Negative or Positive?
Three Theories of Evaluation Reversal

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In this paper, I consider the phenomenon of evaluation reversal for two classes of evaluative terms that have received a great deal of attention in philosophy of language and linguistics: slurs and thick terms. I consider three approaches to analyze evaluation reversal: (i) lexical deflationist account, (ii) ambiguity account and (iii) echoic account. My purpose is mostly negative: my aim is to underline the shortcomings of these three strategies, in order to possibly pave the way for more suitable accounts.

Keywords: Slurs, thick terms, reclamation, evaluation reversal, ambiguity, echo.

1. *Introduction*

Language is not only used to describe state of affairs, but also to evaluate them, i.e., to express subjective judgements. The most prototypical pieces of language that are employed for the purpose of evaluating are thin terms, such as 'good' and 'bad', but many other expressions systematically convey evaluative contents: just to mention a few, the so-called thick terms, slurs, aesthetic predicates, predicates of personal taste and the like.

In this paper, I assess the phenomenon of evaluation reversal: uses of language in which a term that typically carries an evaluative content with a certain polarity (positive or negative) can be felicitously used in order to convey evaluative content with an *opposite* polarity (from positive to negative and vice versa). In this work, I focus on slurs and thick terms—expressions which are *systematically* associated with evaluative contents—, while I leave aside descriptive terms that can be *on occasion* used evaluatively (see Stojanovic 2016a, especially section 2.1).

Slurs are derogatory terms targeting individuals or groups on the basis of their belonging to a certain category.[1] Prototypical English slurs target nationality, ethnic origins, sexual orientation, religion and so on, and they are associated with a negative evaluative content. Thick terms, on the other hand, are usually defined as those expressions which combine descriptive and evaluative contents, both positive and negative:[2] 'generous' for instance does not only refer to the property of being willing to share one's resources, but it also conveys the idea that it is good to be so; 'lewd' refers to the property of being sexually explicit beyond conventional boundaries, but it also conveys the idea that it is bad to be so. In this work, I do not go through all the possible theories of slurs and thick terms; instead I focus on the case of evaluation reversal and critically discuss three accounts.

The paper goes as follows. In section 2 I briefly present two phenomena which can be accounted for in terms of evaluation reversal: the reclamation of slurs and the variability of thick terms. In section 3, I discuss three theories developed to account for reclamation or variability (or both): they are the lexical deflationist account (3.1), the ambiguity account (3.2) and the echoic account (3.3). My goal is to pinpoint the shortcomings of each of them. My aim here is strictly negative, but clarifying the difficulties of each approach should pave the way for more promising accounts.

2. *Evaluation reversal: reclamation and variability*

This section is dedicated to the reclamation of slurs (section 2.1) and variability of thick terms (section 2.2). In this paper, I do not develop an argument to support the thesis that the two phenomena are similar under crucial aspects (for a defense of a similar position, see Cepollaro 2017a), but I do treat both of them as cases where a lexical item conventionally associated with a positive or negative evaluation can be used on occasion with the opposite polarity.

2.1 *The reclamation of slurs*

In the debate on slurs, scholars underline how these expressions systematically convey derogatory contents towards the target group regardless of (i) how the slur is embedded and (ii) what the intentions of the speaker are. As for (i), we observe that an utterance like 'Lea is a wop' keeps being derogatory also when it is embedded under negation, conditional, modal, question: 'Lea is not wop', 'If Lea is a wop, her son is too', 'Lea may be a wop', 'Is Lea a wop?'. The relation between slurs and derogation is such that the pejorative content resists when embedded

[1] See i.a. Potts (2005), Hom (2008), Anderson and Lepore (2013a, 2013b), Camp (2013), Cepollaro (2015), Jeshion (2013), Bolinger (2017).

[2] See Hare (1963), Williams (1985), Blackburn (1992), Gibbard (1992), among others.

under semantic operators. As for (ii), consider a case where someone calls a person a slur and then apologizes by saying she did not mean to offend. The absence of the *intention* to offend is not enough to cancel or neutralize the derogation:[3] slurs *are* demeaning, notwithstanding the intentions of the speaker.

However, we should not take these observations as evidence that there is no way in which slurs occur without being derogatory. As a matter of fact, slurs can also display some peculiar uses, that go under the label of 'reclamation', which seem to convey no derogation. Reclamation is the phenomenon for which the members of a target group can use the slur targeting their own group in such a way that slurs are not derogatory in those cases. Reclamation constitutes a challenge to a theory of slurs which aims to account for the fact that the pejorative content of these expressions seems to resist all kinds of embedding and attempts of neutralization. The phenomenon raises many questions, some of which we will discuss here. Among the main issues scholars are faced with there is the question as to whether reclaimed uses of slurs are literal uses of language; as to whether, once a slur gets reclaimed, it is still the same lexical item as before; as to whether reclaimed uses of slurs pose similar moral problems as non-reclaimed ones; as to whether reclamation can take place without political awareness or not, and so on.

To complicate the picture even more, as Jeshion (ms) underlines, reclamation is not a uniform and homogeneous phenomenon: there are many ways in which a slur can be used by in-groups without being derogatory. Some reclaimed uses of slurs convey positive evaluative content, some are just non-negative without being necessarily positive; some are possible for in-groups only, while some are available for out-groups too; some sound ironic, satirical or sarcastic, while some do not, and so on. In this work, I am interested in reclaimed uses of slurs where the term is used in a positive way, that is, in the cases where the evaluation conveyed by these expressions is *reversed*, not just suspended (for an analysis of evaluation suspension, see Cepollaro 2017a: section 3.2). It may turn out that this is just a subgroup of reclamation in general.

2.2 *The variability of thick terms*

Scholars in ethics and metaethics noticed that even though thick terms are associated with evaluative contents linked with a certain polar-

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[3] In the last decade, quite a few of these cases made it to the newspaper. What they all have in common is that someone used a slur and then tried to apologize by appealing to their own non-derogatory intentions; in all of those cases, this attempted apology failed to excuse them, as in the case of slurs the absence of a derogatory intention does not typically cancel the derogation which did take place nevertheless. Just to mention three such cases: https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2015/dec/15/rajon-rondo-gay-slur-nba; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2017/10/31/conor-mcgregor-apologizes-for-homophobic-slur/?utm_term=.d78b2c9128fa; https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/nhl-athlete-non-apology_us_5922fcace4b094cdba55ecb0?guccounter=1.

ity, on occasion they can be felicitously used with an opposite polarity.[4] Just to make an example, provided that 'chaste' typically carries a positive evaluation, under certain circumstances, it can be used in a negative way. This example is taken from the Corpus Of Contemporary American-English (or COCA; Davies 2008):

> "Not sure how long I'll be gone. (…)'. Elaine gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. 'That was a little chaste'. 'Don't look now, but we seem to be of interest to about fifty elderly women on the tour bus behind you' 'Should we give them something to stare at?"

It looks like the speaker is using 'chaste' as a negative thing for a kiss to be; despite the use of an evaluative term with a positive polarity, the speaker is *not* endorsing that kind of positive evaluation, quite the contrary: he is using 'chaste' as meaning to convey a negative rather than positive evaluation. The example which is mostly discussed in the literature is the positive use of a thick term with negative polarity, namely 'lewd'. The original example from Blackburn is the following:

> "[We may] worry that this year's Carnival was not lewd enough" (Blackburn 1992: 296, quoted in Väyrynen 2013: 217).

But Väyrynen (2013) changes the example a bit in order to avoid the unneeded complications brought about by the expression 'not enough' and credits Matti Eklund for the final version of the example:

> "The carnival was a lot of fun. But something was missing. It just wasn't lewd. I hope it'll be lewd next year" (Väyrynen 2013: 85)

The speaker is using 'lewd', typically associated with a negative evaluation, as expressing a positive one. As in the case of reclamation, scholars need to address questions e.g. whether instances of variability count as literal uses of thick terms or as to whether, once an expression like 'lewd' gets used positively, it is still an instance of the same lexical item as before.

3. *Three theories of evaluation reversal: lexical deflationism, ambiguity, echo*

In this section, I consider three possible approaches to evaluation reversal and I apply them to the case of reclamation and variability. These strategies have been explicitly proposed to account for the phenomenon of evaluation reversal in relation to thick terms specifically (this is the case for the lexical deflationist account, section 3.1), or to slurs (this is the case for ambiguity account, section 3.2) or to both slurs and thick terms (echoic account, section 3.3). In what follows, I try to see how each of these approaches can explain evaluation reversal for both slurs and thick terms. As announced, my aim is negative: my goal is to underline the shortcomings of the three strategies in order to pave the way for more promising accounts.

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[4] Hare (1952), Blackburn (1992), Väyrynen (2011, 2013), Eklund (2013).

3.1 *Lexical deflationism*

The lexical deflationist account of evaluation reversal was put forward for the variability of thick terms rather than for the reclamation of slurs. However I assess its plausibility both for slurs and thick terms, by following a suggestion of Väyrynen (2016).

Lexical deflationism amounts to the idea that the reason why the evaluation conveyed by slurs and thick terms can change polarity on occasion is that it is not lexically encoded. For this approach, the evaluative content with which these expressions are associated consists in pragmatic implications; the addressees infer the evaluative content (and of course its polarity) in each context. Väyrynen (2013) defends a similar thesis for thick terms; moreover, Väyrynen (2016) hints at the possibility to develop a theory of slurs along similar lines; to him, the resulting approach would resemble Bolinger (2017)'s one. For Bolinger, the derogatory content of slurs is due to purely pragmatic mechanisms:

> In choosing to use a slurring term rather than its neutral counterpart, the speaker signals that she endorses the term (and its associations). Such an endorsement warrants offense, and consequently slurs generate offense whenever a speaker's use demonstrates a contrastive preference for the slurring term. (Bolinger 2017: 439)

In this framework, when speakers reclaim a slur, they use it defiantly, without endorsing the relevant associations; as the group of speakers who do so grows, the link between the lexical item and the associated contents grows weaker and weaker. When reclamation reaches a certain stage, it is the context that determines each time whether the slur carries a negative evaluative content or not. Such a strategy, defended by Väyrynen and arguably by Bolinger too, appears to analyze slurs and thick terms in a way that makes them similar to terms that do not lexically encode evaluation, but can be used in evaluatively on occasion—either positively or negatively—, for instance 'intense' (see Stojanovic 2016a, 2016b about "valence-underspecification").

Let us now look at the shortcomings of lexical deflationism. As far as thick terms are concerned, one may wonder if the context is really enough to determine the polarity of the evaluative content. In what follows, I propose a case which suggests, *contra* lexical deflationism, that it is the lexical content which determines the interpretation of the evaluation. Suppose there are two thick terms which share the same descriptive content such that one is typically associated with a positive evaluation and the other with a negative one. For the sake of the example, suppose that this is the case for 'reckless' and 'brave', so assume that their descriptive meaning amounts to something like 'willing to do something dangerous', while their evaluative contents have opposite polarities, one negative, one positive. Now suppose that two such terms are used in the same context:

A. What she did was courageous!
B. It was not. It was reckless.

The two speakers, A and B, agree on what the facts are and what the act at stake is and, nevertheless, disagree on how to evaluate it. If lexical deflationism were right, the audience of such a dialogue would be confused about how the two speakers evaluate the act at stake: since for this approach it is the context and not the lexical content which determines the interpretation of the evaluative content, if the context is one and the same and—by hypothesis—the descriptive content is the same, the context should attribute the same evaluative content to both of them. However, the audience of the dialogue has no difficulty in understanding that A approves of the action under discussion and B disapproves of it. I argue that this is so because the evaluation *is* in fact lexically encoded: competent speakers can come up with a default interpretation roughly corresponds to the conventional meaning of the term at stake.

As far as slurs are concerned, on the other hand, lexical deflationism in the version of Bolinger (2017) has some problems in accounting for the intuition that slurs are derogatory also in a context where they are speakers' default choice (e.g. racist environments and discussions). Let me state again that for lexical deflationists, slurs do not lexically encode offensive contents, they are only pragmatically associated with them as a matter of contrastive choice. If that was the case, then they would not be associated with any such content in a situation where they are the default choice. In other words, lexical deflationism can account for the intuition that slurs are derogatory (i.e. they convey offensive contents) when they occur in non-racist environments, but not when they occur in bigot contexts, where they do not trigger any pragmatic implication in virtue of being the default option. I take this as evidence that lexical deflationism is wrong in postulating that slurs do not convey derogatory contents at the level of conventional meaning.

To sum up, we started from observing that lexical deflationism has an easy way to explain evaluation reversal: since the evaluative content is *not* lexically encoded in the conventional meaning of slurs and thick terms, its polarity can change on occasion. However, we have observed that this approach has problems on its own explaining the behavior of slurs and thick terms *in general* and thus it may not be a viable option to account for evaluation reversal. In what follows, we consider two alternative theories which endorse the claim that slurs and thick terms lexically encode evaluative contents. The challenge which these approaches need to meet is to account for the possibilities for such evaluative contents to change polarity.

3.2 *Ambiguity*

The ambiguity account of evaluation reversal was put forward for the reclamation of slurs rather than for the variability of thick terms. However, as I did for the lexical deflationist approach, I shall consider both applications.

The main point of the ambiguity account of reclamation is that once slurs are reclaimed, a new word comes to exist. Many scholars endorsed this thesis[5] which it gets rid of the problem raised by reclamation at its source: it rejects the idea that a lexical item undergoes an evaluation reversal, since there are in fact two different lexical items. According to this approach, reclamation does not challenge those theories of slurs which analyze the derogatory content as part of the conventional meaning of the term, because in this framework reclaimed slurs are not instances of the same lexical items as slurs; in fact, they are not 'slurs' properly speaking. They are other terms with a different—and non-derogatory—meaning. The same would hold for thick terms: once a thick term is used with a different polarity, a new evaluative term comes to existence.

In the debate on slurs, this proposal has received some criticism from Anderson and Lepore (2013a) and Anderson (2018), an objection which Ritchie (2017) calls 'Reclamation Worry' (RW). The criticism is the following: if there was an ambiguity relation between reclaimed and non-reclaimed slurs, then any speaker would be able to felicitously use one or the other lexical item; however, this is famously not the case, as usually only in-groups and not out-groups can felicitously use the non-derogatory term. Anderson and Lepore use this argument against the theories of slurs which (i) are content-based (i.e. hold that these expressions lexically encode pejorative contents) and (ii) explain reclamation by relying on an ambiguity account. For Anderson and Lepore, because not every speaker can use any meaning of a slur (derogatory and non-derogatory), then the ambiguity thesis of reclamation must be wrong and therefore content-based theories should be rejected because they would have no other way to explain reclamation.[6]

In what follows, I present challenges to the ambiguity thesis that are orthogonal to the Reclamation Worry, as I do not take it to constitute a problem for the ambiguity thesis. In fact, in Cepollaro (2017b) I argued that, on a closer inspection, the RW should not trouble the defendants of the ambiguity account too much, because there are further cases in other languages (e.g. personal pronouns in French, German, Italian, Spanish) where two lexical items are ambiguous and the issue of which speaker can use which term is a matter of socially-determined factors. Leaving that worry aside, the main problem with the ambiguity thesis is that it raises more difficulties than it would have initially appeared. In particular, it needs a detailed characterization of 'ambiguity', which is something that scholars tended to overlook. As Anderson (2018) underlines: "Positing a lexical ambiguity, for example, would mean that

[5] Hom (2008: 428, 438), Richard (2008: 16), Saka (2007: 146–147), Miščević (2011: 176), Jeshion (2013: 250–253), Whiting (2013: 370).

[6] Section 3.3 shows that this is not the case: content-based views are also compatible with the echoic account; so, Anderson and Lepore's criticism would not suffice anyway to challenge content-based approaches, even if the objection towards the ambiguity thesis were correct.

either [the N-word] corresponds to non-identical entries in the lexicon or it expresses multiple meanings". As Anderson remarks, there are two options available for the ambiguity account, which we can attribute to the phenomena of homonymy and polysemy. The first characterization—homonymy—boils down to analyze a standard and a reclaimed slur as corresponding to two different entries in the dictionary.[7] The second characterization—polysemy—is to posit that a standard and a reclaimed slur correspond to one lexical entry with multiple meanings.

Let me start from homonymy, which is the phenomenon for which two lexical items are written and pronounced in the same way and such a thing is—so to speak—accidental: there is no special connection (for instance at the level of etymology) between the two terms. This is the case for example for 'bank': we can talk about two different lexical entries $bank_1$ and $bank_2$, where the former refers to the financial institution and the latter to the river side. We can observe that the two items have different etymologies and that the two meanings corresponding to $bank_1$ and $bank_2$ are expressed by different words in other languages ('banca' vs. 'sponda' in Italian, 'banque' vs. 'rive' in French, etc.). If we look at the relation between a standard offensive use of a slur and a reclaimed one, we observe that it does not resemble homonymy: the two uses do not correspond to terms with different etymologies and the link between the offensive and the non-offensive use of the term does not amount to an accident, as in the case of $bank_1$ and $bank_2$.

The second option for the ambiguity thesis to characterize the relation between standard and reclaimed slurs is polysemy, the phenomenon for which one term has multiple meanings that correspond to different aspects. For instance, take 'bottle'. The lexical item can refer to the object or to the content of the object, as in "The bin is full of empty bottles" (object) and "She drank two bottles of Pastis" (content). The two meanings—object and content—correspond to two related aspects of the concept BOTTLE. If we go back to slurs, we see that if ambiguity is characterized in terms of polysemy, standard and reclaimed slurs would have to correspond to different meanings of the same word. This sounds more promising than holding that the two are not related and that the ambiguity is merely accidental, as in the case of homonymy (see 'bank'). However, the two meanings do not seem to correspond to two aspects of the same concept, as in prototypical cases of polysemy. If we look at instances of regular polysemy, we cannot really trace cases where the two aspects involved only differ at the level of evaluative rather than descriptive content. The same observations can be made for thick terms.

The ambiguity account needs deeper investigation on homonymy and polysemy in order to develop a detailed and precise proposal of

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[7] Which is something Ritchie (2017) has in mind when she formulates the Reclamation Worry by noticing that "Anyone can use 'bank' to mean financial institution or side of a river".

evaluation reversal, because, as it stands, there are too many dissimilarities between the homonymy and polysemy involving descriptive meanings on the one hand (see 'bank', 'bottle') and the case of evaluation reversal involving evaluative meanings on the other hand (see slurs and thick terms).

Finally, the ambiguity account needs a supplementary story about how the evaluation reversal begins in the first place: we know that for new lexical items (or new meanings of old words) to come to exist, certain conditions have to be met: the fact that a term is on occasion used with a different polarity than usual does not seem enough to postulate the creation of a new lexical item. The echoic theory that we discuss in the following section seems to be better equipped to account for how the reversal begins.

3.3 *Echo*

The echoic account of evaluation reversal was originally put forward for the reclamation of slurs by Bianchi (2014), furtherly supported by Miščević and Perhat (2016), and extended to the variability of thick terms in Cepollaro (2017a).

The bulk of the proposal is that the cases of evaluation reversal are instances of dissociative echoic uses of language, i.e. cases in which by uttering an evaluative locution the speaker is evoking the evaluative content conveyed by that particular term, but at the same time she is expressing her dissociation with respect to such content. Instances of evaluation reversal are not literal uses of evaluative language. As a matter of fact, the echoic theory was put forward by Sperber and Wilson (1986) in order to account for irony: in ironic utterances, speakers evoke some thought, belief or expectation that they attribute to someone else and at the same time they express their dissociation with respect to the evoked content. In this sense, evaluation reversal counts as a case of irony. Since irony involves a dissociative attitude, the possibility for irony to be successful (i.e. to be felicitous and to get recognized) requires a correct interpretation of attitudes. As a consequence, for evaluation reversal to be successful, the audience needs to recognize and correctly interpret the attitude of the speaker, which leaves room for all sorts of misunderstanding. Recall the example we mentioned in section 2.2., when the speaker complained about a kiss by saying "That was a little chaste". For the echoic theory, the speaker is evoking the evaluative content associated with 'chaste', namely 'it is good to be abstaining from sexual intercourse', and he is making fun of it by expressing his dissociative attitude. The same goes for slurs: when the actress, singer and stand-up-comedian Lea DeLaria calls herself 'that fucking dyke'; what she does is evoking the pejorative content associated with the homophobic slur and expressing her dissociation from it at the same time.

The echoic approach can tell a plausible story about how evaluation reversal starts: it starts by defiantly subverting the lexically encoded

evaluation of a certain locution by means of irony. However, there are a few points on which the theory shows its weaknesses and call for adjustment.

Most of the difficulties that the approach has concern slurs rather than thick terms, for which, on the contrary, it seems to work quite well (for a contrary opinion, see Väyrynen 2013). The main issue is whether the echoic theory can account for all cases of reclamation. As noticed in section 2.1, reclamation is far from being a uniform and homogenous phenomenon: different instances display different properties. In particular, there are cases which are convincingly captured by the ironic explanation (for instance, the above-mentioned examples of uses of 'chaste' and 'dyke'). To support the view, notice that the clearer the ironic intentions are, the easier it is for the audience to understand that the usual evaluation is subverted. On the other hand, however, not *all* instances of reclamation appear to be ironic, not even in the technical sense which Sperber and Wilson have in mind. In particular, advanced-stage cases of reclamation seem to have lost the ironic flavor. Consider for example certain uses of 'queer': if one talks about the 'queer studies' class she is taking, it is implausible to postulate an ironic use of 'queer', it is just how the class is called; if one appreciates 'queer tango nights', there is no reason to imagine that she is being ironical, it is just how certain kinds of tango are called. In other words, when the process of reclamation is at an enough-advanced stage—i.e. when there is an attested non-derogatory use of the expression which used to be a slur—, the reclaimed uses can cease to sound ironic. Note that this feature (the absence of ironic flavor) does not depend on the fact that reclaimed uses of 'queer' become available for out-groups too: as a matter of fact, also some reclaimed uses of the 'n-word' which are available for in-groups only fail to display irony.

The fact that the echoic approach does not seem to account for *all* instances of reclamation can be taken to suggest either that reclamation is not a uniform and homogeneous phenomenon and that therefore new explanations are required—as Jeshion (ms) claims—or that the echoic account is well-equipped to account for some cases of reclamation but needs some sort of supplementary story for the non-ironic cases.

4. *Conclusion*

As stated at the beginning, this paper has a negative purpose, i.e. underling the shortcomings of three existing accounts of evaluation reversal. The analysis focused on two different cases of evaluatives—slurs and thick terms—in order to look at evaluation reversal with a broader stance. In particular, after presenting the phenomenon at stake (section 2), I argued that lexical deflationism has troubles explaining the behavior of slurs and thick terms in the first place and thus it should not be taken as a viable explanation of evaluation reversal (section 3.1); as for the ambiguity thesis, I showed that it lacks a detailed account

of how standard cases of homonymy and polysemy relate to the case of evaluatives (section 3.2). Finally, I moved to the echoic approach (section 3.3) and underlined that despite its many merits, it displays some weaknesses in accounting for what appear to be non-ironical uses of reclaimed slurs. I hope that by clarifying the difficulties of each approach, I paved the way for more promising theories.

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