ARTICLE IN PRESS

Language Sciences xxx (2015) 1–8

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langsci

Precarious projects: the performative structure of reclamation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Slurs
Derogatory terms
Reclamation project
Speech acts
Oppression
Illocutionary distortion

ABSTRACT

Derogatory terms can be powerful mechanisms of subordination, while re-appropriating these terms can be a strategy to fight back against social injustice. I argue that projects seeking to reclaim slurs have a performative structure that raises particular hazards. Whereas more familiar forms of protest may fail to bring about their intended result, attempts to re-appropriate slurs can fail to be understood as transgressive acts at all. When attempts at reclamation fail, their force is distorted; context and convention lead the hearer to give uptake to the speech act as a traditional deployment of the slur. The force of this traditional use is to validate and re-entrench the very norms the act was intended to subvert. This is the precarious structure of reclamation projects: when successful, reclamation is the subversion of powerful mechanisms of oppression, but when unsuccessful, the act has the ironic force of constituting mechanisms of oppression.

Derogatory terms, or slurs, are emblematic of broad social practices of oppression and injustice, and at the same time, these terms can themselves be powerful mechanisms of subordination (Himma 2002; Hom, 2008; Croom, 2011; Camp, 2013). There has been much philosophical debate about how these terms work, but there is general agreement that they both draw on and re-entrench deeply embedded stereotypes about the targeted group. Re-appropriating slurs has long been a strategy of groups seeking to fight back against these systems of social injustice. Reclamation projects seek to detach the derogation from the term so that the word may be used as either a bare description of the targeted group or as a term of approbation.

Contrary to what the name of the project seems to imply, reclamation projects aren't an attempt to 'take back' a term the targeted group once had control over; it is rarely the case that the group once had this kind of linguistic control of the term. Instead, reclamation projects are centered on the implicit idea that the targeted group *ought* to have control over the term that has been used against them. Reclamation projects are a form of social protest, one which is explicitly discursive in nature; whereas other kinds of protest use language as a tool in speeches, songs, or literature to achieve their goal, reclamation projects are focused on changing the linguistic role of a term or phrase. This relies on changing the discursive conventions connected to the term so that a hearer can appropriately take up the speech act in which the term is deployed.

Reclamation has frequently been a tool of protest. Perhaps the most well known example today is the largely successful re-appropriation of the term 'queer' (Brontsema, 2004). From the late 19th century onwards, 'queer' was used as a slur for those presumed to deviate from the norms of heterosexual behavior. Beginning around 1990, US lesbian and gay communities began an intentional effort to reclaim the term. Today, 'queer' is broadly recognized as referring to an individual whose sexual or gender identity doesn't fit into traditional binary categories, or someone who rejects heteronormative identity categories. This use of the term has become widespread in general culture, and has made its way into academia with fields such as Queer Studies and Queer Theory. While 'queer' is recognized as one of the most successful cases of re-appropriation, it is by no

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2015.05.002
0388-0001/

Please cite this article in press as: Herbert, C., Precarious projects: the performative structure of reclamation, *Language Sciences* (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2015.05.002

means the only case of attempted reclamation. There have been attempts to reclaim terms targeting ability status, sexual identity, political affiliation, nationality, ethnicity, and race.

Recently, SlutWalks around the world have focused on reclaiming the term 'slut' as a method of deconstructing gender norms that excuse or normalize sexual violence. SlutWalks are a protest movement occurring in cities around the world. The movement is centered both on formally organized rallies protesting sexual violence as well as on the dispersed reclamation of the word 'slut.' SlutWalks began in Toronto as a response to Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti, speaking at a university health and safety event, saying, "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized." On March 3, 2011 over 3000 people turned out for the first SlutWalk to protest the attitudes reflected in Constable Sanguinetti's remarks; since then, SlutWalks have been held annually in cities all around the globe (SlutWalk Toronto, 2011).

The intent behind the SlutWalks, and reclamation projects more broadly, is complex. As with all protest movements, the organizers need to navigate conflicting concerns. First, the express purpose of protest movements is to challenge the status quo. However, in doing so the organizers have to be careful not to fully alienate outsiders or the movement is unlikely to achieve its ends. Second, protest movements need to be *about* something in order for people to rally around a cause. Yet in doing this the movement risks creating an essentialist construction of the group identity. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the movement needs to direct its limited energy and resources towards the goals that are both achievable and impactful. Yet the more impactful the goal, often the more difficult it is to achieve.

Reclamation projects focus on slurs as a way to navigate these concerns. Reclaiming the slur provides a tangible objective for the group to rally around. Slurs can be an entry point into social practices that license and support embedded systems of oppression. Slurs are emblematic of these broader social systems and use of a slur is itself an instance of subjugation. Reclaiming a particular slur, then, serves as a way to take away a tool that is used to demean and marginalize the targeted group. The slur has historically been used against the group as a whole, and so it's in everyone's interests to take away this harmful tool. Reclamation projects focus on changing social norms and discursive conventions: this kind of project can be massively impactful. Yet by focusing on slurs, it avoids overt confrontation with hegemonic power structures that often prompts crushing backlash from outsiders. While reclamation of a derogatory term doesn't dismantle the entire oppressive system, it may nonetheless be a powerful step along the way. These projects, however, are not without controversy.

Critics, from both outside of and within the targeted group, raise concerns about whether reclamation is the appropriate project on which to focus limited resources of time, energy, and social capital. Some critics raise the worry that reclamation isn't *possible* to achieve. These critics fall into two camps: those who believe the project is a misuse of resources because reclamation is *never* conceptually possible and those who believe reclamation of the particular slur is too *practically difficult* as to be unattainable. If the first position is correct, then reclamation projects may succeed in things such as increasing group cohesion and raising awareness of oppressive social norms targeted at the group, but will never succeed *qua* reclamation of the term. I believe this position is misguided; the seemingly successful re-appropriation of the word 'queer' lends weight to this belief. However, I'm not going to give an argument for the conceptual possibility of reclamation here. Rather, in this paper I'm going to start from the assumption that reclamation is at least conceptually possible. This assumption, however, still leaves open the concern from the second position, that reclamation of a particular term is too practically difficult as to be unattainable.

Whether reclamation is practically attainable, and beyond that, whether it is the proper subject of a movement's resources isn't a simple question. The answer to this will always be deeply contextual and necessarily dependent on the specific slur being reclaimed, those engaging in the reclamation project, and the complex web of social norms, practices, and structures in which the targeted group and the term itself are enmeshed. In order to fully understand the potential benefits and risks of reclamation, we need a more complete understanding of the performative structure of reclamation projects themselves. Only with a robust understanding of what reclamation projects are *doing*, and their very real potential for both benefit and harm, can individual reclamation endeavors be properly evaluated.

In this paper I lay out the pragmatic structure of reclamation projects. I argue that reclamation projects face hazards distinct from more familiar types of protest. Whereas other forms of protest may fail to bring about their intended result, instances of reclamation projects can fail to be understood *as* transgressive acts at all. Even when not understood as transgressive, though, the speech act still has pragmatic force. The way the act *is* taken up determines the force of the act, even when this force is contrary from the original intent of the speaker. When attempts at reclamation fail, context and convention lead a hearer to give uptake to the speech act as deploying a traditional use of the slur. The force of this traditional use is to validate and re-entrench the very norms the act was intended to subvert. This is the precarious structure of reclamation projects: when successful, reclamation *is* the subversion of powerful mechanisms of oppression, but when unsuccessful, the act has the ironic force of constituting mechanisms of oppression. Reclamation, on my account, is conceptually possible, practically difficult, and pragmatically *precarious*.

1. Socially embedded slurs

At their core, slurs target individuals or groups of people in virtue of their membership in a particular social group. Young notes, "A social group is a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forces, practices, or ways of life. Members of a group have a specific affinity for one another because of their similar experience or way of life, which prompts them to associate more with one another than with those not identified with the group, or in a different way" (Young, 1990, 43). Social groups can be constituted along race, gender, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, or any

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number of other identity features. That slurs target people *qua* social group membership is one of the features that differentiate slurs from insults or accusations.

It's well recognized that slurs do something more than simply refer to members of the particular social group, though exactly what that 'something more' may be is contested. Tirrell has argued that slurs license certain derogatory inferences about a group (Tirrell, 1999, 2012), while Camp proposes that these terms signal allegiance to, and license others to take up, a particularly hateful perspective (Camp, 2013). Potts and Williamson, among others, hold that the nature of slurs is best understood as a matter of conventional implicature (Potts, 2005; Williamson, 2009), and Anderson and Lepore together argue that this 'something more' should be understood in terms of slurs' taboo status (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a, 2013b). For the purposes of this paper, I remain agnostic about the best way to understand the nature of slurs themselves. Here, I am interested in the ways in which these terms fit in to our social practices. Regardless of the particulars of the view, there's general agreement that slurs are importantly connected to social norms that play a central role in the subordination of the targeted group. That is, slurs both draw on and re-entrench oppressive social norms.

Slurs draw on social networks of oppression, discrimination, or subordination. Tirrell argues that this social embeddedness serves as one way to differentiate deeply derogatory terms from other negative terms (Tirrell, 2012). One way to illustrate this is through the contrast between 'nigger' and 'whitey:' both are pejorative terms targeting individuals in virtue of their membership in a racial group. Though 'whitey' is certainly pejorative, it doesn't connect up with a long standing practice of systematic dehumanization, marginalization, and exclusion from participation in social spaces. 'Nigger,' on the other hand, does have such a history and its use continues to draw on and endorse such practices today (Jeshion, 2013; Rahman, 2012). On this account, 'whitey' fails to be a deeply derogatory term, while 'nigger' is one.

Slurs do more than draw on oppressive social norms. Their use also constitutes and re-entrenches these oppressive systems. One way this happens is through the deployment of slurs in *speech acts*. We do more with speech than convey meaning; Austin introduces the idea that speaking is also an action that can constitute normative changes (Austin, 1962). Austin argues that speech acts, which he terms *performative* utterances, are significant beyond their truth or falsity; they *do* things. When I tell my friend who is on their way to get coffee, "Gee, I sure could use some coffee now, too," I've done several things. First, I've *reported* on my desires. Second, I've *brought into being* a new reason for my friend to bring me back coffee. And third (if my friend is truly a good friend!), I will eventually *get* a cup of coffee as a result of my speech act. So, we can do many things, and many things at once, with our speech. Performatives don't merely report on the world; they also constitute the reality they are describing (Austin, 1979). That is, they bring into being real normative changes. The *pragmatic force* of a speech act is the normative change wrought by that speech act (Kukla, 2012). This change can be multifaceted and temporally extended–the change needn't happen all in the same moment.

Exercitives are a type of performative that confer or deny rights to a person or group of people. Slurs deployed in speech acts often function as exercitives; they create and re-entrench social norms under which members of the targeted group are subordinated, marginalized, or degraded (McGowan, 2012) So, Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti's remark that, "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized," both drew on systems of patriarchal power under which women are subordinated to men and are denied sexual agency, *and* it helped to constitute this social reality in which women *are* subordinate to men, women who dress or behave in so-called 'provocative' ways are denigrated, and survivors of sexual violence are cast as responsible for their own victimization.

Of course, an individual utterance typically has limited normative power. While some deployments of slurs are issued by speakers inhabiting official positions of authority, and thus are able to wield far reaching power, most often slurs are deployed in everyday non-official speech acts.[1] The real power comes from the ubiquity of awareness and usage of the slur. Butler has pointed out that it's the repetition of an act that constitutes it as a norm and as normal. This persistent use constitutes the slur as having entrenched social power (Butler, 1997). The more the slur is deployed, the more power it *has* and the greater power is has to *draw on*, thus further re-entrenching the slur's powerful status.[2]

Not only do derogatives constitute harmful social norms, they also license further harmful behavior. Tirrell describes this feature of derogatory terms as being "action engendering" (Tirrell, 2012). The social norms constituted by use of the slur are the scaffolding within which we perform our daily activities. These norms act as a lens through which we see the world, process information, and determine appropriate and desirable behaviors. Use of slurs allows for and endorses certain behaviors that might not otherwise be salient options. Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti's remarks license particular kinds of behavior towards women dressed in so-called 'revealing' attire. Rather than preventing sexual violence, Sanguinetti's comment constituted such women as the appropriate targets of sexual advances and opened up real possibilities for sexual violence to be enacted upon these women. This pervasive threat of violence, whether or not it is instantiated in any particular instance, is itself a form of oppression (Young, 1990). When a slur is deployed, it reifies this threat of violence.

So, slurs deployed in speech acts draw on entrenched systems of social power, constitute oppressive social norms, and open up real possibilities for harmful action directed against those picked out by the slur. Reclamation of the slur serves as a way to disrupt these entwined avenues of social power. Reclamation projects take away a tool used for expressing oppressive power against the targeted group, they remove a method of constituting oppressive norms, and they block off one way by

[1] See Maitra (2012) for a discussion of the role of authority in subordinating speech.

[2] This can be temporally extended: so long as we, as a society, are broadly aware of how a slur has been historically deployed it retains its strength, while if we forget about the slur's history that strength dissipates.

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which harmful actions are licensed against the targeted group. As the reclaimed use of the term becomes more widespread, it further weakens the connection between the term and the pernicious norms that governed its force. Reclamation, then, *is* the subversion of oppressive social norms.

Reclamation, however, can't happen in a vacuum. These projects can only occur in conjunction with other forms of protest and subversion. Various forms of social change work together in a feedback loop: changing the norms helps to change the discursive role of the term; changing the discursive role of the term helps to change the norms. This is well evidenced in the reclamation of 'queer:' US lesbian and gay activists engaged in various strategies to change the prevailing view of homosexuality. This allowed space for 'queer' as a positive term. 'Queer' as an identity descriptor then helped to normalize non-heteronormative identities.

Slurs, then, are deeply and intricately socially embedded. They draw on, constitute, and support oppressive norms, and reclaiming a slur *is* the subversion–at least in part–of these norms. However, though this is important groundwork, it doesn't yet shed light on the performative structure of reclamation. In order to see this performative structure, we first need a better sense of the pragmatic force of speech acts.

2. Pragmatic force and discursive distortions

The pragmatic force of a speech act is the normative change wrought by that speech act. As noted earlier, speech acts are multifaceted: a single speech act can do many things. The pragmatic force of the act encompasses all the normative change wrought by the speech act, both the changes occurring in the moment of the utterance and those that occur farther down the line. Austin argues that speech acts have three parts: the *locution*, or surface grammar of the utterance, the *perlocution*, or the effects brought about by the utterance, and the *illocution*, which is the action constituted by the utterance (Austin, 1979). In speech acts deploying slurs, the slur is a part of the locution of the act. The locution of the speech act sometimes, but not always, points to the type of illocutionary act performed by the speech act. "Please turn your papers in by Friday," has the surface grammar of a request, but when issued by a professor to her students is properly a command: the professor has the appropriate authority for this illocution, and so her students have only one normatively appropriate option: to adhere to the perlocutionary force and turn in their papers by the due date. If, on the other hand, the professor says to her friend, "Please come to my house for dinner tonight," though the surface grammar looks similar to the order to the students, in this case she has issued an invitation, one that her friend can appropriately accept or decline. As seen here, the type of speech act doesn't always determine the perlocutionary effect of the speech act; a given illocution can lead to different perlocutionary effects. Similarly, various kinds of illocutions can be used to achieve a single desired perlocutionary end: the professor can order her friend, or entreat her friend, or bribe her friend, all to achieve the desired outcome of having that friend at dinner. Finally, the force of speech acts can be multiply conjunctive. Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti's illocution was *both* an exercitive and a declarative, and the perlocutionary effects are still reverberating in the form of SlutWalks.

In many ways, the force of a speech act is outside the control of the speaker. Austin argues that certain felicity conditions must be in place for an utterance to achieve its intended purpose. To borrow an example from Austin, when a duly designated individual at a ship christening ceremony says, "I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*," that ship is now named the *Queen Elizabeth*, while it wasn't so before (Austin, 1979). However, if "some low type" were to run up to the ship, grab a champagne bottle out of the duly appointed person's hand, smash it against the ship and say, "I name this ship the *Generalissimo Stalin*," it would not be the case that the ship is called the *Generalissimo Stalin*. The interloper did not meet the necessary conditions for christening the ship, and the speech act did not have the intended pragmatic force of christening the ship with a new name. So, certain conditions must be in place for a speaker to achieve the intended force with their speech.

The uptake a speech act receives determines the pragmatic force of the speech act: both the illocutionary and the perlocutionary force are dependent on how others take up the utterance. That is, a speech act can only do things insofar as people recognize it as doing something and act on that recognition. Of course, though, uptake of a speech act isn't simply up to the whim of the hearer. Rather, we rely on a complex set of conventions to give meaning to linguistic moves (Kukla, 2012). Social context and discursive convention play significant roles in how a speech act is taken up. These conventions govern when something ought properly be taken as a command or request, as an assertion or an expression of emotion. Awareness of micro contexts further helps us to refine our discursive sensibilities: subtle norms brought to salience in a particular context may shift the proper uptake of a speech act.

Sometimes a speaker is unable to perform speech acts they seem, on the surface, to be perfectly entitled to perform. Langton terms this *illocutionary disablement*[3] (Langton, 1993). Here, a speaker is unable to receive uptake as performing the intended type of speech act. Langton draws on pornography to illustrate this phenomenon: subordinative pornography, she claims, constitutes social norms by which women's sexual refusals cannot be properly recognized as such. On this account, pornography is a kind of speech act and the illocutionary force of pornography is to constitute social norms under which women lack sexual agency. These norms set discursive conventions whereby women's sexual refusals are unintelligible *as* refusals. It's not simply that the refusals are unheard or ignored, but rather that they aren't recognized as refusals *at all*. When this occurs, Langton argues, women have been *silenced*.

[3] While I use Langton's original terminology in this paper for purposes of clarity, in general I recommend referring to this concept as 'illocutionary disenablement' so as to avoid ableist connotations.

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Langton is quite right to say that in these cases a speaker is unable to do what she intends with her words. However, she is blurring together two importantly distinct kinds of illocutionary disablement: illocutionary *silencing* and illocutionary *distortion*. For the most part Langton, and the many others who have taken up her work, implicitly focuses on illocutionary *silencing*.[4] In these cases the speech act isn't taken as *any* kind of illocutionary act at all: it has no pragmatic force. In the case of sexual refusals, the speech act is neither unheard nor ignored, yet it doesn't receive uptake from a hearer *as* anything–it's akin to screaming into the wind.

Yet not all failed speech acts completely lack pragmatic force. Often, speech still does things–often powerful and important things–even when the changes wrought by the act are not those intended by the speaker. These are instances of what I term illocutionary *distortion*: when a speech act is taken up as a different type of illocutionary act than that intended by the speaker. To return to the case of sexual refusals, pornography can set up gendered norms in which women are understood to 'play hard to get' as a form of sexual encouragement. In these contexts, a woman's sexual refusal isn't taken as *nothing*, but instead as a kind of encouragement and participation. That is, the force of her speech is coopted and turned against her, and to claim she is *silenced* paints an incomplete picture; it ignores the real and harmful pragmatic force of her words. To have her speech turned against her is an importantly different kind of disempowerment than to not be recognized as speaking at all. We need recognition of both illocutionary silencing and illocutionary distortion in order to have an appropriately rich conceptual framework of the ways in which illocution can fail.

Most of the time it's clear how a speech act ought properly be taken up and the speaker's intent aligns with the uptake it receives. Sometimes, however, a hearer must navigate competing discursive norms: different sets of norms would yield different, yet normatively appropriate, understandings of the illocution performed (Kukla, 2012). So, to return once again to Langton's example, explicit norms about the right of sexual refusal yield one kind of uptake of a woman's intended refusal, while the social norms constituted by subordinative pornography yield an entirely different result. Sometimes features of a speaker's identity will do this work of calling to salience one set of discursive norms over another (Kukla, 2012). Here, the woman's identity *as a woman* intersects with the norms constituted by the pornography to lead a hearer to take up her refusal as encouragement. The point is that both official and unofficial social norms and practices work to govern our discursive conventions, and these various sets of practices can come into conflict. Here, it substantially matters which norms the hearer is being guided by. In these cases where the governing discursive conventions are underdetermined, distortions are especially likely. Reclamation projects necessarily take place in these contexts of underdetermined discursive norms.

3. Performative structure of reclamation

Reclamation projects are made up of myriad individual speech acts in which the slur is deployed; in these acts the speaker intends for the slur to be either a neutral or positive descriptor. It's not enough for the *speech act* to be intended as a positive; what matters is the way the term is being deployed in the speech act. So, while "Don't worry, you're not a slut," is a positive reassurance, this deployment of 'slut' relies on the traditional discursive role of the term. In contrast, while "You jerk, you stole that money from the Queer Resource Center!" expresses a negative accusation, 'queer' is being deployed as a bare descriptor of non-heteronormative identity. What matters is the intended role of the term in the speech act. Sometimes these acts are overtly positioned as part of a reclamation project and sometimes they are not; speakers don't need to explicitly intend to participate in reclamation projects for their speech to be part of the movement.

These projects are directed at altering the discursive conventions governing a hearer's uptake of speech acts that deploy slurs; this is the far-reaching perlocutionary effect of reclamation. Once the reclamation project has fully succeeded, speech acts deploying the erstwhile slur won't have oppressive force in virtue of deploying that term. They will cease to be exercitives constituting oppressive norms, and mere deployment of the slur won't license harmful behavior directed at members of the social group. The purpose of reclamation projects, *qua* reclamation, is to bring into being new discursive conventions governing uptake of speech acts deploying the slur. This process of bringing about new discursive conventions makes reclamation projects inherently precarious.

New discursive conventions don't simply spring into widespread usage; they need to be brought into being and propagated. The illocutionary act of reclamation is to constitute these new conventions and is an act of transgression against the existing social norms. In order to bring about these new discursive conventions, speakers must deploy the slur in contexts where the new conventions have not yet taken root. Typically, this means deploying the slur either in conversations with people outside the group seeking to reclaim the term or in contexts where these outsiders may hear, and give uptake to, the speech act. In these contexts, hearers will not yet have the non-oppressive discursive norms to govern the uptake they give the speech act. Tirrell points out that in these instances hearers will take the speaker to be using term in the traditional way (Tirrell, 1999). While this may be true, it paints an incomplete picture: it's not merely that the term is being misconstrued, but that the speech act in which the term is deployed is *distorted*. In these instances, regardless of what else the speech act is doing, part of its pragmatic force is to constitute mechanisms of oppression.

Some hearers, of course, will be able to recognize that speakers engaging in reclamation are doing something atypical with their speech. Lacking other guiding conventions, though, these hearers will often continue to rely on already entrenched

[4] For further discussions of Langton's arguments regarding pornography and silencing, see: Hornsy and Langton 1998; Langton and West 1999; Bird 2002; Maitra 2004, 2009; Bianchi, 2008; Dotson 2011; McGowan, Adelman, et al. 2011; Mikkola 2011.

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discursive conventions to structure uptake of the speech act as the oppressive exercitive of old. Other times, speaker identity will help to resolve discursive under determination: if the speaker is a member of the group targeted by the slur, this may help to call into salience the intended set of conventions so that a speaker may give the intended uptake to the speech act. It's not simply that the speaker's identity gives them warrant to issue the erstwhile slur, as Anderson and Lepore propose, but rather that due to this identity the speaker may be positioned to perform speech acts that others cannot (Anderson and Lepore, 2013). Yet even this isn't assured and it especially is not in the early stages of the project when the nascent set of new conventions is largely unknown. In these cases, despite the intent of those engaging in reclamation, the force of their speech is distorted; rather than subverting the pre-existing social norms, their speech will continue to constitute the oppression of those targeted by the slur.

One might hope to allay this concern by performing reclamation only within the discursive community trying to reclaim the term. In these contexts, most people know of the intended new conventions, even if those conventions have not yet fully solidified. The explicit knowledge of and commitment to the aims of the reclamation project ideally override preexisting discursive norms. In these contexts, hearers would be able to properly give uptake to the speech act as transgressive. On this model, reclamation would only take place within an isolated discursive community; either speakers would fall back to adhering to the traditional conventions when interacting with outsiders, or they would not interact with outsiders at all.

Unfortunately, this strategy fails. The first reason for this is a practical concern: few, if any, social groups are entirely isolated, and especially not linguistically. Most people belong to multiple complex and overlapping discursive communities, and move between these communities fluidly everyday. A person might employ professional terminology while with co-workers, slang and references to inside jokes while amongst various friend groups or family, and yet still other specialized language while with her sports teammates. For most people the boundaries of these micro communities are blurry: colleagues discuss work while outsiders can overhear them at cafes and bars, friends chat at parties surrounded by lesser known acquaintances and invite newcomers into their conversations, and the lexicon from one micro community is unwittingly deployed in others. Our discursive practices often spill over from one sphere of life to another, whether we intend them to or not. When this happens, our speech is nonetheless heard and taken up, and can impact hearers regardless of whether they are the intended recipient of the speech.

However, practical considerations aside, a reclamation project would not be able to achieve the desired ends if it were entirely discursively isolated. A central goal of reclamation is to subvert oppressive social norms used against those targeted by the term. This subversion can *only* occur by interacting with people outside the group engaged in reclamation. If discursive conventions are subverted only within a particular community, then outsiders will continue to draw on, constitute, and re-entrench these oppressive social norms, which have a profound and real effect on those who are targeted by them. To participate in reclamation centrally involves performing speech acts in contexts where the discursive rules governing the uptake of the speech act have not yet been changed. This means deploying the erstwhile slur in contexts where either the ruling discursive conventions are in flux or where they lead the hearer to give uptake to the speech act as a traditional deployment of the slur.

This, then, is the performative structure of reclamation projects: the project is composed of many individual speech acts which must, at least some of the time, be performed in contexts of discursive flux. When these speech acts are successful, they have the pragmatic force of subverting mechanisms of oppression. Yet when they fail, they ironically constitute the very thing they were intended to subvert. When this happens, speakers from the targeted group have the force of the their speech turned against them; what may be intended as an act of liberatory protest may instead work to constitute harm to the speaker. This risk is unavoidable; it is part of the very structure of reclamation. Reclamation projects are necessarily precarious.

4. Power and limits of reclamation

I began this paper by raising concerns about whether reclamation projects are an appropriate use of time and energy for a protest group. Even starting from the assumption that reclamation is conceptually possible, the answer to this question is by no means clear. If I'm right, then reclamation projects face particular challenges due to their performative structure. These structural hazards are distinct from traditional concerns about the difficulties of implementation: on that view, if done at the right time, in the right place, and by the right people, presumably reclamation could be a safe and stable affair. The hazards I've pointed out, though, aren't avoidable: they're built into the performative structure of the project. When they fail, reclamation attempts have the ironic force of constituting mechanisms of oppression.

This raises concerns for marginalized groups working to fight against mechanisms of oppression. Reclamation, as I have pointed out, can only be successful insofar as it is connected to other forms of social protest. If these other forms of protest aren't already in place, then the attempted reclamation project is likely to have the unintended force of reifying the pernicious norms the group is working to fight against. Even when these other forms of protest are in place, though, reclamation ought to be approached carefully. Since the hazards of reclamation can never be fully avoided, this raises real risks for already marginalized groups. In some cases, the hazard of further entrenching their subordination may be too dangerous to take on. Subordinated groups that have social capital on other fronts, such as the upper-middleclass white gay and lesbian communities who drove the reclamation of 'queer', may be situated such that they are able to face these risks–while others may not be so positioned. Additionally, the group targeted by a slur is complex, made up of people with intersectional identities and different kinds and degrees of social power. This point was eloquently raised by a group of Black women responding to

Please cite this article in press as: Herbert, C., Precarious projects: the performative structure of reclamation, *Language Sciences* (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2015.05.002

the SlutWalk movement: "As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves 'slut' without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is. We don't have the privilege to play on destructive representations burned in our collective minds, on our bodies and souls for generations" (An Open Letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk, 2011). Not only are slurs directed differently at people depending on the particulars of their identity, but these same particulars of identity make real, lived differences in the unavoidable risks of reclamation.

Anderson offers a potential resolution to this problem: while he recognizes that reclamation may unintentionally worsen material conditions of those targeted by the term, he believes rejecting reclamation on these grounds wrongly prioritizes certain kinds of harms over others (Anderson, 2015). On his account, the harm of slurs can be sorted into two broad categories: increasing *external constraints*, such as voting restrictions or laws tacitly holding victims of sexual violence accountable for their victimization, and *internal constraints*, which are comprised of the psychological harms and limits to mental development done to the targets of the slur. Anderson argues that reclamation is a form of resistance directed against internal constraints, and that this ought be given priority–even at the risk of increasing external constraints. While I agree that reclamation can be a way to fight against these internalized harms, I believe this view is too simplistic: when the distorted force of reclamation constitutes and licenses harm against the targeted group, the importance of the distinction between internal and external constraints is not clear. Deployment of slurs that license violence increases *both* external constraints, by increasing the real possibility of instantiated violence, and internal constraints, by reifying the psychological damage that comes from the pervasive threat of violence and the knowledge that one is generally seen as an appropriate and consequence-free target of that violence. The pragmatic force of distorted reclamation is complex and multifaceted, and all of this force needs to be taken into account.

The point is not that reclamation ought only be attempted by those who already have social power, but rather that this is one tool, among many others, by which to fight against mechanisms of oppression, and like all tools its uses and limitations need to be properly understood in order for it to be yielded effectively. Whether or not reclamation is a worthwhile project will depend on many things, ranging from what other forms of resistance are already in place, to the embodied social positions of those who would primarily be engaging in the reclamation, to the degree and kinds of risks already faced by those targeted by the term. In assessing all this, there needs to be an awareness that while individuals endorsing the reclamation project may be situated such that the hazards of the project are something they practically can take on, reclamation projects are broad and the performative force of distorted attempts at reclamation impacts other members of the targeted group who may not be so fortunately situated. While the predominantly white women who started the SlutWalk movement believed themselves to be able to take on the risks of the project, it's not clear that the leaders considered the embodied situation of others who are targeted by the term. While ideally all will benefit from the subversion of oppressive norms, to disregard the real potential for increased harm and danger is recklessly naïve.

Reclamation is intrinsically hazardous. Yet it can also be worthwhile: even when reclamation projects fail *as* reclamation, they still may accomplish good. They may increase group cohesion, bring awareness to the cause, or provide impetus for other sorts of resistance. At its best, reclamation makes real differences in the lived situation of all those who have been targeted by the slur. And when successful, reclamation of derogatory terms *is* the subversion of powerful mechanisms of oppression. While it will always be precarious, it may on occasion be well worth the risks.

Acknowledgments

This paper is an offshoot of work presented at the 2014 Edgington Lectures on Race and Gender Hate Speech and the 2014 meeting of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology. Many thanks to my extraordinary co-presenters at these conferences, and the rich questions and feedback I received from audience members. This project has particularly benefited from conversations with and feedback from Rebecca Kukla, Michael Barnes, Nabina Liebow, and Katharine Jenkins.

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Please cite this article in press as: Herbert, C., Precarious projects: the performative structure of reclamation, *Language Sciences* (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2015.05.002

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