, paired samples t-tests, and one-way between subjects ANOVAs where appropriate.

⁹ In my survey I consistently used “a queer” instead of “queer” because I wanted to make it clear to participants that the usage of the term in the survey was intended to be offensive considering that “queer” is in the process of being reclaimed. I used the indefinite article “a” because putting an article in front of a word distances the listener or speaker from that word and can sometimes be considered offensive (Acton 2019, Acton and Potts 2014).

4.1 Hypotheses and Predictions

In this section I will present my hypotheses regarding each section. These hypotheses are based on my own personal experiences and they are a mix of a pragmatic and semantic reading of slurs. For the first section with my control questions I hypothesize that participants will not find the situations/questions offensive. I consider an overall offensiveness rating to be non-offensive if the mean offensiveness is equal to or less than 2 on a 5 point Likert scale, so I hypothesize that the mean offensiveness will be equal to or less than two. For the second section that regards embedded and reported speech I hypothesize that slurs in embedded speech acts will be more offensive than their neutral counterparts in the same context. This hypothesis aligns with Anderson and Lepore (2013), Cepollaro (2015), Lepore and Stone (2018) as outlined in section 3.1. The third section talks about use vs mention. I hypothesize that participants will find slurs offensive even when they are mentioned in speech. This hypothesis aligns with Bach (2018) as outlined in section 3.2. For the sections regarding derogatory meaning I predict that participants will agree more with a semantic reading of slurs. I think that participants will believe that when slurs are negated their offensiveness is negated along with their group-referencing meaning, that they do have an inherent derogatory meaning, and that slurs are not synonyms of their neutral counterparts. A semantic reading of slurs would go against theories outlined in Camp (2018), Anderson and Lepore (2013), Jorgensen Bolinger (2017), Lepore and Stone (2018), and Nunberg (2018). Finally, for the section on ignorant speakers I predict that participants will find slurs offensive when they are spoken by an ignorant speaker. This hypothesis goes against the theory outlined in Jorgensen Bolinger (2017).

5 Results and Discussion¹⁰

In this section I will present the results of my survey and then discuss them. Because each section of survey questions related to a different topic I will present the results for each section and discuss them. At the end I also discuss and analyse the demographic information that I collected for this thesis. I look at if “queer” is less offensive when it is used as a slur, if participants find slurs less offensive when they are spoken by a member of the LGBT+ community, and if age affects how participants perceive the offensiveness of slurs.

5.1 Control Questions

5.1.1 Results of Control Questions

My control questions ask about less derogatory/non-derogatory terms/situations, e.g., the term “jerk.” These questions are essential because if participants found the less/non-offensive situations to be very offensive, they would likely find the rest of my survey even more offensive, which might skew my data. In my survey, each category has two questions about derogatory language and one question about a non-derogatory neutral counterpart. I have control questions in order to provide contrast to the questions about derogatory language.

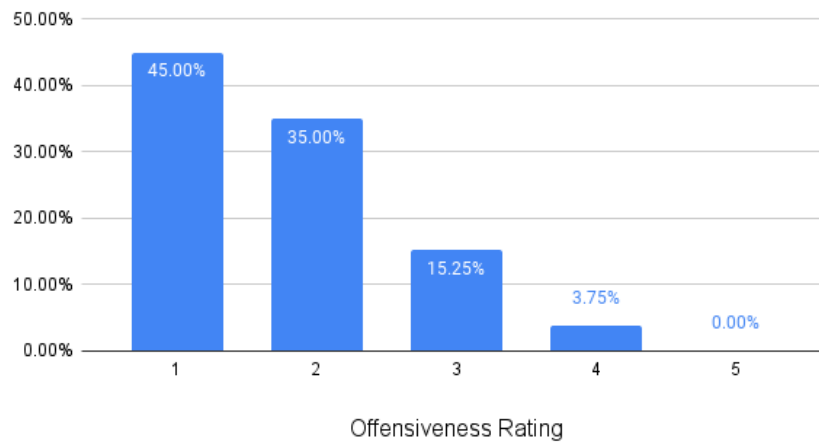
For my first control question, participants were given a scenario where a speaker uses “jerk” in a derogatory context (10).

(10) Lucia is such a jerk.

When asked to rate the offensiveness of the term “jerk” from 1 (not offensive at all) to 5 (most offensive), 45.00% of participants rated “jerk” as a 1, 35.00% rated it as a 2, 16.25% rated it as a 3, 3.75% rated it as a 4, and 0.00% rated it as a 5 on the scale (figure 5) with a mean of 1.79 and a standard deviation of 0.85. The mean offensiveness for this question was less than 2 so therefore participants did not find it offensive.

¹⁰ A full list of all of my survey questions can be found in the section titled “Survey Questions” at the end of this paper.

Offensiveness rating of "jerk" (figure 5)

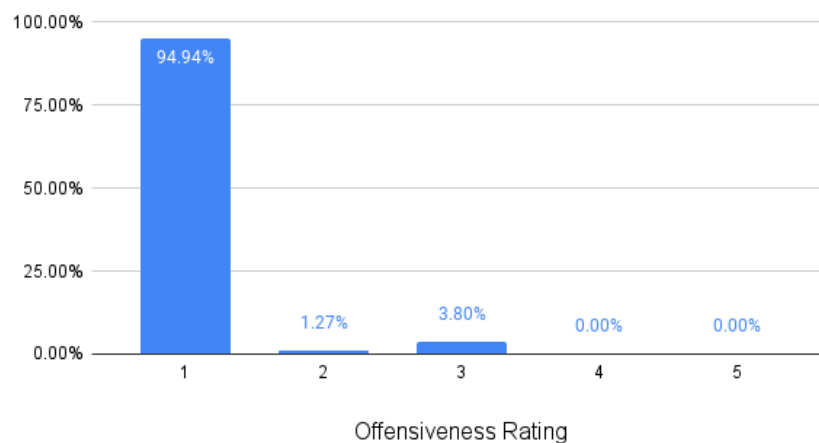


My second control question asks participants to rate the word "lesbian" in (11)

(11) A recent study shows that lesbian couples are more likely to own dogs than straight couples.

from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive). 94.94% of participants rated "lesbian" as a 1, 1.27% rated it as a 2, 3.80% rated it as a 3, 0.00% rated it as a 4, and 0.00% rated it as a 5 (figure 6). The mean offensiveness rating was 1.09, with a standard deviation of 0.40. The mean offensiveness of this question was less than 2 so therefore participants did not find it very offensive.

Offensiveness Rating of "lesbian" (figure 6)



5.1.2 Discussion of Control Questions

As stated in Section 4, these control questions at the beginning of my survey are controls for the entire survey. If participants found my control questions offensive then they would likely find the questions in my survey containing slurs much more offensive. Participants did not find these questions offensive according to my results, so that indicates that the rest of my data is usable.

5.2 Embedding/Reported Speech

5.2.1 Results of Embedded/Reported Speech

The questions in this section gave participants a scenario where a speaker was using a slur or a neutral counterpart in an embedded context. Participants were asked to rate the offensiveness of the slur from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive). There were three questions in this section: one control question that contained the neutral counterpart of a slur but not the slur itself and two questions containing slurs. The control question asked participants to rate the word “gay” in an embedded speech situation. In this situation, two siblings talk about someone they just met and speculate about their sexuality (12).

(12) I heard Lily say that Tyler is gay.

The mean offensiveness rating was 1.26, with a standard deviation of 0.68. 84.9% of participants rated “gay” as a 1, 6.8% rated it as a 2, 5.5% rated it as a 3, 2.7% rated it as a 4, and 0.00% rated it as a 5.

The next question in this section asked participants to rate the word “dyke” in an embedded speech context. In this scenario, a gay student is asking their professor about the term “dyke” (13).

(13) Is it homophobic to believe that lesbians are dykes?

The mean offensiveness rating was 2.77, with a standard deviation of 1.07. 12.3% of participants rated “dyke” as a 1, 31.5% rated it as a 2, 26.0% rated it as a 3, 27.4% rated it as a

4, and 2.7% rated it as a 5. A one-sample t-test was performed (significance level $p < .05$) to determine whether the mean offensiveness rating for this question differed from the mean of the control question. A significant difference was found, ($t(72) = 11.990$, $p = <0.001$, $d = 1.41$), such that the average offensiveness rating for this question (Mean = 2.77, SD = 1.074) was significantly more offensive than the mean offensiveness of the control question (1.26). The effect size associated with the difference in offensiveness was a very large effect.

The final question in this section asked participants to rate “a queer” in an embedded speech context. In this scenario, the participant and their straight friend speculate about a stranger’s sexuality (14).

(14) Do you think Carrie’s a queer?

The mean offensiveness rating was 3.38, with a standard deviation of 1.07. 8.2% of participants rated “a queer” as a 1, 8.2% rated it as a 2, 32.9% rated it as a 3, 38.4% rated it as a 4, and 12.3% rated it as a 5. A one-sample t-test was performed (significance level $p < .05$) to determine whether the mean offensiveness rating for this question differed from the mean of the control question. A significant difference was found, ($t(72) = 16.872$, $p = <0.001$, $d = 0.78$), such that the average offensiveness rating for this question (Mean = 3.38, SD = 1.075) was significantly more offensive than the mean offensiveness of the control question (1.26). The effect size associated with the difference in offensiveness was a medium effect.

5.2.2 Discussion of Embedded/Reported Speech

For both of the questions with scenarios containing slurs in this section each was found to be significantly more offensive than the control question that only contained a neutral counterpart of a slur. This indicates that slurs are offensive, at least to the group they reference, when used in an embedded or reported speech context. This result supports theories like those proposed in Cepollaro (2015), Lepore and Stone (2018), and Anderson and Lepore (2013) as discussed in section 3.1. This data also fails to support theories like those in Hom (2008) that

state that slurs are not offensive in an embedded or reported speech context. To avoid offensiveness speakers should not use slurs in embedded or reported speech contexts or they should swap out the slur with its neutral counterpart.

5.3 Use vs mention

5.3.1 Results of Use vs Mention

The questions in this section gave participants different scenarios of slurs being used in a context where they were mentioned. Participants were asked to rate the offensiveness of a slur being used in the scenario from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive). There were three questions in this section: one control question that contained the neutral counterpart of a slur but not the slur itself and two questions containing slurs. The control question asked participants to rate the word “gay” when defined on a website (15).

(15) Gay: this term describes someone who is attracted to other people of the same gender. The mean offensiveness rating was 1.17, with a standard deviation of 0.51. 87.1% of participants rated “gay” as a 1, 10.0% rated it as a 2, 1.4% rated it as a 3, 1.4% rated it as a 4, and 0.0% rated it as a 5.

The next question in this section asked participants to rate the word “faggot” when mentioned in speech. In this scenario, a lesbian professor tells their class that “faggot” is a derogatory term (16).

(16) The word faggot is a derogatory word for gay people. The mean offensiveness rating was 1.67, with a standard deviation of 0.95. 57.1% of participants rated “faggot” as a 1, 25.7% rated it as a 2, 12.9% rated it as a 3, 1.4% rated it as a 4, and 2.9% rated it as a 5. A one-sample t-test was performed (significance level $p < .05$) to determine whether the mean offensiveness rating for this question differed from the mean of the control question. A significant difference was found, ($t(69) = 4.375$, $p = <0.001$, $d = 0.52$), such that the average offensiveness rating for this question (Mean = 1.67, SD = 0.959) was

significantly more offensive than the mean offensiveness of the control question (1.17). The effect size associated with the difference in offensiveness was a medium effect.

The final question in this section asked participants to rate a scenario in which a company updates its policy on hate speech and gives its employees a list of slurs they should not say (17).

(17) MEMO: The following terms are not to be used by any Corp. employee, nor is their use to be tolerated in any Corp. classroom or workspace: 'faggot', 'dyke', 'homo', 'fairy', 'tranny', 'fruit', 'queer' ... etc.

The mean offensiveness rating was 2.27, with a standard deviation of 1.29. 37.1% of participants rated these slurs as a 1, 28.6% rated them as a 2, 10.0% rated it as a 3, 18.6% rated them as a 4, and 5.7% rated them as a 5. A one-sample t-test was performed (significance level $p < .05$) to determine whether the mean offensiveness rating for this question differed from the mean of the control question. A significant difference was found, ($t(69) = 7.112$, $p = <0.001$, $d = 0.85$), such that the average offensiveness rating for this question (Mean = 2.27, SD = 1.296) was significantly more offensive than the mean offensiveness of the control question (1.17). The effect size associated with the difference in offensiveness was a large effect.

5.3.2 Discussion of Use vs Mention

For this section I hypothesized that participants will find slurs offensive even when they are mentioned in speech. Participants did find the situations with slurs more significantly more offensive than the control question without a slur. This has implications for theories like that of Jorgensen Bolinger (2017) who stated that slurs are not offensive in contexts where they are mentioned. My data supports arguments from Bach (2018) which says that slurs are offensive even when they are mentioned. Of course slurs are mentioned all the time. Whether in the classroom or in the workplace or on an informational website, slurs are sometimes unavoidable

because when we talk about words we usually want to be able to define them. However, I think that my data proves that if you must mention a slur you should also take care to be respectful about it because people of that community will find it offensive. Anyone who talks about or mentions slurs should be aware that slurs are offensive. This data also has implications to the field more broadly because there are many papers about slurs that mention slurs heavily. Very few of these papers have a content warning or tell the reader about how truly offensive and hurtful slurs can be. This is something that I wanted to prove with this paper, not only that this data has implications for what we write about slurs and derogatory words, but also how we write about them.

5.4 Derogatory Meaning

As discussed in section 3.3, the following three sections all relate to derogatory meaning slightly differently. These sections were separated in my survey because the types of questions I was asking were different. It made sense to make them into separate categories. Because of this, I will be presenting the data separately.

5.4.1 Negation

5.4.1.1 Results of Negation

The questions in this section gave participants different scenarios of slurs being used in a context where the sentence was negated. There were three questions in this section: one control question that contained the neutral counterpart of a slur but not the slur itself and two questions containing slurs. For two of the questions, participants were asked to rate the offensiveness of a slur in a certain scenario from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive). The control question asked participants to rate the word “gay” when it was negated while talking about someone else’s sexuality (18a)-(18b).

(18a) “Did you see Jordan at the party on Saturday? They were totally hooking up with Parker.”

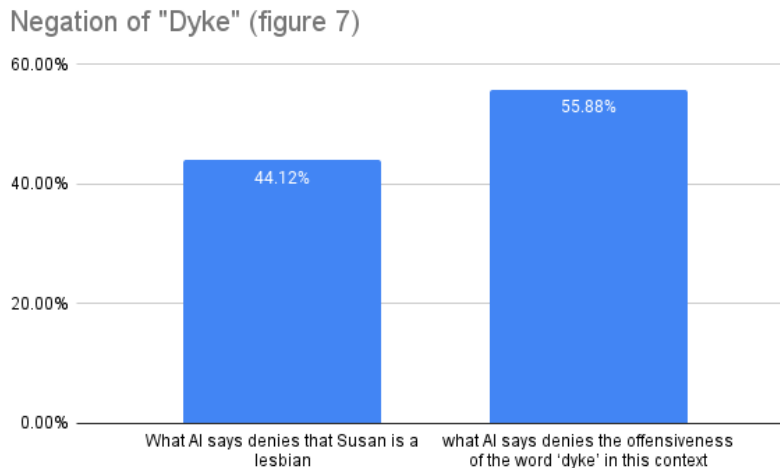
(18b) “I don’t think so, Jordan isn’t gay.”

The mean offensiveness rating was 1.29, with a standard deviation of 0.57. 76.5% of participants rated “gay” as a 1, 17.6% rated it as a 2, 5.9% rated it as a 3, 0.0% rated it as a 4, and 0.0% rated it as a 5.

For the second question, participants were given a situation in which a stranger yelled “dyke” at someone named Susan. A second speaker, Al, negates the statement in (19).

(19) She is not a dyke!

Participants were then given two choices: “What Al says denies that Susan is a lesbian” and “what Al says denies the offensiveness of the word ‘dyke’ in this context.” For this question participants could only choose one answer. Out of the 68 participants who answered this question 44.12% answered “what Al says denies that Susan is a lesbian” and 55.88% answered, “what Al says denies the offensiveness of the word ‘dyke’ in this context” (figure 7).



The final question in this section asked participants to rate a sentence in a scenario in which a group of people who identify as part of the LGBT+ community is having a conversation. One of the speakers calls another “a queer.” The third speaker negates this usage of “queer” (20).

(20) Shut up! Maria is not a queer!

The mean offensiveness rating was 2.64, with a standard deviation of 1.06. 14.5% of participants rated “queer” as a 1, 33.3% rated it as a 2, 30.4% rated it as a 3, 17.4% rated it as a 4, and 4.3% rated it as a 5. A one-sample t-test was performed (significance level $p < .05$) to determine whether the mean offensiveness rating for this question differed from the mean of the control question. A significant difference was found, ($t(68) = 10.456$, $p = <0.001$, $d = 1.26$), such that the average offensiveness rating for this question (Mean = 2.64, SD = 1.071) was significantly more offensive than the mean offensiveness of the control question (1.29). The effect size associated with the difference in offensiveness was a large effect.

5.4.1.2 Discussion of Negation

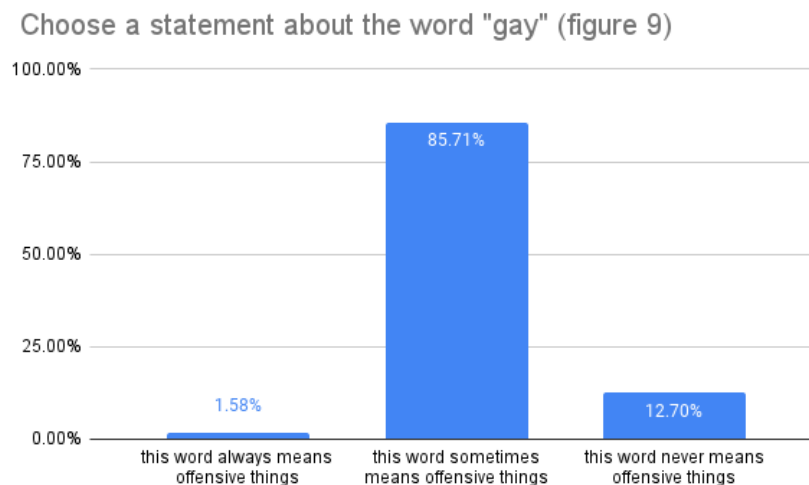
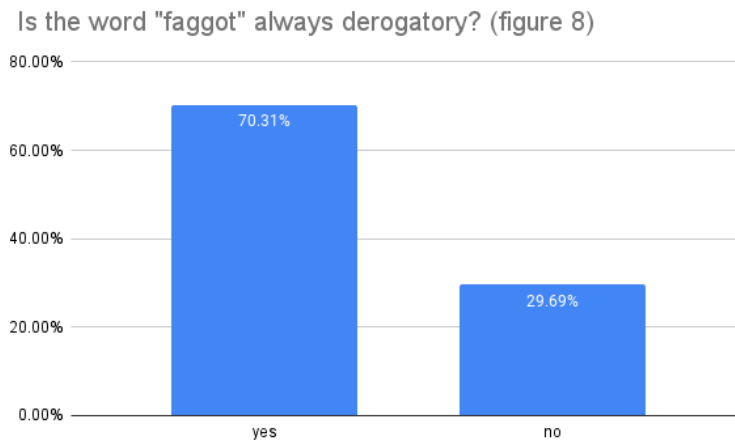
My hypothesis for this section was that participants would believe that when a slur is negated that the derogatory meaning of the slur is negated along with the group-referencing meaning. If negating a slur only results in the negation of its group-referencing meaning then the situation with a negated slur should still be offensive to the listener. Overall the results for this section are inconclusive. When comparing the offensiveness rating of the the control question to the question with “queer” the offensiveness rating of “queer” was significantly more offensive than the control. The slur still carried its offensive meaning even when it was being negated. This supports assumptions like those in Camp (2018) as discussed in section 3.3.1. The results of the other non-control question in this section contradict these results. When asked if negating a slur negated the slur’s offensive meaning or the group-referencing meaning most participants chose that negating a slur negates the group-referencing meaning and the offensive meaning, but only ~10% of participants chose that option over the other one which is not a big enough margin to make any strong claims about the results of that question. The results of the questions in this section were contradictory and partially inconclusive, so I am not able to draw any overarching conclusions from the data in this section.

5.4.2 Inherent Derogatory Meaning

5.4.2.1 Results of Inherent Derogatory Meaning

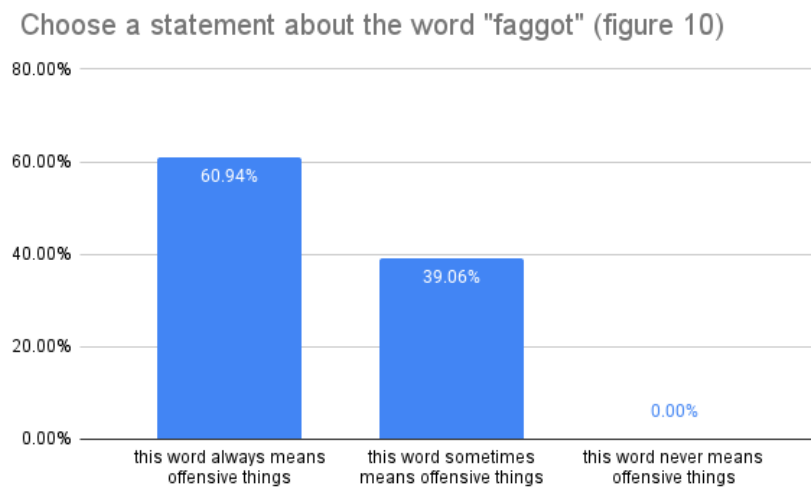
This section gave participants questions about if slurs have an inherent derogatory meaning. There were three questions in this section. For the first question I will talk about, participants were given an example sentence “John is a faggot”. Participants were then asked if the word “faggot” is always derogatory. For this question, out of the 64 participants who answered this question, 45 (70.31%) answered “yes,” and 19 (29.69%) answered “no” (figure 8).

The second question asked participants about the word “gay” and its meaning. Participants could choose between three statements: “this word always means offensive things,”



“this word sometimes means offensive things,” and “this word never means offensive things.” 1 out of 63 participants (1.58%) chose “this word always means offensive things,” 54 out of 63 participants (85.71%) chose “this word sometimes means offensive things,” and 8 out of 63 participants (12.70%) chose “this word never means offensive things” (figure 9).

Finally, in the last question, asked participants about the word “faggot” and its meaning. Participants could choose between three statements: “this word always means offensive things,” “this word sometimes means offensive things,” and “this word never means offensive things.” 39 out of 64 participants (60.94%) chose “this word always means offensive things,” 25 out of 64 participants (39.06%) chose “this word sometimes means offensive things,” and 0 out of 63 participants (0.00%) chose “this word never means offensive things” (figure 10).



5.4.2.2 Discussion of Inherent Derogatory Meaning

For this section I hypothesized that participants will believe that slurs do have an inherent derogatory meaning. The questions in this section asked participants if slurs and their neutral counterparts always have a derogatory meaning. A majority of participants did indicate that slurs always mean offensive things (e.g. have an inherent derogatory meaning) which supports my hypothesis. My data supports theories like those in Hom (2008) and Lo Guercio

(2021) which use inherent derogatory meaning to support their main arguments about the semantics of slurs. My data supports a semantic reading of slurs which usually state that the offensiveness of slurs is contained in the meaning of the word itself (see section 3.3). However, there were also many participants that said that the slurs in questions did not always have a derogatory meaning which I believe should also be taken into account. In this case, I only asked participants about one slur and its neutral counterpart. Participants might find other slurs less or more derogatory. I still believe that my data supports my hypothesis, but I would also argue that there could be more nuance to this issue that my survey did not touch on.

5.4.3 Synonyms

5.4.3.1 Results of Synonyms

The questions in this section gave participants questions about if slurs are synonyms of their neutral counterparts. There were three questions in this section. For the first question I will talk about, participants were given two example sentences “Kate is a dyke” and “Kate is a lesbian.” Participants were then asked if the two sentences said the same thing. For this question, out of the 65 participants who answered this question, 12 (18.46%) answered “yes,” and 53 (81.54%) answered “no.”

The second question asked participants if they agreed with the statement “the word ‘fag’ and the word ‘gay’ say the same thing.” This question was not a binary “yes” or “no” question. Participants rated this statement from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The mean rating was 1.43, with a standard deviation of 0.80. 69.23% rated it a 1, 24.62% rated it as a 2, 1.54% rated it as a 3, 3.08% rated it as a 4, and 1.54% rated it as a 5.

5.4.3.2 Discussion of Synonyms

For this section, my hypothesis was that participants would not believe that slurs are synonyms of their neutral counterparts. My data does support my hypothesis. The majority of

participants did not believe that slurs are merely synonyms of their neutral counterparts. This data goes against statements like those in Jorgensen Bolinger (2017) and Nunberg (2018). My data has implications for how academics talk about slurs. We cannot simply say that a slur is a synonym of its neutral counterpart if one is clearly more offensive than the other. The offensiveness of slurs should be respected and when academics talk about slurs as merely another word for a group of people they are diminishing that respect.

5.5 Ignorant Speaker

5.5.1 Results of Ignorant Speaker

The questions in this section gave participants different scenarios of slurs being used in a context where they are said by a speaker who does not understand their meaning.

Participants were asked to rate the offensiveness of a slur being used in that scenario from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive). There were three questions in this section: one control question that contained the neutral counterpart of a slur but not the slur itself and two questions containing slurs. The control question asked participants to rate the word “gay” when misused by a child (21).

(21) I think that lions are gay.

The mean offensiveness rating was 1.97 with a standard deviation of 1.11. 45.5% of participants rated “gay” as a 1, 28.8% rated it as a 2, 10.6% rated it as a 3, 13.6% rated it as a 4, and 1.5% rated it as a 5.

The next question in this section asked participants to rate the word “fag” when it is said by a child who does not understand the meaning of the word (22).

(22) You are such a fag!

The mean offensiveness rating was 3.14, with a standard deviation of 1.25. 10.8% of participants rated “fag” as a 1, 23.1% rated it as a 2, 24.6% rated it as a 3, 24.6% rated it as a 4, and 16.9% rated it as a 5. A one-sample t-test was performed (significance level $p < .05$) to

determine whether the mean offensiveness rating for this question differed from the mean of the control question. A significant difference was found, ($t(64) = 7.471$, $p = <0.001$, $d = 0.93$), such that the average offensiveness rating for this question (Mean = 3.14, SD = 1.261) was significantly more offensive than the mean offensiveness of the control question (1.97). The effect size associated with the difference in offensiveness was a large effect.

The final question in this section asked participants to rate a scenario in which a gay speaker who does not know English very well and is an acquaintance of the participant uses “queer” incorrectly (23).

(23) Oh, I did not know that she was a queer.

The mean offensiveness rating was 1.82 with a standard deviation of 0.84. 41.5% of participants rated “queer” as a 1, 38.5% rated it as a 2, 18.5% rated it as a 3, 0.0% rated it as a 4, and 1.5% rated it as a 5. A one-sample t-test was performed (significance level $p < .05$) to determine whether the mean offensiveness rating for this question differed from the mean of the control question. A significant difference was not found, ($t(64) = -1.474$, $p = 0.145$, $d = 0.18$), such that the average offensiveness rating for this question (Mean = 1.82, SD = 0.846) was not significantly more offensive than the mean offensiveness of the control question (1.97). The effect size associated with the difference in offensiveness was a very small effect.

5.5.2 Discussion of Ignorant Speaker

For this section I hypothesized that participants would find slurs offensive even when they were spoken by an ignorant speaker. My results partially support my hypothesis. For the questions about children as ignorant speakers (one control, one not) I did find a significant difference in the offensiveness of the two questions. For the question regarding an adult who did not understand English very well participants did not rate it as more offensive than the control, in fact the mean offensiveness was actually less than the control. This discrepancy is from both the situation in the question and the slur itself. In the question with the English language learner

they are asking about someone else's sexuality which in itself is not offensive. This situation comes in combination with the word “queer” which is currently going through a reclamation process (Brontsema 2004, Zosky and Alberts 2016) so participants might not find “queer” as offensive as other terms that could have been used. Participants might also have been more offended by the situation with children saying slurs because most likely children are learning words from their family or the conversations that they are exposed to. Participants might have been offended that a child would know slurs in the first place because they likely would have learned the slurs from their parents. Overall, however, the strong and significant in the offensiveness rating between the two questions about children cannot be ignored. It makes sense to say that slurs in these situations are offensive at least sometimes. Some theorists will mention a theory on ignorant speakers and assume that it is universal, but my data shows that there is more nuance to this subject.

5.6 Analysis of Demographic Data

In this section I will analyse some of the demographic information that I collected while conducting my survey. This data tangentially relates to my main claim in this paper, but it is relevant when trying to form a complete picture of the participants of my survey and how they view slurs on a more global level rather than just when the slurs are in specific situations. I will make some tentative claims based on my data in this section, but the purpose of this section is mostly to start and contribute to conversations surrounding how someone's identity shapes how they view and interpret slurs. I will analyse the use of “queer” as a slur in my survey, members of the LGBT+ community using slurs, and if age effects the offensiveness rating of a question¹¹.

¹¹ I wanted to do an analysis on how the participants' sexuality and gender identity affects the offensiveness rating of a question, but unfortunately I was not able to analyse that data due to technical difficulties.

5.6.1 “Queer” as a Slur

Firstly I wanted to discuss “queer” as a slur¹². The reclamation movement surrounding “queer” has been gaining momentum for the past 40 years (Brontsema 2004, 2-5) with many academics citing the LGBT+ activist groups Queer Nation as starting the reclamation movement in America the late 80s and early 90s (Rand 2014, 3-5) with their anonymous pamphlet *Queers Read This* or *The Queer Nation Manifesto*¹³. In my research I wanted to use “queer” in a slurred context in some of my questions to see if participants would react to it in the same way they would react to a slur that did not have this history of reclamation behind it or if they would find the scenarios with “queer” to be less offensive. I hypothesize that questions with “queer” would have significantly lower offensiveness ratings than the questions without “queer”. I performed a paired-samples t-test (significance level of $p < .05$) where I compared the average offensiveness rating of the questions without “queer” (excluding the control questions which were meant to be non-offensive) and the average offensiveness rating of the questions with “queer”. There was not a significant difference between the offensiveness rating of questions with “queer” and questions without “queer”, $t(72) = 0.479$, $p = .633$, $d = 0.056$. Participants did not rate questions with “queer” ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.755$) as more offensive than questions without “queer” ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.831$), and this was associated with a very small effect size.

A few tentative conclusions can be drawn from this data. The first is that “queer” has not been reclaimed as much as it seems in (Western) popular culture. Participants still viewed queer as a slur when it was used in an offensive context. This conclusion, however doesn’t make as much sense considering that 49 of the participants in my survey (almost half) use “queer” to identify either their gender or their sexuality, and using a word as an identity term is a big factor in reclamation (Zosky and Alberts 2016, 605-606). Another conclusion would be that slurs that

¹² I am discussing “queer” specifically because the reclamation movement around it is very prominent in popular culture, but all of the slurs I have discussed in this paper have reclamation movements behind them in various capacities.

¹³ <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/queernation.html>

are in the process of reclamation can still be used in an offensive context and still have an offensive meaning even though there are many speakers that use slurs in a reclaimed context. The goal of many reclamation movements is to eventually take the offensive meaning out of the meaning of a slur, but at least according to the data in my survey it seems that “queer” has not been fully reclaimed yet.

5.6.2 LGBT+ Speakers

In this section I will discuss the offensiveness of slurs when spoken by members of the community that they target. In my survey some of the questions with slurs had scenarios where the person saying the slur was a member of the LGBT+ community. I hypothesize that questions where a slur was spoken by a member of the LGBT+ community would have a significantly lower offensiveness rating than questions where the speaker was not a part of the LGBT+ community. I performed a paired-samples t-test (significance level of $p < .05$) where I compared the average offensiveness rating of the questions with LGBT+ speakers and the average offensiveness rating of the questions without LGBT+ speakers (excluding the control questions which were meant to be non-offensive). There was not a significant difference between the average offensiveness rating of the questions with LGBT+ speakers and the average offensiveness rating of the questions without LGBT+ speakers, $t(72) = -1.794$, $p = .077$, $d = 0.21$. Participants did not rate questions with LGBT+ speakers ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.730$) as more offensive than questions without LGBT+ speakers ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.731$), and this was associated with a small effect size.

This finding was surprising because usually members of the community that a slur targets often feel like they can use that slur in a more neutral or even positive manner even if there is no active reclamation movement surrounding the slur. My data shows, however, that members of a community that a slur targets will still find that slur offensive even when it is said

by another member of the community. Slurs still have the capacity to offend regardless of the situation they are in or who is speaking.

5.6.3 Age and Offensiveness

In this section I discuss if age affects how offensive participants found the questions in my survey. Many slurs within the LGBT+ community only started being reclaimed within the past 40 years (Brontsema 2004, 2-5). Slur reclamation movements within the LGBT+ community often paralleled the AIDS activism movement in terms of timeline. There are many people within the LGBT+ community today that were alive before, during, and after the start of these reclamation movements. I hypothesize that older speakers within the LGBT+ community (over the age of 50) would find slurs more offensive because they were alive before slur reclamation movements within the LGBT+ community took off. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted on the average offensiveness rating of different ages of participants of the survey. An alpha level of $p < .05$ was used for all analyses conducted. A significant effect of participants' age on offensiveness was not found, $(F(26, 46)) = 1.254, p = 0.246, \eta^2 = 0.41$. None of the comparisons were significant. Taken together, these results suggest that age does not affect the offensiveness rating of questions containing slurs. The difference was associated with a medium effect size as the results revealed that age did not account for a substantial amount of the variance in participants' offensiveness ratings.

These results were interesting because they disproved my hypothesis. These results show that participants' offensiveness rating did not vary by age. This might be because older members of the LGBT+ community might have been a part of the reclamation movements of some slurs that target the LGBT+ community and therefore would not find these slurs any more offensive than younger participants.

6 Survey Limitations

In this section I will discuss limitations to my survey. All of my participants saw the survey questions in the same order that is presented in the section titled “Survey Questions” at the end of this paper. Participants always saw the demographics questions first and then the control questions, and then questions with slurs. Participants might have based their answer to a particular question in relation to the previous questions in the survey. This could skew the results of the survey. Another limitation is that the survey was partly distributed through word of mouth. This led to a disparity in the diversity of participants. A wider diversity of participants could have led to different results. In an attempt to get responses regarding a wide variety of situations and contexts, many of the situations in each section are different even if they are testing for the same thing. This makes the control questions and the questions with slurs harder to compare when the situations that they are asking about are different. However, I do not think that this completely invalidates my arguments because even if the questions in each section are different, they are still asking about the same topic.

7 Further Research

In this section I will outline areas of further research relating to this paper. The biggest area for further research in my mind is with slur reclamation. As with slurs themselves there are many theories surrounding the reclamation of slurs (Bianchi 2014, Brontsema 2004, Herbert 2018, Jeshion 2020) but there is little empirical evidence looking at these theoretical claims specifically¹⁴. Some questions I would ask about reclamation are: How are slurs reclaimed? Does reclamation come from the meaning or the usage of the term or both? Are there different types of reclamation? How do speakers feel about reclamation movements? etc. I think that this would be a very interesting line of inquiry.

¹⁴ There are a couple articles that I have found that look at reclamation of a specific term using empirical data (Gaucher, Hunt, and Sinclair 2015, Zosky and Alberts 2016), but not at reclamation theories more broadly.

I think it would also be interesting to see a survey on slurs done on a larger scale. I was only able to run my survey for a month due to time constraints, but I would be interested to see more data on this subject considering that my paper is one of the first looking at empirical data in this field. I would also be interested to see data collected with a more diverse sample. My survey only looks at slurs that target the LGBT+ community, but there are many other categories of slurs (Jeshion 2021) and groups of people targeted by slurs than I represent in my survey.

8 Conclusion

The results of my survey show conclusively that collecting empirical data can influence theories surrounding slurs and how/what academics think about them. With the exception of the sections on negation and ignorant speaker my results were conclusive. My data shows that at least some pragmatic accounts of slurs are not empirically supported. In section 5.2 I show that slurs are offensive when used in an embedded context. In section 5.3 I also find that slurs are derogatory when they are mentioned in speech. In section 5.4 on derogatory meaning, participants leaned more toward a semantic reading of slurs. Even though the results in section 5.4.1 on negation were inconclusive I still think that favored the theory that slurs have an offensive meaning contained in the meaning of the slur itself. Finally, in section 5.5 I found that at least for ignorant speakers who are children, saying slurs is offensive. All of the results that I have summarized have implications for how academics analyse slurs. I hope that the results of my survey will help academics to update their thinking of slurs and how they function. Almost all of my data has implications for different slur theories that I have identified.

I now want to briefly propose my own theory for how slurs offend. I believe that slurs have both an offensive meaning and a group-referencing meaning which aligns with a semantic reading of slurs, and while the context in which a slur is used might change how the slur is perceived, ultimately slurs do have the ability to potentially offend listeners in any context because they have an inherent derogatory meaning. Some might disagree with my theory and

say that slurs in a reclaimed context should not have an inherent derogatory meaning because the speaker is choosing to use them in a non-derogatory way, but I would argue that reclaimed uses of slurs are often both political and personal statements. When someone uses a slur with the intention to reclaim it they understand that that word is offensive to many people and has a long history of offensiveness (e.g. that it has an inherent derogatory meaning). The offensive meaning of a slur will only go away when enough people in the community that the slur targets believe that it is not offensive over a long period of time because of course word meaning can change over time.

Finally, I want to end this paper with a short discussion of how academics in the field talk about slurs. While my results have many implications for the theories proposed in articles about slurs they also help to contextualize how we should talk about slurs in an academic setting. Slurs are offensive. Their offensiveness should be considered anytime they will be mentioned in speech or writing. Slurs contain in their meanings long histories of discrimination, dehumanization, and oppression, and despite some recent reclamation movements slurs can still hurt listeners. We need to handle slurs with care. We should have more content warnings in academic articles and writers should explain exactly how and why they are using slurs in their paper and how it furthers the academic conversation on slurs. I think this is a necessity and I hope the literature moves toward this type of conversation.

Survey Questions

Demographics

1. How old are you?
2. What city and state do you currently live in? (city, state)
3. What term(s)/label(s) do you use to describe your sexuality (can choose more than one)?
 - Asexual

- Bisexual
- Gay
- Heterosexual
- Lesbian
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Other (please fill in)

4. What term(s)/label(s) do you use to describe your gender (can choose more than one)?

- Cisgender
- Female
- Genderfluid
- Genderqueer
- Male
- Nonbinary
- Transgender
- Two-Spirit
- Queer
- Other (please fill in)

5. What is your educational background?

- High school (some or all)
- Undergraduate (some or all)
- Post-College (some or all)

Control Questions

6. Imagine you are talking with a friend named Sam at a coffee shop. You are talking about someone you both know named Lucia who you both dislike and Sam says:

1. Lucia is such a jerk.

Please rate the offensiveness of the word “jerk” in this context from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive).

7. Imagine you are reading a newspaper article and the author of the article states:
 2. A recent study shows that lesbian couples are more likely to own dogs than straight couples.

Please rate the offensiveness of the word “lesbian” in this context from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive).

Embedded/Reported speech

8. Imagine you are talking with your sister, who is a transgender lesbian, about someone you both just met named Tyler. After talking for a while your sister remembers something that her friend Lily said about Tyler and she says:
 1. I heard Lily say that Tyler is gay.

Please rate the offensiveness of the word “gay” in this context from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive).

9. Imagine you are in a college classroom and the class is learning about LGBT+ people and homophobia, the professor mentions some terms that have historically been used against LGBT+ people, and one student, who is gay says:
 2. Is it homophobic to believe that lesbians are dykes?

Please rate the offensiveness of the word “dykes” in this context from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive).

10. Imagine you are talking with your friend Ann, who is straight and cisgendered. You are talking about Carrie, whose sexuality is unknown to you. Ann remembers something that your mutual friend, Emily, said about Carrie and says:
 3. Ann: Do you think Carrie’s a queer?

Please rate the offensiveness of the word “queer” in this context from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive).

Use vs. Mention

11. Imagine you are on the internet looking at a website that lists and defines many different sexual/gender identities. The definition that is listed for “gay” is:

1. “Gay: this term describes someone who is attracted to other people of the same gender.”

Please rate the offensiveness of the word “gay” in this context from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive).

12. Imagine you are in a college setting learning about the LGBT+ rights movement, and your professor, who you know is a lesbian, says:

2. The word faggot is a derogatory word for gay people.

Please rate the offensiveness of the word “faggot” in this context from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive).

13. Imagine the company you work for has revised their policies in regards to hate speech/derogatory language. You are emailed the following memo:

3. MEMO: The following terms are not to be used by any Corp. employee, nor is their use to be tolerated in any Corp. classroom or workspace: ‘faggot’, ‘dyke’, ‘homo’, ‘fairy’, ‘tranny’, ‘fruit’, ‘queer’ ... etc.

Please rate the offensiveness of the word “faggot” in this context from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive).

Negation

14. Imagine that two people, Susane and Al, who are both lesbians, are walking together when a stranger walks past them and yells “dyke” at Susane. Al, who wants to defend Susane, replies:

1. She is not a dyke!

Please choose one of the following to describe what AI says in (1):

- What AI says denies that Susan is a lesbian.
- What AI says denies the offensiveness of the word "dyke" in this context.

15. Imagine you overhear a conversation between two people named Summer and Quinn.

They are talking about someone they know named Jordan. Summer and Quinn have the following conversation:

2. Summer: "Did you see Jordan at the party on Saturday? They were totally hooking up with Parker."

3. Quinn: "I don't think so, Jordan isn't gay."

Please rate the offensiveness of the word "gay" in this context from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive).

16. Imagine you overhear a conversation between three people, who identify as members of the LGBT+ community, named Nina, Maria, and Chloe. Nina is clearly insulting Maria by calling Maria a "queer". Chloe, wanting to defend Maria, says:

4. Shut up! Maria is not a queer!

Please rate the offensiveness of the word "queer" in this context from 1 (not at all offensive) to 5 (most offensive).

Ignorant Speaker

17. Imagine you are working at a daycare with young children. You overhear a conversation between two kids named Kai (age 7) and Harper (age 6). They are talking about their favorite animals. Harper says to Kai:

1. I think that lions are gay.

You are sure that Harper doesn't know the meaning of the word "gay".

How offended would you feel while hearing this exchange? Please rate from 1 (not at all offended)-5 (most offended)

18. Imagine you are babysitting two young children named Max (age 4) and Fin (age 5). Max steals Fin's toy and Fin says:

2. You are such a fag!

You are sure that Fin does not know the meaning of the word "fag".

How offended would you feel while hearing this exchange? Please rate from 1 (not at all offended)-5 (most offended)

19. Imagine you are having a conversation with an acquaintance who is gay and whose first language is not English. You are talking about someone who you know is queer. You mention this to your acquaintance who says:

3. Oh, I did not know that she was a queer.

Even though it is clear that your acquaintance doesn't understand that "queer" is a derogatory term in English.

Please rate the offensiveness of your acquaintance's usage of "queer" from 1 (not at all offended)-5 (most offended)

Synonyms

20. Do you agree with this statement?

1. "The word 'fag' and the word 'gay' say the same thing"

Please rate from 1 (totally disagree)-5 (totally agree).

21. Consider the following sentences:

2. Kate is a lesbian.

3. Kate is a dyke.

Do you believe that these sentences say the same thing?

- Yes
- No

Inherent Derogatory Meaning

22. Consider the following sentence

1. John is a faggot.

Do you believe that this use of “faggot” is always derogatory?

- Yes
- No

23. Consider the following term: “gay” Please choose a statement that best describes the offensiveness of this word:

- This word always means offensive things
- This word sometimes means offensive things
- This word never means offensive things

24. Consider the following term: “faggot” Please choose a statement that best describes the offensiveness of this word:

- This word always means offensive things
- This word sometimes means offensive things
- This word never means offensive things

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