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CONFINING WORDS: AN ANALYSIS OF MISOGYNISTIC SLURS AND THEIR SUBORDINATING FORCE[1]

abstract

This paper aims to examine misogynistic slurs, focusing mainly on 'slut' and 'bitch', and distinguishing them from racial or homophobic slurs. Three critical elements are explored in depth: the target, the presumed neutral counterpart, and the unsuccessful attempts at reclamation. Through this analysis, challenges emerge in categorizing such insults as authentic slurs. The intent of this work is to explore the origin of these problems, establishing that, despite differences, gendered insults possess intrinsic characteristics of slurs. If they indeed qualify as slurs, they also hold the power to subordinate, significantly influencing gender discrimination.

keywords

slurs, misogyny, subordination, gender-based discrimination

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyse misogynistic slurs, demonstrating that they qualify as slurs despite their unique characteristics. To achieve this, I have structured the work as follows. In §2, I will focus on slurs in general, discussing their nature and particularly emphasizing their subordinating role. In §3 I will explore why misogynist slurs might not initially seem to qualify as actual slurs: the target is unclear (§3.1), there appears to be no neutral counterpart (§3.2), and attempts at reappropriation have been unsuccessful (§3.3). In §4, I will address each of the points from §3, offering explanation for the ambiguous target due to the nature of misogynistic speech (§4.1), questioning the neutrality of the so-called neutral counterparts (§4.2), and justifying the lack of success in reappropriation attempts (§4.3). If misogynistic slurs are indeed slurs, then they have the power to subordinate. In §5, we will examine some examples to better understand this concept.

2. Slurs: what are they?

2.1. Definitions and characteristics

Slurs are not the same as generic insults. Terms like 'asshole' or 'bastard' convey a negative attitude towards an individual, regardless of the social group they belong to. Slurs, by contrast, target individuals as members of a specific social group and thus carry the potential to simultaneously demean the individual and the social group in question. Target groups are identified on the basis of various (real or perceived) social traits, such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability.

Let us take a closer look at the key characteristics of slurs: (i) slurs tend to have a neutral counterpart, (ii) they are offensive independently from the speaker's mental states, but their offensiveness may vary across time, (iii) they have a "taboo-like" character and seem to lose derogatory potential in certain specific contexts in which mention is generally considered permissible (Bianchi, 2021).

In this article, I won't extensively delve into slurs in general, but it's crucial to clarify the concept of a neutral counterpart and explore the phenomenon of reclamation.

A neutral counterpart of a slur is a non-derogatory correlate that is used to refer to the same social group. For instance, 'homosexual' or 'gay' serve as neutral counterparts to the derogatory 'faggot'. The neutral counterpart shares the descriptive component of the slur but lacks the expressive (evaluative, derogatory) one. This feature sets slurs apart from generic insults. Since generic insults are not designed to denigrate someone *because of a category they belong to*, there are no neutral counterparts for terms like 'asshole' or 'motherfucker'

(Cappelen&Dever, 2019). It is important to note, however, that, while many slurs have neutral counterparts, not all slurs do (as we shall see when speaking specifically of gendered slurs).

Slurs are generally perceived as *taboo words*: their use is considered inappropriate across a wide variety of contexts. But there are contexts in which it is generally considered permissible to mention slurs: citational, educational and reclamation contexts. Reclamation (or re-appropriation) refers to cases in which members of the target group employ slurs to express intimacy, solidarity, and to distance themselves from non-members, thereby reinforcing group identity bonds (Bianchi, 2021). We will consider this phenomenon in more detail when discussing the terms 'slut' and 'bitch' below.

2.2. Slurs as subordinating speech acts

In this Section, I will look at what slurs may be used to do. In particular, I will focus on Rae Langton's idea that slurs subordinate. Before doing so, however, some preliminaries on speech act theory are needed.

J.L. Austin (1962) famously stated that when we speak, we perform actions with words: we make promises to one another, offer advice, compel silence, and more. Contemporary philosophers often draw upon Austin's theory to examine hate speech. The 'saying is doing' motto of Austin's philosophy applies to hate speech as it does to any other kind of speech (Langton, 2018).

Austin classifies speech acts into three distinct categories: locutionary (what is said), illocutionary (what is done with words), and perlocutionary (the resulting consequences or effects). Imagine that Sonia tells Mark:

(1) Shut up!

The locutionary act is the act of saying something and essentially captures the literal meaning of the words used. In (1), the locutionary act is the act of uttering the words 'shut up'. However, in saying "Shut up", Sonia performs not only a locutionary act but also an illocutionary act – namely, the illocutionary act of giving an order or command to Mark, explicitly instructing him to be quiet. Furthermore, Sonia's words can lead to a range of consequences: they can offend Mark, make him angry, leave him stunned, and so forth. These various outcomes are what Austin referred to as the perlocutionary act. The perlocutionary act encompasses the effects or reactions that the illocutionary act may trigger in the listener or recipient of the speech.

Subordinating illocutions, in Langton's view, are acts that classify certain individuals as inferior, legitimate discrimination against them, and unjustly deprive them of important powers and rights (Langton, 1993).

Acts of subordination can be distinguished into three different types (Bianchi, 2021; Langton et al., 2012):

- Subordinating acts with an *institutional* character: these are formal acts by which authoritative speakers issue policies, directives, regulations of public premises, or even laws with a discriminatory character. For example, 'Whites only' signs placed at the entrance of restaurants in 1930s Alabama serve as an illustration of this type of act of subordination.
- Subordinating acts with the character of an *attack*: these acts are characteristically, though not exclusively, carried out via instances of second person hate speech, intended to injure or harm the interlocutor.
- Subordinating acts with the character of *propaganda*: these acts are characteristically, but not exclusively, performed via third-person uses of hate speech. An example is the statement "Muslims are terrorists". The focus is on the addressees and audience (rather

than the target): the speaker presents them a certain perspective on Muslims, and invites them to share it.

Claudia Bianchi (2021) has proposed to conceive of slurs as *markers of subordinating illocutionary force*: when a speaker employs a slur in a standard context (not re-appropriative, citational, or educational), they invoke a subordinating procedure independently of their actual beliefs, attitudes, or intentions.

Slurs are rarely linked to institutional speech acts, as they violate social norms and are taboo. They serve as linguistic acts of aggression, like shouting 'Faggot!' or 'Nigger!' to degrade rather than convey information, constituting verbal violence.

Furthermore, the use of slurs may serve ideological and propagandistic purposes. Using slurs and hate speech does not only reflect the speaker's (racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.) prejudices, but actively promotes these discriminatory attitudes. For instance, slurs targeting gay men operate as tools to discipline those outside the target group, contributing to the perpetuation of toxic masculinity ideals. Adolescents may feel pressured to conform to these ideals to avoid being labelled as 'fags'.

Now that we have outlined what slurs are and how they can subordinate, let's proceed to analyse gendered insults. Do they fall within the category of slurs? And if so, do they also have the power to subordinate?

3. 'Slut' and 'bitch': the differences with other slurs

Before delving into the discussion, it is important to clarify the terminology I will use. In this chapter, I will avoid referring to gendered insults as either 'misogynist slurs' or 'sexist slurs', as the distinction between sexism and misogyny will be introduced later. Until then, I will employ the more generic term 'gendered slurs', even though it may not be the most accurate descriptor.

3.1. Target

One of the problems when analysing gendered slurs such as 'slut' and 'bitch' is being able to identify the target.

In fact, we said that slurs target an individual as belonging to a specific social group. A homosexual man is singled out as a 'fag' simply because he is a member of the LGBT community, and in insulting him, the homophobe denigrates the entire category.

This is not the case for gendered slurs. 'Slut' and 'bitch' are supposedly slurs for women in general, but that's not entirely true. While there might be people who think that 'all women are bitches' or 'all women are sluts', this is not the way these words are generally used.

The fact that these terms are not used with regard to the entire female category is closely linked to the problem of the neutral counterpart. It becomes nearly impossible to separate one problem from the other because the neutral counterpart plays a crucial role in identifying the social group to which the target is perceived to belong. However, the difficulty arises in pinpointing a term that can function as a neutral counterpart precisely because the target is not clearly defined. Let us look at it in more detail.

3.2. The absence of neutral counterparts

In §2.1, we discussed the characteristics of slurs, and one of them involves having a neutral counterpart. For example, the neutral counterpart of 'faggot' is 'homosexual man'. As we shall see in §4.2, this can be complicated because it is not certain that a neutral counterpart succeeds in being actually neutral.

Elisabeth Camp (2013) claims that this contrast with a neutral correlate is part of what makes a word a slur: in Camp's framework, having a neutral counterpart is not only a characteristic of slurs, but an indispensable feature. If we accept her view, talking about

gendered slurs becomes somewhat problematic, because their neutral counterparts are not easily identifiable.

'Slut' is typically directed towards women whose perceived sexual behaviour is deemed to be reprehensible. Often, it is used when people assume or imagine that a woman engages in sexual activity with multiple partners. Sometimes, it is employed in a derogatory manner towards sex workers. However, it's important to note that considering 'prostitute' as the neutral equivalent of 'slut' is limiting, as the slur is not exclusively directed at sex workers. Even when it is, this is primarily due to their involvement in certain sexual activities rather than their profiting from it. 'Woman who has sex with a lot of partners' or 'woman who is promiscuous' don't work as neutral counterparts either. Why? Because they are not *neutral*. Being a woman who has sex with a lot of partners is something that is strongly socially disapproved of, and it isn't bereft of pejorative associations (Ashwell, 2016). To be fully neutral, a term must not bring to mind or be associated with anything that is disapproved of and must be as close as possible to being purely descriptive. 'Woman who has sex with a lot of partners' isn't purely descriptive, because it will apply (or fail to apply) to some women depending on what is taken to be a generally appropriate number of partners, and this changes according to both the social context and the open-mindedness of the speaker. Moreover, the term 'slut' is often used to slur a woman not only because of how many partners she has, but also because of who these partners are and what she does with them. Not to mention that it is sometimes used merely because of the way a woman dresses and poses, the photos she posts on social networks and the number of male friends she has.

'Bitch' is typically directed towards women that "are more boisterous, more assertive, more self-concerned" than one would expect (Ashwell, 2016, p. 235). A man can be strong-minded or self-centred, yet the term 'bitch' will not apply to him. 'Bitch' is a slur referring only to women and implicitly conveying how a woman *should* behave, according to a sexist culture. The explanation I have offered as to what 'bitch' means may pass itself off as neutral, but in fact it is not. It includes not only a descriptive component, but also a normative (evaluative) one. Adjectives like 'boisterous' or 'assertive' are not neutral counterparts like 'African American', 'Chinese' or 'homosexual'.

As one can see, gendered slurs do not seem to have clear neutral counterparts. According to a theory like Camp's, which takes having a neutral counterpart as a prerequisite for a term to be a slur, 'bitch' and 'slut' are not slurs.

3.3. The attempts at reclamation

Re-appropriative or reclaimed uses of slurs have been interpreted as *ironic* uses, in which the attitude communicated is one of dissociation, distancing or disapproval (Bianchi, 2014). Reclaiming a slur involves echoing its offensive use while dissociating from the conveyed attitudes. Sometimes, in protected circumstances and for selected speakers, even an out-group can express dissociation and successfully use a slur in a reclaimed sense.

Slur reclamation is a form of collective resistance. It is used in various contexts: political contexts, in which activists defending the rights of the target group reclaim the use of the slur as a tool of conscious political conflict; friendship contexts, in which members of the target group use reclaimed slurs as a way of bonding; and artistic contexts, in which singers, writers or painters reclaim slurs to subvert dominant socio-cultural norms.

Robin Jeshion (2020) identifies two prominent varieties of slur reclamation: *pride reclamation* and *insular reclamation.* Pride reclamation involves publicly expressing pride in the targeted group as a form of political activism. In contrast, insular reclamation aims to foster camaraderie among target members in response to oppression, without necessarily intending to challenge societal attitudes.

Jeshion outlines the difference between these two types of reclamation by giving concrete examples. 'Black' and 'queer' are cases of pride reclamation, 'nigger' (as used within African American communities) is the clearest example of insular reclamation. 'Bitch', however, lies between the two.

> Throughout the twentieth century, 'bitch' has overwhelmingly been used as a gendered slur: applied to women whose actions, attitudes, demeanor, or social standing defy misogynistic norms, particularly those governing assertive-ness and self-satisfaction. Women and girls are dubbed 'bitches' when they are deemed domineering, strong-minded, independent, and driven (Jeshion, 2020, p. 119).

Inspired by movements like 'Black Power', some feminists tried to reclaim the term. Jo Freeman wrote the 'Bitch Manifesto' in 1968. Being a 'bitch', says the manifesto, isn't something women should be afraid of, but something they should be proud of and embrace, because "bitch is beautiful" (Jeshion, 2020, p. 120). Over the past twenty years, this process of reclamation has branched out in two different directions. On the one hand, the term has been consciously and politically reclaimed. Consider, for example, the 'tough angry bitch' pins used during demonstrations, or song lyrics written by female authors, such as the lyrics of Niki Minaj's "Baddest Bitch" song («I'm a boss ass bitch, bitch, bitch...»). These are attempts at pride-reclamation of 'bitch'. On the other hand, it has been growingly used colloquially between female friends, to express solidarity between strong women, and appreciation of their being independent and outspoken. These are attempts at insular reclamation of 'bitch'.

The reclamation of 'bitch', however, has not been as clear as the reclamation of slurs like 'nigger'. Whether or not out-groups are prohibited from using 'bitch' in the reclaimed sense has rarely been discussed, and the use of the term has not been as strongly politicised. Similar, if not worse, considerations apply to 'slut'. The (controversial) case of *SlutWalks*, a movement born in 2011, constitutes an attempt to reclaim the term 'slut' as a method of deconstructing gender norms that excuse or normalise sexual violence (Herbert, 2015). As I will explore later in §4.3, on this occasion, black women made their voices heard, firmly opposing the newly born movement, which had a significant impact on the project's failure. But beyond this case, there is little evidence of the politicisation of 'slut'.

4. 'Slut' and 'bitch': why can they be considered slurs?

I have already explored the reasons to doubt whether gendered insults qualify as slurs. Now, I will attempt to address each concern individually. Why should these words be considered slurs when there isn't a specific target, a neutral counterpart, and the reclamation rarely, if ever, fully succeed?

4.1. Sexism vs. misogyny: exploring the distinction

The first problem encountered in analysing 'slut' and 'bitch' is defining the ambiguous target. Are these terms directed at women as a whole social category, or do they specifically affect certain types of women? It appears to be the latter. To understand why, we will examine whether these terms are employed within sexist or misogynistic speech. To do this, we need to discern the difference between sexism and misogyny.

In everyday speech, the terms 'misogyny' and 'sexism' are often considered synonymous. In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Kate Manne (2018) claims that this is a mistake and advances an account of how misogyny and sexism differ.

Sexism and misogyny both serve to uphold a patriarchal social order. Manne portrays misogyny as the "law enforcement" arm, policing and enforcing norms. Sexism, in contrast, is the "justificatory" branch, rationalizing patriarchal social relations.

Sexism is often employed to naturalise sex disparities, portraying them as inevitable. It is made up of assumptions, beliefs, stereotypes, and cultural narratives highlighting gender differences and the supposed superiority of men. An example of sexist speech is the systematic use of 'girl' to refer to adult women. This implies that adult women have an inferior status compared to adult men, which, in turn, serves to justify granting men more credibility and authority (Richardson-Self, 2018). Labelling a grown woman as a 'girl' serves not only to deny her adulthood but also to rationalize male paternalistic behaviours.

Sexist ideology asserts male superiority, while misogyny goes further by making a distinction between *good* and *bad* women and actively punishing the latter. Enforcing compliance through coercion and hostile attitudes, misogyny differs from sexism, which shapes beliefs through rational methods.

Manne (2018) stresses that an action need not target all women for it to count as misogynistic. In typical a patriarchal setting, men don't universally target women. They appreciate those serving their interests, like loving wives or devoted moms. Patriarchy associates informal roles with femininity, such as emotional support and care, which women have a social 'ought' to provide within their families, workplaces, and in social life more broadly. When women deviate from these roles and established norms, they frequently encounter misogynistic assaults. Manne's central example to illustrate this is the case of Elliot Rodger.

In May 2014, Elliot Rodger committed a mass shooting in Isla Vista, California, killing six and injuring others before taking his own life. Motivated by a deep-seated hatred toward women, expressed in a manifesto and videos, he felt entitled to attention and affection, growing resentful when rejected by women. He describes "girls" as "throwing themselves" at the "obnoxious brutes" they preferred to him. He chose to attack the "hottest sorority house" of the University of Santa Barbara, to find "every single spoiled, stuck-up blonde slut" he saw inside there.[1] Rodger might not have harboured hostility towards women had they shown him the attention and affection he desired. He directed his hostility towards women who, in his view, were 'bad', because they were engaging in behaviours he disapproved of, such as being promiscuous, and did not give him the attention and care they 'ought to' have given him.

Now that we have distinguished between misogyny and sexism, it is quite easy to realise that gendered slurs are used in misogynistic speech. They lack any justificatory component and do not provide any (alleged) reasons to believe that men are superior to women. As such, they do not qualify as sexist speech. More importantly, though, gendered slurs generally do not target all women, but only those who are perceived as 'bad': those who independently choose what to do with their sexual life or dress freely without following a patriarchal dress code ('slut'); those who are not attracted by men and are perceived as masculine ('dyke'); those who are independent, assertive, and outspoken ('bitch'). The most correct way to define these terms is, then, 'misogynistic slurs'.[2]

However, it would be a mistake to think that misogyny as universal hatred of women never occurs, and that's why Louise Richardson-Self says: «misogyny takes both interdivisional and intradivisional forms» (2018, p. 264). We can talk about interdivisional speech when the target is the entire social group.

The following statement provides an example of *interdivisional* misogynistic speech:

1 Rodger's words are reported in K. Manne, 2018, p. 35.

2 'Dyke' is not really a misogynistic slur, because it more properly concerns a woman's sexual orientation. In spite of this, I have included it in the list, because patriarchal norms hardly allow a woman not to be attracted to men. Sexual orientation may thus be an additional reason why a woman might be considered 'bad'.

(2) I hate women, they are all sluts.[3]

The statement erases the category of 'good women,' leaving only 'bad women' and men. All women are subjected to negative treatment: they are all objects of hatred. However, this isn't the most prevalent form of misogynistic speech women encounter.

Consider this example of *intradivisional* misogynistic speech:

(3) Feminists deserve violence, because only through it will they learn to stay in their place and stop being bitches.

An utterance of this sort aims to exert control over women who defy gender norms and thus are deemed to be 'bad'. It aims to silence them, to pressure them into conforming to societal expectations, and to push them back into "their places". Misogyny predominantly targets feminists, as they are the women who most vigorously challenge and resist patriarchal norms. Richardson-Self claims that utterances like (3) manifest hatred towards the entire female category, because the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' women is exceedingly thin. A woman who is classified as a 'good' woman at a certain time may face hostility and a reversed judgment at a different time. It may only take one action that patriarchal standards consider wrong for your status to change – for you to find yourself a victim of misogynistic reactions. Every woman is vulnerable to misogyny; irrespective of her efforts to conform to social norms, she remains susceptible to being judged as 'bad'. Intradivisional misogynistic speech prescribes patriarchal norms and enforces an unjust social reality that affects *all* women.

In §2.1, I said that generic insults do not typically denigrate someone because of a social category they belong to. And that is why 'slut' and 'bitch' cannot be considered generic insults, because they degrade, dehumanise, and debase the entire group of women, even as they subdivide it: even 'good women' ('non-sluts', 'non-bitches') are not fully worthy of esteem and are not recognized as equal to men within a patriarchal gender order. The volatile, context-dependent nature easily leads from a 'non-slut' judgment to a 'slut' one. All it takes is for a woman to step outside the patriarchal order, even briefly.

The fact that the extension of certain terms (such as 'slut' and 'bitch') does not include all women is not enough to prove that these terms are not slurs, since a term in whose extension only some women fall may serve to keep 'in their place' (and, thus, subordinate) an entire group.

So we have in fact learned something about the way hate speech functions: we know that groups are oppressed in the first instance, and that individuals are oppressed only insofar as they are group members, but we have also learned that hate speech attacks not only individuals as members of groups, but also subsets of those groups (for example 'feminists', 'sluts,' and so on) in order to keep the entire group down. This is true of misogynistic speech, and likely of intradivisional speech targeting other groups too (though perhaps this is far less common) (Richardson-Self, 2018, p. 268).

4.2. Neutral Counterparts: debunking the myth

As mentioned earlier, the target is closely intertwined with the concept of a neutral counterpart. However, is the neutral counterpart truly the determining factor that qualifies a particular term as a slur? While it provides an intuitively clear theoretical framework for understanding slurs, it doesn't imply that every slur has a clear neutral counterpart.

Take, for instance, the term 'dago': a slur used against Italians, Spaniards, and Portuguese ('Southern Europeans'), specifically targeting those perceived as prone to violence

3 This is a real example: the utterance is quoted in L.B. Nielsen, 2000, p. 1055.

(Cappelen&Dever, 2019). In this case, the slur is directed at individuals from South Europe because, according to a certain stereotype, they are deemed prone to violence. This propensity for violence is not a purely descriptive characteristic, it's subjective and not inherently neutral. Questions arise: what makes them violent? How is violence defined in this context? What behaviours are considered violent? For some, being violent might even extend to having a particularly loud tone of voice without necessarily being verbally aggressive.

Any stereotype associated with the victim of discrimination is not objective. That's the point: any so-called neutral counterpart is only partially neutral for this reason. 'African American' may be neutral for a non-racist person, and 'gay' may be neutral for a non-homophobic person. However, for a racist or homophobe, even the neutral counterpart is tainted by certain stereotypes. If Southern Europeans are deemed violent, then Jews may be associated with greed, and gay men might be stereotyped as universally hysterical.

While it is true that expressions such as 'African-American' or 'homosexual' are comparatively more neutral than others, they are not entirely devoid of bias. Thus, the absolute necessity of a neutral counterpart to categorise a slur is called into question.

4.3. Reclamation did not work: why?

So far it has been said that misogynistic slurs, even if they affect certain types of women, are actually a 'danger' to the entire female gender; then it has been questioned that having a neutral counterpart is a fundamental feature of a slur. Thus, there seems to be no doubt that 'slut' and 'bitch' are slurs, despite the differences. The question at this point is: why aren't misogynistic slurs, despite their prevalence and frequency, strongly reclaimed, even just for camaraderie purposes? There could be several reasons. Firstly, some women believe they clearly place themselves outside the category of, for example, 'sluts': they believe the term does not apply to them. Furthermore, women also frequently use these terms to describe other women with certain behaviours, or even to self-identify when judging themselves negatively. A woman can be influenced by social norms shaped by patriarchal values, and thus be inclined to pass judgment on another woman for having multiple partners or for being too independent. If a woman doesn't identify with the descriptions conveyed by these slurs, she might not perceive herself as a potential target (even if she is).

It is notably more challenging to reclaim the term 'slut' than the term 'bitch'. This is because today it is relatively easier (though not always obvious) to embrace and take pride in one's strong character, irreverence, and determination. Conversely, societal prejudices surrounding women's sexual behaviours, often intertwined with prejudices around sex work, remain pervasive and deeply ingrained. Embracing 'slut' may inadvertently reinforce the idea that a woman's sex life defines her, and this makes feminists hesitant to reclaim the term.

When a black man uses the term 'nigger' in a reclaimed way, it is relatively easy for him to decouple the term from its derogatory connotations, or to subvert its negative impact. After all, as a black man, his use of the term will hardly suggest or imply that being black is something despicable. However, this isn't quite the case with the term 'slut'. Its content, whether explicit or implicit, delineates a set of behaviours, characteristics, and choices that a woman should not display. Unlike sexual orientation and skin colour, which are not a matter of choice, dating a certain partner or wearing a certain piece of clothing are choices. Therefore, when a woman uses the term 'slut', it may not be that clear whether she is distancing herself from the underlying misogyny associated with the term. Using the term 'slut' while being a woman carries the risk of inadvertently contributing to a belief system that restricts women's possibility to freely express themselves without consequences. In terms of social impact and communicative effectiveness, a woman's attempt to reclaim the term 'slut' doesn't always succeed in undermining the demeaning power of the slur, unless the

message she wants to convey is made overt and explicit by the context (imagine, for example, a feminist activist holding a placard reading 'Slut' during a feminist demonstration).

What I have just described does not only apply to misogynistic slurs. As we said in §2.2, slurs directed against homosexual men affect those who do not conform to a certain ideal of masculinity and it is true that the term 'fag' is sometimes used by homophobes towards individuals who may not be gay but are perceived as such. This means that 'fag', too, slurs people not only because of who they are, but also because of their clothing choices, the genres of films they watch and of books they read (with men watching and enjoying romantic comedies being sometimes slurred as 'fags'), or the friendships they choose to have. I believe, however, that when 'fag' is used in this way, it ceases to be solely or primarily about sexual orientation and becomes more about gender roles. According to the offender, a man should not have feminine traits, and if he does, he deserves to be the victim of verbal violence.

In addition, it is worth stressing that the group targeted by a slur is always complex, made up of people with intersectional identities and different kinds and degrees of social power. As I mentioned earlier, in the context of the *SlutWalk* movement, a group of black women pointed out that black women do not have the privilege to call themselves 'slut' without validating the already strong narrative that sees black women as prostitutes.

In the United States, where slavery constructed Black female sexualities, Jim Crow kidnappings, rape and lynchings, gender misrepresentations, and more recently, where the Black female immigrant struggle combine, 'slut' has different associations for Black women. We do not recognize ourselves nor do we see our lived experiences reflected within *SlutWalk* and especially not in its brand and its label (Black Women's Blueprint, 2015, p. 9).

In conclusion, reclaiming misogynistic slurs appears to be a formidable challenge, given their unique characteristics and the pervasive influence of misogyny in our society.

5. Misogynistic slurs as subordinating speech acts: some examples.

Having established that misogynist slurs are slurs in the proper sense and having enucleated their characteristics, some concrete examples will be discussed here to show how these slurs can act as subordination devices.

In §2.3, we have analysed slurs as subordinating speech acts: they are markers of illocutionary force and contribute to creating a climate of hatred and hostility independently of the speaker's intentions.

Misogynistic slurs are no exception: they classify members of the target group as inferior, legitimise discriminatory behaviours towards them, and deprive them of important rights and powers. Misogynistic slurs, like other slurs, manifest as acts with aggressive and propagandistic characteristics. An alarming example involves the use of slurs to label (alleged) victims of rape cases, acting as both second-person attacks when used in front of victims and third-person propaganda when discussing the incidents. A notable instance is the gang rape in Palermo against a 19-year-old girl in July 2023, where perpetrators continued to use misogynistic slurs against the victim even after the crime (Figliuolo, 2023).

While the subordinating character of misogynistic slurs is obvious in this case, often it is subtler and less clear. An example from pop culture comes from the rap song "Famous" by Kanye West (2016) "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex. Why? I made that bitch famous (Goddamn). I made that bitch famous". This line, associated with Taylor Swift, raises concerns about the use of violent language in rap songs. Despite seeming innocuous, videos from West concerts show fans shouting "Bitch!" and concluding with a collective "Fuck Taylor Swift!" (CelebSnapzTV, 2016, 1:19). Beyond the verbal violence towards the singer (subordinating act with the character of an attack), the line clearly states that West himself made Swift famous (subordinating act with the character of propaganda). This propagandistic message suggests that a woman's success must be attributed to a man's influence rather

than her own talent or achievements. Furthermore, the use of 'bitch' conveys that Swift is overly focused on herself, assertive and snooty, qualities considered undesirable for a woman. According to Bianchi (2021), a slur is a marker of illocutionary force. West employed a slur ('bitch') in a standard context (not re-appropriative, citational, or educational), so he invoked a subordinating procedure independently of his actual beliefs, attitudes, or intentions.

Clearly, the case of the Palermo gang rape and the case of Kanye West are importantly different. They have different consequences, and the former is far more serious than the latter. But they are both examples of how misogynistic slurs can constitute subordinating speech acts. And let me stress that these cases are just the tip of the iceberg reaching the news: uses of misogynistic slurs in everyday life are widespread and we are often so used to them that we fail to pay enough attention.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I argued that gendered insults qualify as slurs, and therefore are subordinating speech acts. In §2, I explored slurs and their categorisation as subordinating speech acts by Langton. In §3, I analysed words like 'slut' and 'bitch', noting differences from other slurs, addressing challenges like the absence of a clear target and neutral counterpart. Reclamation attempts were discussed, revealing their general failure. In §4, I questioned distinctions between sexism and misogyny, examining how misogynistic slurs oppress the entire female category, unlike generic insults. I challenged the notion of the neutral counterpart's fundamental role, given its elusive nature. Reappropriation failures were linked to the intradivisional nature of misogynistic discourse, weakening its impact. I was able to assert, therefore, that misogynistic insults are slurs, despite the differences highlighted at the beginning. Ultimately, in §5 I posited that misogynistic slurs are linguistic acts of subordination, degrading and devaluing all women, legitimising discrimination, and depriving them of rights. Examples demonstrated how these slurs function as subordinating speech acts of attack and propaganda. Misogynistic slurs, deeply woven into our daily language, are often downplayed. Even women use them, unintentionally perpetuating misogyny. This underlines an urgent need for critical reflection and should persuade the academic community to commit itself to focus more on gender discrimination and how to overcome it.

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