

Gendered Pejoratives as Particularistic Insults

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This talk examines the communicative function of gender-oriented pejoratives (GOPs) (e.g., *slut*, *whore*) regarding their group-derogating (slur-like) behavior. Most prior literature (e.g., Ashwell, 2016; Cepollaro et al., 2019; Hess, 2021; Jeshion, 2021; Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018) categorizes GOPs as slurs, akin to ethnic (e.g., *spic*) and sexual orientation slurs (e.g., *faggot*). However, this classification relies on introspection without empirical validation. Addressing this methodological issue, this talk presents two empirical studies comparing the slur-like behavior of GOPs to canonical slurs and character-oriented particularistic insults (COIs) (e.g., *jerk*).

Study 1 examined the slur-like behavior of GOPs through a forced-choice task. The study employs a 3×2×2 design with two within-subject factors: 'pejorative type' (COI vs. GOP vs. slur) and 'speaker gender' (female vs. male), yielding 6 conditions. Additionally, 'participant gender' (female vs. male) was included as a between-subjects factor. Participants (n = 100) were presented with short utterances and evaluated whether the speaker expresses a negative attitude only toward the pejorative target or toward a social group the target is part of.



“That *Pejorative*[(*GOP*) *bitch* / (*Slur*) *faggot* / (*COI*) *asshole*] (*Hailey/Zachary*) parked in a handicapped spot again!”

The study finds that GOPs differ descriptively from COIs with more group-derogating interpretations (Figure 1). However, GLMM analysis (with random intercepts and slopes for pejorative type by participants) reveals no significant difference in slur-like behavior between GOPs and COIs. The numerical difference stems from a small minority evaluating GOPs as slurs, while most treat them as particularistic insults. This contrasts with canonical slurs, which are interpreted as group-derogating significantly more often.



“That *Pejorative*[(*GOP*) *bitch* / (*COI*) *asshole*] (*Jessica/Ryan*) *Action*[(*Negative*) constantly takes credit for other people’s ideas! / (*Promiscuous*) has slept with half the people in our friend group! / (*Neutral*) graduated from State University last year!”]

Study 2 (n = 80) followed the same methodology as Study 1. The design differed in that a 2 × 3 design with utterances manipulated by the factors 'pejorative type' (COI vs. GOP) and 'action' (neutral vs. negative vs. 'promiscuous') was used. The study aimed at investigating whether the treatment of GOPs as particularistic insults in Study 1 was due to the generally negative actions used favored an insult reading.

The Study reveals that contextual information does not affect whether GOPs are perceived as slurs. Similar to Study 1, GOPs show descriptively more slur-readings than COIs (Figure 2). However, this stems from a small subset of participants consistently treating GOPs as slurs rather than indicating a fundamental category difference, as confirmed by GLMM analysis showing no significant difference by pejorative type.

The findings of both studies indicate that the classification of GOPs as slurs is not appropriate. In contrast to canonical slurs, GOPs are rarely interpreted as group-derogating and instead pattern with COIs as pejoratives that express a negative speaker attitude only toward its target. The findings suggest that pejoratives that, in contrast to canonical slurs, lack a clear neutral counterpart do not express a group-derogation, contrary to recent claims by Ashwell (2016) or Cousens (2020) that aim to categorize various pejoratives as slurs on the basis of philosophical reasoning and introspection rather than on actual linguistic behavior.

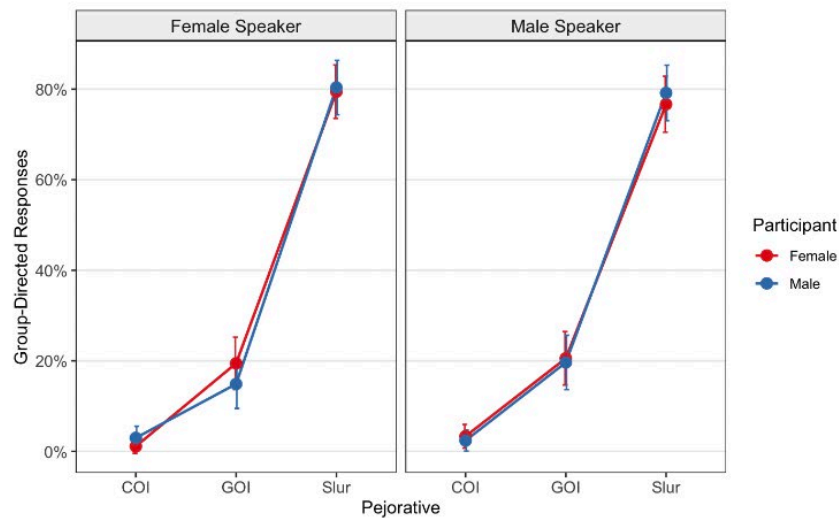


Figure 1: Observed Proportion of Group-Interpretation by Condition with 95% CI.

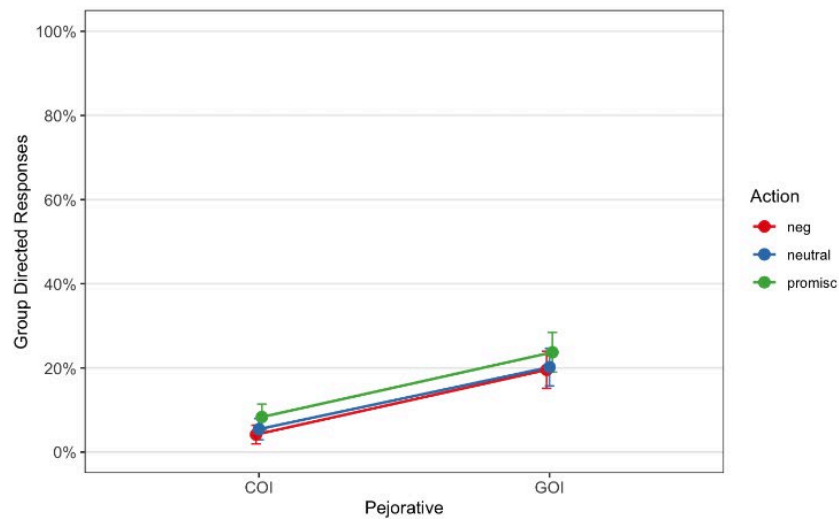


Figure 2: Observed Proportion of Group-Interpretation by Condition with 95% CI.

References

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