

## *Let's Not Worry about the Reclamation Worry*

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*In this paper, I discuss the Reclamation Worry (RW), raised by Anderson and Lepore 2013 and addressed by Ritchie (2017) concerning the appropriation of slurs. I argue that Ritchie's way to solve the RW is not adequate and I show why such an apparent worry is not actually problematic and should not lead us to postulate a rich complex semantics for reclaimed slurs. To this end, after illustrating the phenomenon of appropriation of slurs, I introduce the Reclamation Worry (section 2). In section 3, I argue that Ritchie's complex proposal is not needed to explain the phenomenon. To show that, I compare the case of reclaimed and non-reclaimed slurs to the case of polysemic personal pronouns featuring, among others, in many Romance languages. In section 4 I introduce the notion of 'authoritativeness' that I take to be crucial to account for reclamation. In section 5, I focus on particular cases (the "outsider" cases) that support my claims and speak against the parsimony of the indexical account. Finally, I conclude with a methodological remark about the ways in which the debate on appropriation has developed in the literature (section 6).*

**Keywords:** Reclamation worry, appropriation, ambiguity, slurs, polysemy.

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I discuss a worry raised by Anderson and Lepore (2013) and addressed by Ritchie (2017) concerning the appropriation of slurs, namely the Reclamation Worry (RW). My aim is to show that despite appearances the Reclamation Worry is not worrisome and could be addressed by simply relying on contextual meaning determination: no indexical account *à la* Ritchie is needed. To this end, I present a more parsimonious answer to the apparent problem raised by the RW. Finally, I introduce and discuss the notion of ‘authoritativeness’ and conclude with a methodological remark about the ways in which the debate on appropriation has developed in the literature.

Let us start from defining Reclamation. Reclamation (or ‘appropriation’, I use the terms interchangeably) is the phenomenon for which, under certain conditions, speakers can use a slur in such a way that the slur is not derogatory nor offensive anymore in those contexts; on the contrary, appropriated slurs are used to express solidarity and underline intimacy. Typically, in-groups can use the slur targeting their own group in such a reclaimed way. However, over time, non-derogatory uses can become available for out-groups, too. This is for example what happened to the term ‘gay’, that used to be derogatory and nowadays it is neutral, after a process of appropriation (see Brontsema 2004). This suggests that reclamation is able to challenge the derogatory potential of slurs and, in time, even delete it. Such a process is on-going for other terms that still have a derogatory use (such as ‘queer’) or terms that can typically be used non-derogatorily by in-groups only (such as ‘nigger’).

Reclamation is a very problematic topic in the growing literature<sup>1</sup> about pejoratives partly because it constitutes an example of meaning change: thanks to reclamation, slurs can be used, under adequate conditions, in a positive way that differs “dramatically” from their original derogatory meaning (see Potts 2007: 266). One can account for such a change of meaning in (at least) two different ways: by defending an echoic account or by defending a polysemic account. The echoic explanation consists in interpreting the reclaimed positive use of slurs as non-literal derivative uses of language (see Bianchi 2014, Mišćević and Perhat 2016: 140, Cepollaro 2017). Slurs have derogatory *literal* meaning also in reclaimed uses, but speakers can use it in a positive way thanks to irony. Reclamation is analyzed by these authors as an instance of ironic use of language (which is, in relevance theoretic terms, an *echoic* use of language: Sperber and Wilson 1986, Wilson and Sperber 2012). An alternative way to understand the change of meaning stemming from appropriation is to claim that slurs, under the right circumstances, acquire a new non-pejorative *literal* meaning (see i.a. Mišćević 2011, Ritchie 2017). Such a process results in the ambiguity

<sup>1</sup> See i.a. Potts (2007: 266), Hom (2008: 428, 438), Richard (2008: 16), Saka (2007: 146-147), Jeshion (2013: 250-253), Whiting (2013: 370), all quoted in Ritchie (2017).

between two lexical items: the old derogatory slur and the reclaimed positive ex-slur. The Reclamation Worry, to which I now turn, especially targets such a polysemic account of reclamation. In this paper, I leave aside the echoic account, as my main (and more modest) aim here is just to establish whether the Reclamation Worry (i) is indeed worrisome and (ii) should be taken as supporting an indexical semantics for reclaimed uses of slurs.

## 2. *The Reclamation Worry*

Ritchie (2017) phrases the Reclamation Worry, already voiced by Anderson and Lepore,<sup>2</sup> in the following way:

Content-based views that posit an ambiguity to account for reclamation cannot account for why only members in the target group can use a reclaimed slur to express a non-offensive/positive meaning. (Ritchie 2017: 157)

It looks problematic – or at least challenging – to explain why, given two meanings that an expression can have, one particular meaning is available to a certain subset of speakers, but not to others. There seems to be a contrast, Ritchie argues, between standard cases of ambiguity/polysemy and the behavior of appropriated and non-appropriated uses of slurs. In standard cases of polysemy, all the meanings that an expression can have are potentially available to *any* speaker. Consider standard instances of polysemy, for example, ‘mouse’. In principle, anyone can access any of the two meanings of ‘mouse’, as anyone can use the term to refer either to the mammal or to the electronic device. In other words, there are no restrictions with respect to *who* can felicitously access each meaning. On the other hand, not every speaker can felicitously use slurs as reclaimed.

Since scholars got interested in slurs and pejoratives, the phenomenon of appropriation has caught the attention of many. The question as to how and why reclaimed uses of slurs are possible for certain people and not for others challenged philosophers and linguists, but it also gave rise to a debate outside academia: there are many ways in which tv-series, movies and even cartoons assess the issue of who can and who cannot use slurs in positive ways.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “Ambiguity fails to explain why non-members cannot utilize a second sense [that is, the non-pejorative sense]. If it were just a matter of distinct meanings, why can’t any speaker opt to use a slur non-offensively? (...) Ambiguity is useless here” (Anderson and Lepore 2013a: 42).

<sup>3</sup> Here are some interesting examples. In the tv-series *Treme* (2010), Season 1 episode 5 titled ‘Shame shame shame’, Davies, a white guy, gets punched after using the word ‘nigger’ in a bar attended by black people, even though he was identifying himself with the black community. An interesting fact is that Davies is explicitly *quoting* another character, Antoine Baptiste, who is in fact black (“I can only quote Antoine Baptiste: New Orleans niggers will fuck up a wet dream. Media freak the fuck out. The cops looking for any excuse to clamp down”). The explicit quotation does not save him from getting punched, nor does the fact that he identifies with the black community of New Orleans.

In her paper, Ritchie offers a solution to the Reclamation Worry that accounts for the allegedly peculiar ambiguity between reclaimed and non-reclaimed slurs by claiming that the lexical meaning of reclaimed slurs features an occurrence of the plural first-person indexical pronoun 'we'. A reclaimed use of 'bitch', for example, conveys for Ritchie something along the lines of "We women are laudable for being women".<sup>4</sup> Only in-groups (women, in this case) can access the reclaimed slur because they are the only ones who can *feliculously* use the indexical 'we'. When an out-group (a man, in this case) tries to use 'bitch' in a positive way, he fails to convey a positive content such as "We women are laudable for being women", because he cannot felicitously use the indexical 'we'.

In other words, Ritchie grants that the RW constitutes a challenge for content-based accounts of slurs that explain reclamation in terms of ambiguity, as appropriation gives rise to a particular case of ambiguity that diverges from standard instances of in that, because of the indexical 'we', only certain speakers can felicitously access the reclaimed meanings. The challenge for Ritchie's indexical account is to explain how out-groups can felicitously use slurs in a positive or non-derogatory way: I come back to this issue in greater detail in section 5.

In what follows, I show that despite appearances the Reclamation Worry is not worrisome and that an indexical account of reclaimed slurs is not needed. I will not *refute* Ritchie's proposal: rather, I will show that (i) no indexical pronoun in the reclaimed use of slurs is to be postulated to satisfactorily answer the Reclamation Worry (section 3) and that (ii) all the ingredients that are needed to answer the RW *without* postulating hidden indexicals are already employed by Ritchie to explain the outsider cases, namely out-groups using slurs non-derogatorily (section 4). I conclude that more parsimonious responses to the RW should be preferred and that the indexical explanation of Reclamation needs further justification to be defended.

Before discussing my own solution to the RW, let me make a brief remark about the theories that are allegedly challenged by such a worry. The authors who discussed the Reclamation Worry, including Ritchie, focus on the so-called 'content-based' account of slurs, that is, the theories according to which slurs lexically encode some kind of de-

In the 2016 cartoon *Zootopia*, a bunny police-officer is called 'cute' by her cheetah-colleague; she tells him: "Ooh, uh, you probably didn't know, but a bunny can call another bunny 'cute', but when other animals do it, it's a little...". The cheetah police-officer is mortified.

In the tv-series *Atlanta* (2016), Season 1 episode 04 titled 'The Streisand Effect', a character named Zan goes to Alfred, a black rapper, and calls him "My nigga". Alfred's answer is "Are you even black?". Afterwards the characters discuss and make hypotheses about Zan's mysterious ethnic origins which are taken to be crucial in order to establish whether his use of 'nigga' was legitimate or not.

<sup>4</sup> Note that Ritchie is neutral with respect to which particular content-based account captures best the semantics and the pragmatics of slurs. Such a proposal should therefore be taken to be compatible with possibly any content-based view.

rogatory content (however such a lexical component could be analyzed: truth conditions, conventional implicatures, presuppositions, etc.). This label is meant to distinguish this first type of theories from those that challenge the very idea that a thick and rich semantics for slurs is needed. For such accounts, that we can call content-less (or “deflationary”) (Anderson and Lepore 2013a), the derogatory content associated with slurs is *not* part of their encoded or lexical meaning. They account for the pejorative power of slurs by relying on various mechanisms: Anderson and Lepore (2013a, 2013b) talk about taboo effects, edicts and language prohibitions, Bolinger (2015) relies on contrastive preferences, Nunberg (forthcoming) introduces the notion of manner ventriloquistic implicatures, Rappaport (ms) analyzes the pejorative content of slurs in terms of the relevance-theoretic notion of ‘showing’. *Prima facie*, the phenomenon of appropriation is less problematic for such accounts, as they are not committed to the claim that slurs lexically encode derogatory content (and therefore they do not have to posit polysemy to explain appropriation). However, it is not entirely correct to conclude that they are not challenged by the meaning change that we observe in appropriation, as, if these theories need to explain how slurs are *systematically* associated with derogatory contents, then they also need to explain how and why such an association can fail to hold in reclamation contexts. So, *if* the Reclamation Worry was posing a problem for content-based account of slurs, then it would potentially pose a challenge for all theories of slurs. In what follows, I argue that this is not the case.

### 3. *Ambiguity and social meaning*

As we said, the Reclamation Worry was originally voiced by Anderson and Lepore as a potential argument against the content-based theories, even though the authors already suggest that in order to save the account, content-based theorists could add an extra story to explain why the non-derogatory use of slurs is only accessible to a certain subset of speakers. This ‘extra story’ is exactly what Ritchie aims to add, by arguing that the lexical meaning of reclaimed slurs involves the occurrence of a plural first-person pronoun that imposes constraints on who can use the reclaimed slur: for instance a reclaimed use of ‘bitch’ conveys a content along the lines of “We women are laudable for being women”. In other words, Ritchie endorses the idea that the ambiguity between reclaimed and non-reclaimed uses of slurs deeply differs from standard instances of ambiguity and provides a story to explain why appropriation gives rise to such a unique case of ambiguity.

In this section I present an alternative and simpler solution. My claim is that the ambiguity between reclaimed and non-reclaimed slurs is not particular nor problematic and I try to show that other instances of ambiguity display similar properties: the context, together with speaker’s intentions, provides constraints on who can felicitously

access a certain meaning of a polysemic term in each situation. As a matter of fact, (i) contexts typically include information about the relations among the speakers as well as information about the beliefs and attitudes of the participants to the conversation and (ii) such information can drive the interpretation of expressions and utterances.

Let us now turn to the instance of ambiguity that I take to prove the non-exceptionalness of reclamation. Consider for instance the use of 'tu' and 'vous' in French or 'tu' and 'lei' in Italian. The 'vous' and 'lei' forms are the formal pronouns used to formally address the interlocutor in French and Italian respectively. More importantly, both of them are identical to *another* personal pronoun that is neutral with respect to the parameter of formality: in French, 'vous' can be either the formal singular second-person pronoun or the formal/informal plural second-person pronoun; in Italian 'lei' can be either the formal singular second-person pronoun or the formal/informal singular third-person pronoun. Suppose that A addresses B in Italian and says:

- (1) Lei gradisce del tè?  
 (a) Would *you* [formal] like some tea?  
 (b) Would *she* [informal/formal] like some tea?

As it is, (1) is *ambiguous* between (1a) "Would *you* like some tea?" (formal) and (1 b) "Would *she* like some tea?" (formal or informal), because the formal second-person pronoun 'lei' is identical to the singular third-person pronoun 'lei' (formal or informal).

Given the social information provided by the context, the addressee will typically access one interpretation or the other and understand whether the term at stake is a second or third-person pronoun. Such information about the social relations of the speaker does not only drive the interpretation from the point of view of the addressee: it also constrains which meaning of 'lei' ('you' or 'she') each speaker can felicitously express. We could describe the situation as follows: only those speakers who are in an *informal* relation to the addressee can felicitously use (1) and be taken to say "Would *she* like some tea?"; and only the speakers who are in a *formal* relation to the addressee can felicitously use (1) to mean (and be taken to mean) "Would *you* like some tea?". Note also that for the use of (1) (as meaning (b)) to be felicitous, it is *not* enough that the speaker *thinks* that she is in an informal relation to her addressee; also her addressee has to recognize her as being in an informal relation with him. The same goes if the speaker intends to use (1) as meaning (a): for such an utterance to be felicitous, it is not enough that the speaker *thinks* that she is in a formal relation to her addressee; also her addressee has to recognize her as being in a formal relation with him. The same goes for the French and Spanish equivalent cases of polysemic pronouns.

The 'lei' example suggests that the Reclamation Worry raised by Anderson and Lepore might be just an apparent worry. The ambiguity between formal and informal personal pronouns shows that the am-

biguity between negative and positive senses of slurs is not the only case where social information about the speaker and about her relation to the others can affect the way in which a polysemic term is both used and interpreted. The clues that help us decide in which sense a polysemic term is used are provided by the context (broadly construed) and by the intentions of the speakers. If that is correct, then the Reclamation Worry should not be seen as an objection to content-based theories, as Anderson and Lepore suggested, nor as evidence in favor of an indexical account of the lexical content of reclaimed slurs, as Ritchie suggests. The ambiguity between reclaimed and non-reclaimed slurs would be just another instance of the following phenomenon: socially important information determines and constrains the senses in which terms can be used by speakers and interpreted by hearers.

As we shall see in greater detail in Section 5, the indexical account proposed by Ritchie has to strongly rely on contextual factors such as speaker intentions and the like in order to explain the 'outsider' cases, namely – in her terminology, that I adopt – the cases where out-groups can use slurs non-derogatorily. According to a naïve version of the indexical account of reclaimed slurs, a felicitous outsider use of a reclaimed slur could not be, due to an infelicitous use of the indexical 'we'. We shall see that in order to fix such a problem, Ritchie employs similar resources to those we are invoking here to explain the ambiguity between reclaimed and non-reclaimed slurs. I will conclude that a more parsimonious answer to the RW should be preferred.

#### 4. *Authoritativeness*

It is surely a useful simplification to hold that what is typical of appropriation is that it starts and spreads among in-groups. However, there are good reasons *not* to frame the Reclamation Worry in terms of appropriated uses being accessible for in-groups only and offensive uses being accessible for out-groups and possibly in-groups. If the shift or extension from in-groups to out-groups was not available, it would not be possible to explain outsider cases, nor how reclamation can finally lead to slurring terms losing their derogatory power for good. If that is correct, what makes a non-pejorative use of slurs possible in general does not amount to the category(s) to which the speaker belongs, but rather, how likely it is for the speaker to be taken as *genuinely* and felicitously expressing a positive attitude towards the target class. In other words, what is at stake is whether the audience accepts the speaker's intention of dissociating from the negative use of slurs and subverting such a use, not necessarily whether the speaker belongs to the target group or not. Is then the in-group/out-group description of appropriation just wrong? Of course not. To be an in-group is the safest way (or one of the safest ways) for a speaker to be accepted as genuinely<sup>5</sup> (i) expressing

<sup>5</sup> One reason to stress that the attitude has to be recognized as 'genuine' is that people who do not undergo certain kind of discriminations themselves are not always

a dissociative attitude with respect to bigot beliefs typically conveyed by slurs and (ii) communicating a positive attitude<sup>6</sup> towards the target group. However, as many cases show, this does not need to be the case. The mere fact that reclaimed uses *can* be open to out-groups signals that the right direction to go in phrasing the Reclamation Worry is not in terms of in-groups and out-groups but in terms of 'believability' or 'authoritativeness' of the subject. How much a subject is taken to be authoritative depends on many complex factors that vary on a case-by-case basis (hence, the discussion inside and outside academia concerning who can use reclaimed slurs; see footnote 3): for sure it is important with which groups she can identify with, but also what kind of experiences she had undergo, how clear her beliefs and her stance towards bigotry are and so on. My claim is that being an in-group is just *one* way to be very authoritative and I present a scenario that I take to support my claim. Take three men, John, Peter and Bob. They are gay. John is an activist and spent his entire life fighting homophobia. Peter, on the other hand, never felt like telling anyone that he is gay, except for very few people. He is very discreet about it and never participates to LGBTQ+ pride events. He never engages in discussions about gay marriage nor anything related to LGBTQ+ rights. Suppose Bob is a close friend of both and knows they are gay. One day, on different occasions, Bob hears them talking about a common friend being 'a fag'. My intuition is that John is somehow more entitled than Peter to use the slur 'fag' in a positive way. In particular, I would expect Bob to have no doubts in interpreting John's use of the slur as reclaimed and to feel uneasy or dubious about Peter's use of the term. If what allows speakers to access positive uses of slurs was 'just' their belonging to the target group, and if we grant that the group targeted by the slur 'fag' is gay men, then we cannot account for the intuition that John's reclaimed use of a homophobic slur is more acceptable than Peter's use. The only way to save the in-groupness account of reclamation would be either (i) to say that Peter should count as less of an in-group than John, which does not make much sense if the target of the homophobic

taken to be entitled to express solidarity attitudes nor to use appropriation. Think about the fact that while right now, as Ritchie notices, it is nearly impossible for men in general to use 'bitch' in a reclaimed way, gay men are sometimes (sometimes!) allowed to do so.

<sup>6</sup> An interesting issue is whether the attitude expressed in reclamation contexts has to be positive or just non-negative. As I see it, in the first phases of reclamation, the attitude expressed by the speaker/the content conveyed by the term (this depends on what theory of appropriation one favours) has to be positive for a certain occurrence of a slur to count as – and to be taken as – reclaimed. However, since appropriation can lead to a point where the slur loses its derogatory power for good and becomes a neutral term (think of the case of 'gay') rather than a positive word, then it's plausible to think of reclaimed uses of slurs such that the speaker does not convey any positive content, she just fails to convey negative ones. I'd like to thank Erich Rast for pushing me on this point.



slur 'fag' are gay men, or (ii) to say that the group targeted by 'fag' is not gay men, but gay activists, which is also quite implausible.

A more promising way to explain why Peter could be perceived as less entitled than the activist John to use 'fag' in a positive way is in terms of *authoritativeness*. It is easier for Bob to recognize John's anti-homophobic intentions and attitudes, while he would harbor doubts about whether or not Peter's dissociative attitude with respect to homophobia and Peter's solidarity attitude with respect to the LGBTQ+ are truly genuine. And, again, this has nothing to do with Peter's being a member of the target class or not. It is about the *authoritativeness* that Peter is granted in a group.

The more a slur gets reclaimed, the less *authoritativeness* is needed to felicitously access the non-derogatory meaning: the less problematic a term becomes, the less is needed to recognize the speaker's intentions as felicitously communicating non-derogatory attitudes.

We cannot account for the John-Peter case intuitions if we stick to the in-group/out-group schema, nor can we account for the outsider cases: we need to think in terms of *authoritativeness*, legitimacy and believability in order to account for the criteria on the basis of which speakers can or cannot access reclaimed uses of slurs.

### 5. *In- and out-groupness: the outsider cases*

In Section 3, I argued that the Reclamation Worry does not arise at all, since it is not surprising that in cases of polysemy or ambiguity, complex social information is required for the speaker to use the ambiguous term with a certain meaning and for the hearer to interpret it correctly. In doing so, I claimed that the indexical account of appropriated slurs should not be invoked as a solution to the Reclamation Worry, since the worry does not arise in the first place. Moreover, in Section 4, I claimed that the main criterion with which certain uses of slurs are interpreted as reclaimed seems to deal with recognizing and accepting speakers' intentions on the basis of the *authoritativeness* they are granted, rather than just considering whether speakers belong or not to a group.

In this section, I come back to the outsider cases to show that they speak in favor of my claim and reveal some lack of parsimony on the side of the indexical account of reclaimed slurs.

The outsider cases are, as we said, those cases where out-groups use slurs non-derogatorily. The reclaimed use of slurs like 'queer' is a good and well-known example, since out-groups can felicitously use a slur in a positive or neutral way<sup>7</sup> (think of expressions such as Queer Studies, Queer Tango, Queer Film Festival, the acronym LGBTQ+, etc). But there are many other cases where the possibility for the outsider's re-

<sup>7</sup> Ritchie excludes from her investigation cases such as 'queer', where the process of appropriation led to a point where a speaker clearly does not need to identify with the target class in order to use the slur in a reclaimed way. However, I think it is crucial for a satisfactory account of reclamation to be able to explain this phase, too.

claimed use to be felicitous or not depends very much on the context: under the adequate circumstances, an out-group can use a slur in a positive way, but it does not only depend on her intentions. It is crucial for the indexical account to explain how these uses are even possible. As a matter of fact, it looks *prima facie* very hard for the indexical account of reclaimed slurs to explain how an out-group could felicitously use a slur in a positive way: if reclaimed slurs involve the occurrence of an indexical 'we', when an out-group uses a 'we', it should be infelicitous. Ritchie addresses the problem by introducing the notion of 'insider' status. The outsider cases are not infelicitous because under certain circumstances out-groups can get something like an insider status, they can count as belonging to a 'we' even though they do not belong to the target group. The 'insider' status makes their use of the indexical 'we' felicitous despite the out-groupness of the speaker.

I would resist this move for two reasons. The first one is that such an explanation does not account for all the data of reclaimed slurs, but only for a subset. In fact, while it could be an adequate description of some outsider uses, speakers need not always perceive (and be taken as perceiving) themselves and the target class as a 'we' in order to use reclaimed slurs. For instance, a scholar using the term 'queer' in talking about 'Queer Studies' is not necessarily identifying herself with the target class (she can of course; but she does not *need* to). The outsider cases actually show that what is at stake is not whether a speaker belongs or not to a category, nor whether she can talk about the target class using a plural first-person pronoun. The beliefs and intentions of each one in each context, together with the way in which such beliefs and intentions are recognized and accepted, seem to constitute what makes a use of a slur reclaimed or not. Then, again, as it was said in Section 4, belonging to a group is a strong contextual clue of what the speaker's intentions and attitudes are, but it is not all there is.

Moreover, the indexical account ends up relying on notions such as intention attribution and recognition, as well as something close to authoritativeness (namely the 'insider' status), in order to explain the outsider cases; but once one invokes these notions to explain the outsider uses, these notions turn out to be just enough to account for *all* reclaimed uses. In other words, there is no need to postulate hidden indexicals for reclaimed uses of slurs, if the outsider cases already require us to rely on intention interpretation, and some relevant social relations involving the speaker (authoritativeness, in my terminology). My conclusion is that a more parsimonious response to the RW should be preferred to the indexical account and that the indexical explanation of Reclamation would need further justification to be defended.

## 6. Conclusion: A brief methodological remark

The debate on appropriation started when philosophers of language and linguists became interested in slurs and pejorative language. However, it is easy to observe instances of valence reversal that we might call 'reclamation' for any kind of evaluative term. Slurs are not the only evaluative words that used to be negative and that were used positively until the point where the term lost its pejorative power for good. I consider just two famous examples from the history of poetry and painting. Let us start from the most ancient one. In a letter to Atticus,<sup>8</sup> Cicero calls a group of poets '*neoterói*' (from the greek '*νεώτερον*', 'the newer ones'), disregarding this avant-garde interested in introducing in poetry new stylistic features and new themes. Two centuries after, a group of poets called themselves 'the novel poets', after the *neoterói*. The term lost its derogatory power, even if it was initially created and used as derogatory by Cicero. First, it was used positively by those later poets who were very much inspired by the group that Cicero scornfully called '*neoterói*' and nowadays '*neoterói*' is how the scientific community neutrally calls these very much appreciated poets. Another (possibly more famous) example concerns the impressionists. The French term '*impressioniste*' was disdainfully introduced by a critic, Louis Leroy, in the journal *Le Charivari* in 1874.<sup>9</sup> Not long after, the term was used again, but in a positive sense, by Jules-Antoine Castagnary in his paper "Exposition du boulevard des Capucines. Les impressionnistes", published on *Le Siècle*.<sup>10</sup> Nowadays, we still call these artists 'impressionists' with no trace of disdain. Besides these examples, we can find many more instances of appropriation from very different fields that have nothing to do with slurs as they are commonly understood.<sup>11</sup> Just to mention a few, the English adjective 'terrific', coming from the Latin adjective 'terrificus' (frightening), underwent a process of valence change. Until 1880s, it meant – just like in Latin and contemporary Italian – 'horrible' or 'frightening'. From around the 1880s, it starts meaning 'excellent', which is its standard meaning today in English.<sup>12</sup> Or take the adjective '*bárbaro*' in Spanish: it used to be exclusively negative (mean-

<sup>8</sup> From the *Epistulae ad Atticum*, Book 7, Letter 2 (year 50 B.C.). Latin text available online: <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus-cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=PerseusLatinTexts&query=Cic.%20Att.%207.2&getid=0>.

<sup>9</sup> Leroy, Louis (1874), *L'Exposition des impressionnistes*, *Le Charivari*, April 25th 1874.

<sup>10</sup> Castagnary, Jules-Antoine (1874), *Exposition du boulevard des Capucines. Les impressionnistes*, *Le Siècle* April 29th, pp. 1-10.

<sup>11</sup> Nunberg (forthcoming) claims that that of 'slur' is a fairly recent notion. I do not agree with Nunberg on this point, but even if he was right, the 2000 year old case of '*neoterói*' shows that appropriation is not a recent nor slurs-only-related phenomenon.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=terrific&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=terrific&searchmode=none).

ing 'horrible') and nowadays it can *also* be used positively ('fantastic').<sup>13</sup>

The reason why I mention these apparently unrelated cases is to make a methodological point: appropriation should be seen as a general phenomenon that is *not* restricted to slurs.<sup>14</sup> The reclamation of slurs is just one instance of valence change. I grant that the possibility of reversing the valence of an evaluative term becomes particularly crucial and politically precious when it comes to socially loaded terms like slurs, but this does not mean that we ought to study appropriation as a characterizing feature of slurs *only*. When investigating the appropriation of slurs, it is important to bear in mind that it is a general mechanism, not only related to slurs. In order to provide a satisfactory account of appropriation, a much broader stance is required.

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<sup>13</sup> Real Academia Española, <http://dle.rae.es/?id=52DLHf1>.

<sup>14</sup> Jeshion (2017) argues that not only appropriation does not only concern slurs and labels: it does not only concern language. You can have appropriation in any domain, including non-linguistic ones such as fashion. Moreover, Jeshion (2017) offers a list of ways in which meaning change can happen: I do not address the varieties of meaning change here, but I am sympathetic to Jeshion's views.

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