

Don't you know that you're toxic? The semantics of reclaimed slurs

Philosophers and linguists increasingly debate how slurs – derogatory terms targeting minority groups – are reclaimed by in-group members to express pride, resistance, or solidarity. A central question is whether slurs genuinely lose their sting when reclaimed. Theoretical accounts sharply diverge, and empirical evidence remains scarce. In this talk, I present the first evidence on the online processing of reclaimed slurs. The results reveal a clear pattern: reclamation substantially weakens pejorative force, but does not erase it. Even in reclaimed uses, slurs remain partially toxic. Crucially, this reduction in toxicity emerges during incremental comprehension itself, rather than as the outcome of post hoc pragmatic reasoning: reclaimed slurs are immediately processed as such, without relying on the conscious inference that “a group member wouldn't insult their own group.” These findings sharpen a set of questions for the semantics of slurs: what exactly gets weakened through reclamation? Why does some toxicity persist? And what do reclaimed uses reveal about the semantic building blocks of pejorative meaning? I conclude by sketching how an ongoing pupillometry study may help address these questions, and push our understanding of slur semantics further.