Gendered Insults in the Semantics-Pragmatics Interface

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Abstract

There have been many past attempts on the part of linguists and philosophers of language to account for the derogatory nature of slurs—terms, like *fag* or *kike,* which disparage their targets on the basis of membership to a certain group, defined by factors that include but are not limited to race, nationality, sexual orientation, and religion (Hom 2008, 2010; Croom 2013; Jeshion 2013; Camp 2013; Nunberg 2017). This paper examines a closely related phenomenon, providing an account of insults that are linked to their targets' gender or to gendered social norms. These terms span multiple parts of speech, including nouns like *bitch, slut,* or *cuck;* adjectives like *bossy* or *nasty;* and verbs like *nag.* The category of gendered insults overlaps with the category of slurs, and even those gendered insults which are not slurs per se are similar to them in a number of respects: their referents are at least somewhat restricted based on identity, they express negative attitudes toward their individual targets as well as sexist attitudes more generally, and they frequently undergo some sort of "reclamation" process (Bianchi 2014; Croom 2013) wherein members of the group targeted by an insult appropriate the term as a means to build in-group solidarity. This paper seeks to account for the linguistic mechanism by which gendered insults convey negative attitudes toward their targets, and explore the ways that these insults are used in practice.

To account for the negative attitudes communicated by gendered insults, I propose a two-pronged approach which incorporates elements of both semantic and pragmatic strategies that have been used in the past to account for the offensive content of slurs. First, I divide the negative attitudes expressed by gendered insults into two categories: a negative attitude toward the trait or behavior truth-conditionally invoked by a given gendered insult (termed the lexical negative attitude), as well as a sexist attitude more broadly. The first type of attitude, I argue, is semantically encoded into the insults themselves in the form of conventional implicature. I account for the sexist attitudes of gendered insults on the basis of linguistic practice (rather than linguistic meaning), arguing that speakers of gendered insults affiliate themselves with a particular group of people or historical pattern. This proposal accounts for a number of features of gendered insults, including their variable derogatory force, and the lack of societal consensus on whether a given insult is indeed sexist.

I then present qualitative data from the Corpus of Online Registers of English (CORE) (Davies 2016-) to isolate trends in the ways that different insults are used to apply to different genders. After examining many different nominal, adjectival, and verbal gendered insults, some general trends emerge. Women are more likely to be derogated on the basis of physical unattractiveness or sexual promiscuity; men are more likely to be derogated on the basis of attributed homosexuality, weakness, or sexual inadequacy. These results corroborate those of various folk-linguistic studies on the nature of insults having to do with gender or sexual orientation (Brown & Alderson 2010; Coyne et al. 1978; Preston & Stanley 1978). Furthermore, men are more likely to be targeted by insults typically gendered female than women are to be targeted by insults typically gendered male. These trends lend insight into the behavior of gendered insults as a linguistic and social phenomenon, and how these insults reflect culture.

Section 1: Introduction

1.1: What is a slur?

Broadly, a slur can be defined as a noun that denigrates its referents on the basis of their perceived membership in a particular group or identity category. There is considerable variation in the traits that define these categories: immediately, the term *slur* draws to mind insults that degrade on the basis of race (such as *chink* or *nigger,* which is often considered to be the most offensive of all slurs in the English language (Kennedy 2002; Croom 2013)), sexual orientation (such as *faggot* or *dyke*), ethnicity (such as *boche* or *wetback)* and religion (such as *kike* or *raghead*). However, slurs are not limited to these categories—they may refer to a person's age, class, gender, national origin, or even political affiliation (terms like *libtard* or *repuglican* qualify). For the purposes of this paper, I argue that a term's status as a slur is not tied to the social status of a given group—that is, a slur may refer to a group of people who historically have social and political power. By this definition, *cracker* is just as much a slur as *nigger,* although the latter has considerably greater derogatory force, and has caused much more damage on a systemic level (Kennedy 2002). In general, slurs derogate *solely* (or at least primarily) on the basis of membership in whatever group they are associated with, and not on the basis of any other quality (although some linguists and philosophers promote an account of slurs based on stereotype semantics (Hom 2008; Croom 2013; Camp 2013; Jeshion 2013), which admittedly complicates this notion).

One noted feature of slurs is that, as least in the English language, they tend to have a "neutral" counterpart (Nunberg 2017; Bianchi 2014; Croom 2013; Camp 2013)—that is, for a given slur, there is usually some noun or adjective that denotes the same group of people derogated by the slur, but which does not express the same attitudes toward those people that

slurs do (or any particular attitude at all, for that matter). For example, the slur *dyke'*s neutral counterpart is *lesbian,* and the slur *kraut'*s neutral counterpart is *German.* These categories are not necessarily immutable—terms that were once slurs may shift toward being more neutral descriptors (a prominent example being *queer*). The reverse process may happen as well, in which a term that was once considered to be fairly neutral takes on a slur-like quality. Yet despite the blurriness of this concept, the availability of some neutral counterpart does seem to be a unifying feature of slurs in English. "Neutral" may be a slightly misleading term—it is important to clarify that these so-called neutral counterparts may indeed in certain contexts be used to insult: the term *lesbian,* which I highlighted as the neutral counterpart of *dyke,* is certainly sometimes used as an insult, especially if the speaker believes homosexuality to be an undesirable trait[1]. This potential to be used as an insult is heightened for nominal expressions, due to a phenomenon called *noun aversion* (Horn 2016), wherein words are seen as more offensive in their nominal forms than in their adjectival forms, as they are perceived to be essentializing, or to "brand" their targets into a particular group, rather than to simply point out a trait or behavior. Nevertheless, *lesbian* in many contexts may be used to highlight the fact of a woman being attracted to other women, without communicating any negative attitude toward her by virtue of her sexual orientation. *Dyke* can only accomplish this goal in very particular instances, generally when the speaker of the term is either lesbian themselves or within some other social context in which they are deemed to share a speech community with lesbian speakers (Bianchi 2014; Anderson 2017).

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[1] In some cases, a word may behave as both a slur and its neutral counterpart—perhaps the most prominent example of this is the word *Jew* (Oppenheimer 2017).

Literature on slurs differs with regard to how the neutral counterpart condition is conceived of. Some, like Nunberg (2017) and Hom (2008), treat this condition as a necessary one: that is, in order to be considered a slur, a term must have some neutral counterpart in the language. Others, however, treat it as a tendency that ties together many slurs, but not necessarily a necessary condition for being considered one. My inclination is to consider neutral counterparts a descriptive tendency of slurs, rather than a necessary feature. For a number of slurs, it is fairly difficult to come up with a neutral term that bears the same extension. For example, consider the term *redneck*. There is no neutral word or phrase which clearly extends to the same set of people as this term. *Poor rural Southerner* does not quite capture the content of *redneck* in the way that *lesbian* does of *dyke*. I would not say, however, that this alone disqualifies *redneck* from being considered a slur. Furthermore, the fact that some "neutral counterparts" are nouns, while others are adjectives, suggests that this trait is variable, and not an immutable feature of slurs.

Furthermore, slurs do not all carry the same degree of derogatory force. To a certain extent, this does seem to be conditioned by a given group's position and society: many would argue that to derogate a person on the basis of their membership in a group with a high level of institutional power (such as calling a white person a *cracker*) is a less severe illocutionary act than to do so on the basis of membership in a systematically oppressed group (such as calling a black person a *nigger*) (Hom 2008). However, the spectrum of derogatory force that slurs fall along cannot be entirely explained by this particular social factor, as it is often the case that two slurs derogating the same group of people may be interpreted as having a difference in derogatory force (Hom 2008; Nunberg 2017). For example, the terms *fruit* and *faggot* are both slurs generally targeted toward gay men, but the latter seems to carry greater derogatory force. The derogatory force of a given insult is not fixed—intuitions may vary significantly from

speaker to speaker (and from dialect to dialect) about how "strong" particular insults are, and about which are stronger than others.

1.2: What is a gendered insult?

A gendered insult is any word or phrase which is disproportionately applied to a member of a particular gender, and which generally bears some connection to societal expectations or norms placed upon that gender. While slurs pick out their referents on the primary basis of their presumed membership within a certain identity category, slurs are not the only sort of insult that are tied to identity in some way. This paper will focus primarily on the set of insults which are disproportionately applied to members of a particular gender, but not only on those whose truth-conditional content does not revolve around membership in that gender in the same way that a slur would. For example, consider the term *slut,* which is ordinarily used to target or refer to women who are perceived as having a disposition toward sexual promiscuity. The term *slut* is certainly gendered: it is disproportionately applied to women, and often seems somewhat comical when used to refer to a man—the existence of the term *man slut,* in and of itself, indicates that there is often a need to specify when a woman is *not* the target of this insult. Because this term is tied to gender identity in some way, it resembles a slur. Indeed, *slut* appears as an example of a slur in multiple previous accounts of slurs, such as that of Adam Croom (2013). However, *slut* does not quite fit the definition of a slur in that it derogates primarily on the basis of a behavior, not an identity: it is not used to criticize someone simply for being female, but instead for being sexually promiscuous (often in conjunction with being female). The behaviors these insults are tied to are generally not regarded as being fundamental and immutable parts of an individual's identity in the same way that race and gender are. It is important to note that not all gendered insults are gendered female—the term *cuck,* which has

recently gained traction on social media (particularly among alt-right circles), is a good example of one which is gendered male. Other insults which are gendered male include *fuckboy,* insults that reference male genitalia, such as *dick* and *prick,* as well as *bastard,* which is often viewed, at least folk-linguistically, as the male counterpart of the word *bitch* (Coyne et al. 1978).

Groups defined by gender are not the only groups to be targeted by non-slur insults of this sort. There are a number of racialized insults that operate this way as well. For example, the term *savage* has historically been used to target Native American populations (Mieder 1993), but it is not an offensive term *for* Native Americans in the same way that the slur *redskin* is. Another prominent example is *thug,* which has come under fire for being used in the media to unfairly target young black men as opposed to their white counterparts (Kutner 2015). The phrase *New York values,* which Ted Cruz was criticized for using during a Republican primary debate in 2016 (Leopold 2016), is a euphemistic expression generally used to target Jews—but as it is not a noun which derogates on the basis of group membership, it cannot be considered a slur. Similar euphemisms include the use of *urban* to refer predominantly to black people and *cosmopolitan,* also historically used to describe Jewish people. The word *snowflake* is arguably a slur, and is certainly a demographically-linked insult (which derogates on the basis of both age and political affiliation). However, the scope of this paper will for the most part be limited to those insults which derogate along lines of gender. One question that arises for such insults (including, but not limited to gendered ones) is that of whether the identity group primarily targeted by an insult is semantically encoded into the insult itself, either as truth-conditional content or as conventional implicature. Does *slut,* for instance, actually encode *woman* as part of its semantic content, or do hearers simply primarily associate the term with women because of its historical use and the social conditions that dictate sexual promiscuity as a worse social transgression when committed

by a woman as opposed to a man? Certainly gendered insults may be applied to a member of the gender with which they are not primarily associated, but this alone cannot answer that question: after all, slurs too may be applied to someone who the speaker does not perceive to be a member of the identity category with which the slur is generally associated. For example, the term *fag* is quite often applied to men whom the speaker does not presume to be homosexual (Brown & Alderson 2010), despite its status as a slur for gay men.

The category "slur" and the category "gendered insult" are not mutually exclusive—it is at least theoretically possible for an insult to qualify as a gendered slur, if it derogates its targets on the sole basis of their membership in a particular gender. Perhaps the clearest examples of gendered insults which may be classified as slurs are *bitch* and the somewhat stronger *cunt.* If we are to include political affiliation as an identity along which a slur can be applied, then *feminazi* certainly qualifies. For a word like *slut,* there is reasonable room for disagreement over its status as a slur or some other sort of insult. If we are to define a slur as a noun that insults its targets on the sole basis of the speaker's perception of their membership in a particular demographic or identity category, then the borders of the category *slur* are quite shaky: after all, "identity category" is not an entirely cohesive notion. One could easily argue that promiscuous people are a coherent identity category, and that on that basis *slut* is indeed a slur. Similar arguments could easily be made for male-gendered insults like *cuck* or *fuckboy.* Later, however, I will argue that *slut* is distinct from a slur in that its primary identity-linked nature lies in its presuppositional (rather than its propositional) content.

However, the category of gendered insults is much broader than nouns like *slut, cuck,* or *feminazi.* Gendered insults may also be adjectival or verbal. Donald Trump's infamous designation of Hillary Clinton as a *nasty woman* during one of the 2016 Presidential debates

constitutes a use of an adjectival gendered insult (Gray 2016). Another prominent example is *bossy,* a word which Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg has campaigned to "ban" (Lean In 2015), arguing that it denigrates girls for exhibiting traits that would be praised as "leadership" in boys (Grant 2014). Verbs, too, may constitute gendered insults: *nag* and *whine* have been argued to fall into this category (Saner 2014). These examples also point to another feature that slurs share with only some subset of the set of gendered insults: slurs have often been noted to be socially taboo (Hom 2010), which is true of only certain gendered insults. *Slut, bitch,* and *cunt* certainly are, but words like *nag* and *bossy,* despite being widely criticized in the media, are not taboo in the same way. Some gendered insults have in common with slurs that they are nominal, but are less socially taboo—an example of this is *ball-and-chain,* which is often used by men to refer derogatorily to their wives. To speak of terms as being either taboo or not taboo is, however, reductive. Taboo words are a blurry category: taboos exist on a spectrum and vary by context. For example, American speakers tend to perceive *cunt* to be a stronger or more vulgar word than do their English counterparts. As with the variations in derogatory force between paradigmatic slurs, there may be also fine variations in speakers' judgments (even within the same dialect or speech community) with regard to how "strong" a particular insult is.

1.3: A Brief Disclaimer on Gender

All discussion of gender in this paper should bear the caveat that gender is a complex and ever-changing social construct. I do not intend to endorse the idea that *male* and *female* are the only genders—nor, in my discussion of genital-based insults later on, do I endorse the idea that any gender is immutably linked to a particular set of reproductive organs. Nevertheless, as a paradigm for conceiving of gender, the gender binary is the hegemon (at least in contemporary Western society). Thus, it has a powerful influence over cultural perception of gender, and in

turn over gendered language. At many points, this paper speaks in terms of the gender binary—however, this comes from the standpoint of recognizing how profoundly it has shaped our culture, rather than from the idea that the gender binary is correct.

1.4: A Review of Past Accounts of Slurs

While slurs are not the main focus of this paper, there is quite a bit of crossover between slurs and the gendered insults (both slurring and non-slurring) that I am seeking to account for. Thus, much of my account of gendered insults will draw from previous accounts of slurs. The following subsections summarize a selection of these accounts, with a particular focus on those that have had the most influence on my account of gendered insults.

1.4.1: Nunberg (2017)

One of the main problems that linguists and philosophers have grappled with in their attempts to account for slurs is that of whether the offensiveness of slurs arises by way of semantic or pragmatic mechanism. Geoff Nunberg's article "The Social Life of Slurs" falls firmly in the pragmatic camp. In fact, Nunberg asserts that slurs are just "plain vanilla descriptions" which do not disparage their targets by means of any truth-conditional or conventionally implicated content. He instead believes when a speaker utters a slur, that speaker exploits Grice's (1975) Maxim of Manner to express an affiliation with a particular social identity—specifically, in this case, with a group of people who generally hold negative attitudes toward a group targeted by a slur.

Nunberg's argument largely hinges upon the "neutral counterpart" condition of slurs, which I discussed in Section 1.1. This characteristic, Nunberg argues, throws a wrench in purely semantic accounts of slurs, as it does not seem coherent to posit that a word encodes as part of its

semantic content a requirement that some other particular type of word exists in a language. Moreover, Nunberg argues that if a speaker chooses to use a slur as opposed to its neutral counterpart when both options are equally available, that speaker likely made that choice for a particular reason (though not necessarily consciously). Given the taboo nature of slurs, the use of one as opposed to its neutral counterpart seems to constitute a significant (and likely intentional) departure from a "default" term. The function of this departure, in terms of both speaker intent and hearer interpretation, may be highly variable and is dependent on the surrounding social conditions. Generally, though, given a slur's history, the departure will implicate the speaker's negative attitude toward the group in question. This explanation accounts neatly for a few aspects of slurs that many other accounts leave open. For example, it can provide an explanation of the fact that some slurs are generally perceived to be "stronger" or "worse" than others. Furthermore, Nunberg's analysis takes into account a wider variety of contexts of use of slurs than many other accounts have, pointing out that slurs are most often used among like-minded company, rather than flung at members of a particular demographic. His explanation of slurs also accounts nicely for the fact that users and hearers may have radically different notions of how "offensive" a slur is or whether it expresses a particular attitude toward a given group. After all, communicating an affiliation with a particular social identity or group of people who have historically used a word does not in any way require that a speaker and hearer will agree in their evaluations of the group at hand.

Nunberg's account, I believe, has quite a bit to offer to the debate about how best to account for slurs. He is right, I think, to posit the importance of considering the historical usage and social practices surrounding slurs in seeking to gain an understanding of slurs as a social and linguistic phenomenon. In my view, however, manner implicature is not entirely adequate to

account for the attitudes communicated by slurs. Because his framework depends on the neutral counterpart condition of slurs, it collapses quickly if (as discussed earlier), this condition is treated as a descriptive tendency rather than as a necessary fact about slurs. Nevertheless, Nunberg's approach has a fair amount of influence over my proposal, particularly when it comes to explaining the gendered nature of insults like *bossy* and *nag,* for which gender is part of neither the propositional nor presuppositional content. In particular, Nunberg's concept of linguistic metadata*,* which will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.2, influences my account of gendered insults.

1.4.2: Croom (2013)

In his paper "How to do things with slurs," Adam Croom (2013) provides a broad overview of slurs, in which he distinguishes them from other terms within the descriptive/expressive dichotomy, provides background on the social and political factors surrounding slurs, develops a tripartite schema to differentiate various usages of slurs, and provides a novel account of the literal meaning of slurs. Croom's account of slurs falls more in the realm of semantics than pragmatics, but does not fail to take context into account. His analysis deals primarily with the fact that slurs, in many contexts, contribute more specific and complex truth conditions than their neutral counterparts. For example, consider Chris Rock's (1996) infamous comedy bit, in which he claimed to "love black people, but hate 'niggers.'" In saying this, he argued that these were in fact two different types of people—the targets of the slur are implied to be worthy of contempt, but are defined by a set of stereotypes typically associated with their race rather than by their race alone. Another good example is the case of *faggot,* which is very frequently used as an insult for people who are not gay men (Brown & Alderson 2010). In some cases, the speaker of this insult may mean to degrade a target by insinuating that that

target *is* gay, but in other cases they may be referring to some other quality that the speaker finds undesirable. This phenomenon was mocked in an episode of the popular TV show *South Park* (2009)*,* wherein the word *faggot* was used by younger speakers to refer to bikers with obnoxiously loud motorcycles rather than to gay men, to the confusion of the older characters on the show.

To tackle this puzzle, Croom delineates three distinct categories of uses of slurs, which he describes the three types of uses of slurs as the "paradigmatic derogatory use," "non-paradigmatic derogatory use," and "non-derogatory in-group uses." Croom defines the paradigmatic derogatory use of a slur as that in which the speaker derogates the target on the basis of perceived membership in a certain demographic, often with the intention to invoke particular negative stereotypes ordinarily associated with that demographic. For example, a paradigmatic derogatory use of the word "faggot" might imply that the target was effeminate, uptight, or sexually perverse (traits which have been historically invoked to derogate gay people), but would derogate *primarily* on the basis of their perceived homosexuality. The examples of the *South Park* (2009) episode discussed above is an instance of what Croom calls the non-paradigmatic derogatory use. This occurs in contexts in which the speaker *does* intend to insult, but does not necessarily direct the slur at a member of the demographic it is typically associated with. In these uses, Croom argues that the speaker invokes the negative qualities associated with the slur, but not explicitly the target demographic. The non-derogatory in-group use is one in which the slur is used by a member of its target demographic, without derogatory intent. A prominent example of this third type of use is the reclamation of the word *nigga* by the African American community. *Nigga,* in particular, has undergone an interesting shift wherein it can now occasionally be used to refer to white people, without necessarily implicating that the

target has any quality stereotypically associated with African Americans. For example, in a 2012 post, Twitter user Larry Beyince (@DragonflyJonez) compiled a list of ten reasons "why [he wasn't] voting for Romney" and ten reasons "why [he was] voting for Obama." The first item on the former list was the statement *he a white nigga* (with *he* referring to Mitt Romney).

After proposing this tripartite framework, Croom proposes an account of the literal meaning of slurs that he argues can account for all of these uses. Under his proposal, a slur denotes not a particular set of individuals, but a set of properties. For instance, the slur *faggot* might denote the set of properties {*gay, effeminate, uptight,…*}. These properties are to some extent ranked in terms of their salience, with membership in the target demographic ranked very highly. However, in some contexts, an individual may be referred to by a slur if they possess enough of the other properties that are part of that slur's meaning. As evidence, Croom highlights the fact that this accounts for the wide range of contexts in which slurs can be used, and the wide range of referents they may have—in using a slur, speakers invoke some subset of the set of properties denoted by the slur, but not necessarily the entire set.

Moreover, Croom discusses the place of slurs within the descriptive-expressive dichotomy. To illustrate the difference between descriptive and expressive content, consider the contrast between sentence (1) and sentence (2):

1. That *dog* over there looks like it hasn't eaten in days.
2. That *motherfucker* over there looks like it hasn't eaten in days.

Dog, in sentence (1), is an example of a descriptive, or "non-evaluative" term (Väyrynen 2016): that is, *dog* gives the hearer information about what sort of entity is being discussed, but does so without communicating any particular moral evaluation of it. *Motherfucker,* in sentence (2), is an

example of an expressive term, which gives more information about the speaker's emotional state or attitude toward the entity being discussed than it does about its descriptive qualities. Croom argues that slurs do not fall precisely into either category, and express some mixture of descriptive and expressive content.

Croom's account was compelling to me, primarily due to its ability to account for the wide range of usage that occurs in the real world (as well as his use of real-world examples to illustrate his points). The family resemblance-based semantic account, I think, gives due acknowledgement to the fact that slurs are often used to pick out specific members of a group who conform to the negative stereotypes generally associated with that group, rather than derogating entirely on the basis of group membership. At the same time, his account leaves room to avoid the trap of claiming that a speaker explicitly invokes every stereotype associated with a group on every use of a slur—a trap which the account of Christopher Hom (2008) falls into and which Robin Jeshion (2013) critiqued in her attempt to "quell the tide" of stereotype-semantic accounts. Croom's framework schema for differentiating between the three types of uses of slurs will be useful for my analysis of gendered insults. However, in Section 2.1 I will propose a modification to this Croom's taxonomy, with regard to how the paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic derogatory forms are differentiated.

1.4.3: Further Accounts of Slurs

While Croom's (2013) and Nunberg's (2017) accounts of slurs have perhaps the most influence over my account of gendered insults, it is worth giving a brief overview of some of the other attempts that have been made to account for the origin of the offensiveness of slurs. As discussed above, these accounts are largely separable into two major families, those being the semantic accounts (which claim that slurs are offensive due to some aspect of their encoded

meaning) and the pragmatic accounts (which assert that slurs are not inherently offensive words in and of themselves, but that the offensiveness arises from some aspect of their context of use). Each of these general approaches has certain strengths, as well as certain difficulties. One problem for semanticist accounts is that any comprehensive account of slurs must deal with the fact that slurs often mean seemingly quite different things depending on who is saying them and whom they are targeting (as discussed in the overview of Croom's account). A particularly difficult problem for semantic accounts is posed by the phenomenon of reclamation, wherein in-group members use a slur historically used to target them, either casually with no derogatory intent or with the conscious intention of building in-group solidarity (Bianchi 2014). Pragmatic accounts, for their part, must deal with what many have called the *nondisplaceability* of slurs from the attitudes they express. For instance, consider a hypothetical speaker who utters sentence (3):

3. I have no problem at all with fags.

While this speaker's assertion truth-conditionally conveys that they do not object to gay people, many hearers would still interpret the speaker's statement as a homophobic one by the very virtue of the use of the word *fag,* regardless of what the speaker says. To those who generally object to the use of slurs on the grounds of their offensiveness, it is extremely difficult for a speaker to cancel the derogatory attitude communicated by a slur. The effects of a slur are regular enough that they seem to be tied to the words themselves in some facet.

However, separating accounts into these two broad categories is only informative to a certain extent. Considerable variation exists within each category, and indeed some specific accounts in the pragmatic camp have more in common with specific semantic accounts than they do with other pragmatic accounts. For example, Liz Camp's (2013) approach, in some ways, has

quite a bit in common with Nunberg's. She argues that slurs express a "perspective," or an affiliation with a derogating group or attitude. Unlike Nunberg, however, she argues that this perspective is *conventionally* conveyed as part of a slur's semantic content, rather than expressed through an exploitation of Grice's maxim of manner. Furthermore, these two categories do not encompass all past accounts of slurs. A prominent example which does not fit into either category comes from Anderson and Lepore (2013), who argue that slurs are not offensive by nature of any content they convey, whether semantically or pragmatically. They posit instead that slurs are prohibited due to social edicts surrounding their use, and that their perceived offensiveness arises from the violation of these edicts. Bearing these various accounts of slurs in mind, in the next section, I compare and contrast the semantic and sociolinguistic properties of slurs and gendered insults in more depth.

Section 2: Comparing and Contrasting Slurs and Gendered Insults

Section 1 gave a broad overview of the concepts of slurs and non-slur gendered insults. This section will examine these two concepts in more detail, and explore the ways in which they are similar and the ways in which they are different. In this section, I argue that, while slurs and non-slur gendered insults differ significantly in their truth-conditional semantic properties, they are very similar in their sociolinguistic behavior.

2.1: The Truth-conditional Contributions of Slurs and Gendered Insults

In the debate over how best to account for slurs, one particular question that linguists and philosophers have quibbled over is what, exactly, the truth-conditional contribution of a slur is to a sentence—more particularly, are slurs truth-conditionally equivalent to their neutral counterparts? Some, such as Camp (2013), Williamson (2009), and Hom (1989) would argue

that they are, while others, such as Joseph Hedger (2013), would disagree. Hedger points to the

contrast between the following two sentences (where the * in sentence (5) can be replaced with

the slur of your choosing referring to black people):

4. Obama is black.

5. Obama is a *.

A "nonracist" hearer, Hedger argues, would almost certainly concede the truth of (4), but would

at the very least hesitate to affirm the truth of (5). The truth-conditional equivalence of slurs and

their neutral counterparts is certainly not self-evident (and indeed, in some contexts the two seem

to contribute different truth conditions). Consider again the Chris Rock (1996) comedy bit

discussed in Section 1.4.2, in which he differentiated between "black people" and "niggers." In

Rock's view, each of these terms has an extension, but these extensions are different[2]. While one

man's standup comedy routine should certainly not be taken to answer all linguistic and

philosophical questions about the semantics of slurs, it does reflect an important trend in their

real-world use.

For my part, I will take a somewhat middling position on this particular issue, harkening

back to Croom's (2013) differentiation of three different types of usage of slurs. My position is

that slurs, when used pejoratively, are truth-conditionally equivalent to their neutral counterparts

only in their "paradigmatic derogatory use," as Croom termed it. I will follow Croom's "family

resemblance" framework for the truth-conditional contributions of slurs in other contexts—the

application of this framework to gendered insults will be discussed in Section 3.1. However, I

propose a slight modification to Croom's framework for differentiating the various uses of slurs.

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[2] The relationship between the two sets is not, however, entirely clear. One interpretation is that the set of black people is a superset of the set of so-called *niggers,* another that the two sets are disjoint.

Croom's differentiation between the paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic derogatory uses of slurs rests primarily upon the identity of a slur's target in a given context: if the target is a perceived member of the group generally associated with the slur, then it constitutes a paradigmatic derogatory use; if not, then it constitutes a non-paradigmatic one. This framework is useful, and does reflect real distinctions in how slurs are used, but it is not entirely comprehensive. In Section 1.1, I argued that a slur generally derogates its targets *solely* on the basis of their membership in a particular demographic or identity category. This criterion, I think, is a more useful basis on which to differentiate the paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic derogatory uses of slurs, rather than on an ad hoc basis depending on an individual target's membership in a given group or lack thereof. Under this reframing, a use of a slur whose primary aim is to highlight the target's group membership constitutes a paradigmatic use of a slur, while a use that intends to highlight some other undesirable quality (generally one stereotypically associated with the group in question) as opposed to mere group membership constitutes a non-paradigmatic derogatory use. While the targets of the term *nigger* in Rock's bit are indeed black, I think his use of the term better fits into the non-paradigmatic category (though on Croom's original formulation, his targets' race would have led it to be classified as paradigmatic). This is not to say that the identity of a target is not of import: I think Croom was right to make a distinction on this basis. However, I think the umbrella of the non-paradigmatic derogatory use should be widened, and that further distinctions within that category can be made on the basis of the target's identity.

It is from this position—that slurs are truth-conditionally equivalent to their neutral counterparts in their paradigmatic derogatory uses, but not in their non-paradigmatic derogatory use—that I will proceed with my comparison of the truth-conditional contributions of slurs and of non-slur gendered insults. This view is consistent with a view like Croom's (2013), on which

slurs have more flexible truth conditions than they do on other semanticist accounts. On a

paradigmatic derogatory usage[3], then, Liz Camp's (2013) assertion is true that to negate a

sentence like *Isaiah is a kike* is to deny only the fact of Isaiah's being Jewish, and not to deny

that he is greedy, conniving, or any other stereotype associated with Jews. But this fact is not

absolute. In a context such as Chris Rock's (1996) comedy bit, negating the assertion that

someone belongs to the extension of a slur does *not* negate that they fall into the identity

category targeted by the slur, but only the assertion that they conform to the associated negative

stereotypes.

For the most part, the gendered insults which I am discussing do not contribute, say, *x is

a woman* or *x is a man* as their primary propositional content. A word like *slut,* while

misogynistic (as will be further argued in Section 5), is not misogynistic in quite the same *direct*

way that a word like *kike* is anti-Semitic. That is, to negate the proposition that someone is a slut

is not to negate that that person is a woman (though *slut* is disproportionately applied to women),

but instead to negate that that person is excessively sexually promiscuous. To call a word a

gendered insult is not to say that it is a slur *for* a particular gender: it is not the case that *slut,* for

example, is a slur for women (though it could certainly be considered a slur for women—or

perhaps people more generally—who are perceived to be excessively sexually promiscuous). In

terms of its truth conditions, a word like *slut* behaves differently than a slur for women would.

Some nominal gendered insults, however, do behave like slurs against women, such as *bitch* and

cunt. In certain contexts, negating the proposition that someone was a *bitch* would be to negate

the proposition of that person being female. However, without contextual support for that

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[3] For many slurs, the paradigmatic derogatory use can, I think, be presumed to be the default type of usage of a slur, in the absence of strong contextual evidence that a given use falls into one of the other two categories. There are, however exceptions—a good example of one such exception is *fag,* which is used extremely commonly to communicate a proposition other than that the target is gay (Brown & Alderson 2010).

interpretation, *bitch* behaves a bit more like *slut.* A proposition like *X is not a bitch,* in an unmarked context, seems to negate the target's unpleasantness (or weakness, particularly in cases where *bitch* targets a man), rather than the target's womanhood.

In general gendered insults can be put into three different categories. The first are those which encode gender as part of their propositional content. Terms like *bitch, twat,* and *cunt* fall into this category in contexts where they are used to assert their target's gender. Slurs for the transgender community, such as *tranny* or *shemale,* also fall into this category. The second type of gendered insults are those which encode gender as part of their presuppositional, rather than propositional, content. Slut is a good example of this type of insult. To utter a sentence like *x is a slut* is not to assert *x is a woman, and she is sexually promiscuous*, but to predicate of a woman that she is sexually promiscuous (or something along those lines). Intuitions vary between speakers with regard to whether this presupposition of womanhood communicated by *slut* can be cancelled—for some speakers, *slut* can be felicitously predicated of a man without necessarily insinuating that he is feminine, while for others, to call a man a *slut* is to compare him to a woman as well as to assert that he is sexually promiscuous. The term *bitch,* in contexts where it is used to assert that its target is unpleasant or weak (or some other negative quality), rather than simply to assert that she is a woman, nevertheless presupposes the target's womanhood. The third category of gendered insult includes those which do not encode gender as part of their semantic content at all. These include terms like *bossy* and *nag.* These words are gendered in their practice (as I will argue further in Section 5.2)—nevertheless, it seems far-fetched to posit that they encode gender as part of their semantic content.

2.2: On Reclamation, and the Sociolinguistic Similarity of Slurs and Gendered Insults

As mentioned previously, one noted feature of slurs is that they sometimes undergo a process generally known as *reclamation* (sometimes termed *appropriation*). Reclamation is a process by which the group targeted by a slur or other bigoted insult begin to use the slur self-referentially, generally with the intention of defusing the slur's power as an oppressive tool. While earlier reclaimed uses of any given slur generally have some political motivation behind them, at a certain point reclaimed slurs may begin to be used more casually in what Claudia Bianchi (2014) calls "friendship" contexts—such as the casual use of the word *nigga* within the African American community. Reclamation has been accounted for with a variety of strategies. Croom (2013), who terms reclaimed uses of slurs the *non-derogatory in-group use,* accounts for it within his family resemblance-based approach to the semantics of slurs. He argues that that, in reclaimed contexts, speakers invoke the group membership trait associated with the slur without invoking any of the negative stereotypical traits associated with that group. Bianchi (2014) proposed an "echoic" account, which she argues is compatible with either a semantic or pragmatic account of slurs. In Bianchi's view, in-group members often "echo" derogatory uses of slurs in such a way that makes clear their opposition to the derogatory attitudes ordinarily expressed by the slur. Her proposal relies primarily on the Relevance-Theoretic concept of "echoic content" (Wilson & Sperber 2012). An echoic utterance is one in which a speaker reports an utterance or thought attributed to someone else, while simultaneously making clear their attitudes toward that attributed utterance or thought. The attribution need not be to a specific speaker, but may be a more general "echoic allusion" to either a non-specific utterance or abstract concept. Nunberg (2017) views reclaimed slurs similarly, at least in the early stages of reclamation: he describes them as "ironic or defiant" uses of a slur meant to recall those who use

the slur in earnest. Luvell Anderson (2017) seeks to account more specifically for the more "casual" appropriated uses of slurs (particularly uses of *nigga* within the African American community) by positing that it constitutes a perlocutionary act of "addressing," which is only available to members of a particular community of practice (this is distinguished from the perlocutionary act of "calling," which is more widely available, but generally deemed offensive).

Gendered insults, including those which differ significantly from slurs on a purely linguistic level, often undergo this process as well. Quite a few examples of this occurred during the 2016 presidential election cycle, including the viral surge of the hashtags #nastywoman (Gray 2016) and #pussygrabsback (Puglise 2016), each in response to comments made by Donald Trump. The SlutWalk movement has been another effort on the part of women to reclaim a gendered insult as a point of pride and empowerment rather than shame. SlutWalk, an annual event spearheaded by model and former stripper Amber Rose, is a particularly interesting case, in that it saw activists attempting to reclaim not only the epithet *slut,* but also a *non*-linguistic behavior associated with the term (McAfee 2015): participants often attend the events donning "skimpy clothes and lingerie," with the intent of sending the message that sexual violence is unjustified regardless of what the recipient of that violence is wearing. While some (including those sympathetic to the larger goals of the movement) have critiqued SlutWalk for "preaching that sex is the optimal way of maintaining freedom and acquiring equality," (Watson 2016), others have hailed it as a transformative movement (Mendes 2015). Similar debates surround the reclamation of other words, and the validity of reclamation as a tactic more generally. Opponents of the practice have argued that reclamation provides a "false sense of power" that in fact merely reinforces oppression (Mauro 2013).

The above examples demonstrate that reclamation as a sociolinguistic process is not limited to slurs. Reclamation efforts have been made for non-slurring insults, as well as comments deemed offensive which are not directed at any target per se (as in the example of #pussygrabsback, in which the words being reclaimed were not insults directed at a person or group, but rather a crass description of an act deemed reprehensible by many). Even a term like *bossy,* which at first glance does not bear great resemblance to a slur like *faggot* (being adjectival, not subject to any particularly strong taboo, and felicitously attributable to members of any demographic without any apparent shift to the semantic content of the word), may undergo such efforts (Moore 2014; Talbot 2014). Examples of *bossy* in reclaimed contexts include the title of Tina Fey's 2013 memoir *Bossypants,* and R&B singer Kelis's hit single "Bossy" (Rogers 2006) (in which the singer proudly and defiantly attributes the titular trait to herself). While gendered insults may be fairly disparate in terms of their semantic resemblance to slurs, the phenomenon of reclamation provides a clear sociolinguistic similarity between slurs and other sorts of identity-linked insults.

2.3: A Preliminary Analysis of the Attitudes Expressed by Gendered Insults

Christopher Hom (2008) notes that any adequate account of the meaning of a slur must account for the fundamentally bigoted nature of the attitude communicated by it. A racial slur, he argues (at least in what he calls "straightforwardly racist" contexts), derogates and "threatens" its targets specifically *because* of the race of those targets. Thus, he argues that any minimally adequate account of non-appropriated uses of racial slurs will account for their "inherently racist nature[4]," and not merely for the fact that they convey a negative attitude of some sort. More

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[4] That is, the fact that racial slurs derogate targets *because* of their race; they do not simply derogate their targets while *pointing out* their race (Hom 2008).

broadly speaking, any attempt to propose a linguistic mechanism responsible for the ideas

conveyed by an utterance must begin with an in-depth understanding of what, exactly, those

attitudes are. Many previous accounts of slurs have failed to discuss this issue in much depth,

often simply referring to the user of a slur as "the racist" or "the bigot" and leaving it at that. This

section will propose a starting point for defining what specific attitudes gendered insults

communicate. It is not adequate to simply declare that users of gendered insults possess sexist

attitudes, particularly when considering how broad the category of gendered insults is. I argue

that the attitudes expressed by gendered insults can be divided into two broad categories. The

first category is the negative attitude toward the particular behavior or trait that a gendered insult

invokes (henceforth, I will refer to this attitude as the "lexical negative attitude"); the second is

what can be characterized as the "sexist" attitude of a gendered insult (a working definition of

sexism will be provided shortly). While attitudes in both of these categories are communicated

by gendered insults, it need not be the case that they are communicated through the same

linguistic mechanism (and indeed, I will argue in Section 3 that they are not).

To illustrate these two broad categories of attitudes that I have laid out, I will present

some examples of gendered insults and discuss the attitudes in each of these categories that they

express. Consider first the word *slut,* which refers to a person (generally a woman) whom the

speaker perceives as sexually promiscuous. There is a marked contrast between sentences (6) and

(7), despite the fact that under this definition they are more-or-less truth-conditionally

equivalent[5]:

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[5] It is difficult to come up with any clear example of a noun or noun phrase that coreferences with *slut:* neither *promiscuous woman* nor *promiscuous person* quite seem to do the trick. That is, *slut* apparently lacks the "neutral counterpart" feature of slurs that Nunberg (2017) and others have commented on. The implications of this for *slut's* standing as a slur are up for debate, and largely depend upon whether one considered the neutral counterpart

6. She likes to sleep around.

7. She's a slut.

In particular contexts, a speaker of sentence (6) *might* implicate that they view having had quite a few sexual partners as negative or immoral, but this attitude does not seem to be tied to the words themselves. After all, (6) could also be uttered without communicating any particular evaluation of the behavior it references. This is not the case for sentence (7), which in any non-reclaimed context would (advertently or inadvertently on the part of the speaker) conveys a negatively evaluative attitude toward the sexual promiscuity of its subject. This evaluation constitutes the lexical negative attitude of the word *slut.* To clarify the nature of the lexical negative attitude, consider the hypothetical sentence (8), as it would be said by (for example) a drunken man in pursuit of a one night stand:

8. I love me some sluts.

Sentence (8) demonstrates that the lexical negative attitude is not necessarily a straightforwardly moralistic one. The speaker of (8) does not implicate that he wishes that sluts did not exist—quite the opposite, in fact. Nonetheless, (8) does communicate a certain condescension, or in some contexts a possessive attitude toward those who the speaker believes to be sluts. For another example of the lexical negative attitude expressed by a gendered insult, consider the word *bossy,* which I will roughly define as "taking enjoyment in giving people orders.*"* Consider sentence (9):

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observation to be a necessary feature of a slur, or merely something many slurs happen to have in common. This apparent lack of a neutral counterpart made (6) a slightly difficult sentence to compose. The framing of a slut as someone who "likes to sleep around" is, I think, fairly appropriate: this framing would allow for the set of sluts to include women (and possibly men) who unsuccessfully try to sleep around. *Sleep around,* furthermore, seems appropriate in that it need not indicate any particular *number* of sexual partners: this could account for those who are unfaithful to their romantic partners, even if their philandering only occurs with one other person.

9. She's very bossy.

Bossy, as in (9), communicates some sort of negative evaluation of the subject's proclivity for giving orders: a negative evaluation that would not be present if the subject were described as *authoritative* or as someone who *likes to be in charge.* This attitude is not inherently gendered, nor is it a blanket indictment of the behaviors associated with bossiness. It is restricted to the particular target of (9).

Proceeding with the examples of *slut* and *bossy,* I will now discuss how they fit into the second category of attitude I outlined, that being the sexist attitude that a gendered insult expresses. As a clarificatory note, I use the term "sexist" in a quite broad sense, to refer to an attitude that conforms to negative beliefs about or harmful socially-enforced norms for either men or women. A "sexist" attitude, for the purposes of this discussion, is not synonymous with a misogynistic or chauvinistic one. Moreover, I follow roughly the same logic employed in my introduction of slurs: a slur is a slur, regardless of how much institutional power the group associated with it has. Likewise, a sexist attitude may be directed toward men, women, or nonbinary people. For example, a belief that men do or should not cry would be considered sexist, as would a belief that sexual promiscuity is more acceptable among men. This second attitude is a bit subtler than the first, and I don't think it can be isolated as an entirely linguistic phenomenon. Instead, the sexist attitude is tied to the social and historical context of the *usage* of gendered insults. I posit that, in using a gendered insult, a speaker communicates a sexist attitude, analogous to the bigoted attitudes that the speakers of slurs express. The speaker of sentence (7), in addition to expressing a negative view toward the subject's sexual promiscuity, also tacitly communicates (however abstractly, and regardless of their actual beliefs) some agreement with the norm that sexual promiscuity is particularly despicable in women. This

attitude is extremely difficult to cancel. The sexist attitude of (7) or (9) remains, even if followed by a statement like *but I'm not sexist*[6].

This sexist attitude of a gendered insult is far less self-evident than the so-called lexical negative attitude. The nature and source of this negative attitude are discussed in depth in section 3.2, but I will first provide a preliminary justification of my belief that this attitude is indeed present. Hom (2008) posits that the semantic values of words are "not completely determined by the internal mental states of individual speakers," but that they are to a degree "dependent on the external social practices of the speaker's linguistic community." I do not necessarily agree with Hom in terms of which side of the semantic/pragmatic distinction the contributions of external social practices fall on (Hom holds the view of semantic externalism, which holds that the literal meaning of a term comes from its usage within a speech community). Indeed, I will later argue that the sexist attitude of a gendered insult is an aspect of linguistic metadata (Pullum 2016; Nunberg 2017), rather than semantic content. I do, however, agree with Hom's point that the social practices surrounding a term contribute in some way to the total sum of information communicated by those terms. The sexist attitude stems from the social practices surrounding gendered insults—which are, in my view, sexist. Indeed, in some cases, like in the case of *bossy, nag,* and *shrill,* the social practices surrounding an insult constitute the entirety of their gendered nature (this claim is substantiated in section 5, when I discuss the behavior of these terms within a corpus).

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[6] Indeed, a slight variation on this practice—namely, the use of "response controlling but-prefaces" (Baker 1975) has been widely lampooned by bloggers and other political commentators (Heiss 2014; Mastroni 2016). It has often been pointed out that, nearly invariably, a sentence beginning *I'm not racist, but* contains a racist statement in the second conjunct. The but-preface does little to nothing to conceal or subvert this.

Slut and *bossy* are useful examples to illustrate the divide between these two attitudes, because they each bear some distinct truth-conditional contribution that is not inherently tied to sex or gender norms. However, this is not always the case. Consider the term *cuck*, which is generally used to refer to men who are perceived as weak or emasculated. *Cuck* is derived from *cuckold,* which originally referred to the husband of an adulteress, but it has taken on somewhat of a more abstract meaning. To call someone a *cuck* is not to truth-conditionally assert that his partner has been unfaithful, but to imply that he is inadequately masculine, spineless, or complacent about having power taken from him (Frost 2015). Because of how deeply the definition of the word *cuck* is tied to the idea of masculinity, it seems difficult to isolate the more ad hoc negative attitude expressed by the word from the sexist attitude it expresses. Within this framework, the first sort of negative attitude expressed would be something along the lines of a belief that the lack of masculinity of the target of *cuck* is a negative quality—an attitude which is sexist in and of itself. The distinction between these two attitudes, then, is fuzzy—and in general, the more closely a gendered insult resembles a paradigmatic slur[7], the blurrier the line between that insult's lexical negative attitude and its sexist attitude. However, I don't think the blurriness of this distinction in some cases is a fatal blow to the bipartite framework I have proposed— rather, it is simply an indication that in some cases the lexical negative attitude communicated by an insult may be sexist in itself. In the case of *cuck* (among others)*,* unlike in the case of a word like *bossy,* the truth-conditional content of the term is deeply tied to gender and sexuality. This fuzzy boundary between the lexical negative attitude and the sexist attitude will continue to arise

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[7] Resemblance to a slur, here, is defined in terms of the level at which a term encodes gender as part of its semantic content. Words like *bitch,* for which gender is a component of propositional content resemble slurs more so than terms like *slut,* for which gender is a component of presuppositional content. These in turn resemble slurs more than words like *bossy,* which are gendered in their practice but not in their semantic content.

and be discussed in the next section, as part of my account of how these attitudes are communicated.

Section 3: A Two-Pronged Account of Gendered Insults

The framework laid out in Section 2.3, in which I divided the attitudes conveyed by gendered insults into the lexical negative attitude and the sexist attitude, underlies my account of the linguistic mechanism responsible for communicating the negative attitudes implicit in gendered insults. These attitudes are, in my view, communicated by separate mechanisms: the lexical negative attitude is communicated semantically through conventional implicature, whereas the sexist attitude is an aspect not of the semantic content but of the linguistic metadata of a gendered insult, which stems from the linguistic practices surrounding it. My rationale for separating the two is further explained throughout this section.

3.1: Conventional Implicature: The Lexical Negative Attitude

3.1.1: What is conventional implicature?

In short, conventional implicature is an aspect of a word's encoded semantic content that does not contribute to the truth conditions of sentences in which it occurs. One clear example to illustrate this concept is the contrast between *and* and *but,* discussed by Frege (1879; Horn 2013). Consider the sentences below:

   10. He's a Republican, and I quite like him.

   11. He's a Republican, but I quite like him.

Sentences (10) and (11) have exactly the same truth conditions. In both cases, in order for the sentence to be true, it must be the case that the subject of the first conjunct is a Republican, and

that the speaker quite likes that subject. However, (10) and (11) do not mean quite the same thing. Sentence (11), but not (10), communicates that there is some expected contrast between someone being a Republican and that person being liked by the speaker. This contrast is part of (11)'s conventional meaning but does not contribute to its truth conditions.

Conventional implicatures, as conceived of by Grice (1961) are detachable, but not cancellable. To say that the implicature is *detachable* is to say that, for any sentence containing a word (or other expression) that bears a conventional implicature, it is possible to create a sentence with the same truth conditions but without the implicature. This is demonstrated by (10) and (11): (10) bears the exact same truth conditions as (11) but without the conventionally implicated contrast between the two conjuncts. However, the implicature communicated by (11) cannot be felicitously cancelled. To demonstrate this, consider (12):

12. He's a Republican, but I quite like him—then again, it's not particularly odd for me to like a Republican.

(12) is certainly not nonsensical. However, the last portion of (12) reads more as a retraction of the choice to use the word *but* than as a cancellation of the implicated contrast between the two conjuncts. The non-cancellability of conventional implicatures differentiates them from conversational implicatures, which can be felicitously cancelled. Furthermore, unlike conversational implicature (Grice 1975), the content implicated by a conventional implicature cannot be derived from general principles of rational behavior or speech, but only through familiarity with the expressions that bear conventional implicatures.

3.1.2: Gendered Insults and Conventional Implicature

Conventional implicature is, I believe, responsible for communicating the lexical negative attitude of a gendered insult. The lexical negative attitude, as defined above, is the negative attitude that a speaker communicates toward the particular trait truth-conditionally invoked by a gendered insult. Of course, defining the truth-conditional semantics of an insult (and thus, pinning down the nature of the lexical negative attitude associated with it) is much more straightforward for some terms than for others. I will first discuss my rationale for positing conventional implicature as the mechanism responsible for communicating the lexical negative attitude using terms with more obvious truth conditions, then go on to discuss how the framework applies to insults (such as *bitch)* for which the truth-conditional semantics poses a greater puzzle.

It is fairly clear that the lexical negative attitude of a gendered insult is not an aspect of its propositional content. When someone is called a *slut,* for example, the speaker's negative attitude toward the target's sexual promiscuity is not part of the at-issue content of that utterance. This can be demonstrated through negation, as in (13):

   13. She's not a slut!

(13) negates the proposition that the subject exhibits the behaviors truth-conditionally invoked by the word *slut.* It does not, however, negate the speaker's belief in the existence of sluts, or their negative attitude toward the sexual behavior or inclinations of the set of people whom they believe to be sluts[8]. Thus, it seems clear that the lexical negative attitude is implicated rather than

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[8] These beliefs can be negated on a metalinguistic level: the hearer could, for example, respond with *There's no such thing as a slut!* This does not negate (13), per se. Rather, it argues that (13) has no truth value whatsoever. One can also refute the presumed lexical negative attitude by responding, for example, *There's nothing wrong with being a slut.*

asserted as part of (13)'s truth conditions. This implicature seems to be conventional rather than conversational: lexical negative attitudes are a regular feature of the words they are associated with, rather than being calculable from a set of broader rational principles. Just as the contradiction conventionally implicated by *but* can only be understood through an understanding of the lexical item itself, there is no way to understand the evaluative content of *bossy* or *slut* aside from familiarity with the terms themselves. There is no generalizable rational principle that would dictate that *bossy* expresses a negative attitude, but *authoritative* does not, for example.

Furthermore, the lexical negative attitude seems to be conventionally implicated because, as a conventional implicature account would predict, this attitude is detachable, but not cancellable. To demonstrate the detachability of the lexical negative attitude, consider again sentences (6) and (7), reproduced below:

6. She likes to sleep around.

7. She's a slut.

As discussed in section 2.3, (6) and (7) assert roughly the same truth conditions, but only (7) communicates the lexical negative attitude. Now consider (14) and (15):

14. She's a slut, but more power to her.

15. I'm a slut and I'm proud!

These sentences, in one way or another, can be read as attempts to cancel the lexical negative attitude. However, I argue that these are potential instances of reclamation rather than statements in which the lexical negative attitudes is truly cancelled, per se. (15) fairly straightforwardly fits the profile for a reclaimed use of an insult: the word *slut* is predicated by the speaker of themselves, and they express that this is a source of pride, rather than shame. (14) is a bit less

clear, but I argue that it too is only felicitous in a reclaimed context. To demonstrate this, consider the different effect (14) would have if uttered by a man than it would if uttered by a woman. Because women have been the historical targets of words like *slut,* they constitute something closer to the "in-group" that will have reclamation of the insult available to them (Croom 2013; Bianchi 2014; Anderson 2017)[9]. If said by a man, (14) seems a bit odder, along the lines of (3) or (8), both reproduced below:

3. I have no problem at all with fags.

8. I love me some sluts.

A straight male speaker would be less easily able to felicitously utter (14): despite the attempt to cancel a negative attitude toward the target's "slutty" disposition, it nevertheless communicates the sort of condescending attitude present in (8).

To further illustrate the detachability and noncancellability of the lexical negative attitude, consider the example of the word *bossy.* Consider (16):

16. She likes to take charge.

In particular, consider the contrast between (16) and (9), which is reproduced below:

9. She's very bossy.

The contrast between these two statements is central to the rationale behind the Ban Bossy campaign (Lean In, 2015): the campaign's website argues that for precisely the same behaviors,

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[9] Though, of course, as *slut* is not straightforwardly a paradigmatic slur, this in-group is not as clearly defined as the in-group for a slur like *chink—*though even for paradigmatic slurs, complex histories and blurry category distinctions make for somewhat fuzzy extensions. From a theoretical standpoint, one could argue that only promiscuous women could felicitously reclaim *slut,* or perhaps promiscuous people more generally. *Slut* is also frequently used in the gay community, so one could argue that some subset of gay men are also a part of this in-group.

girls are more likely to be described as *bossy,* while boys are more likely to be described in terms more along the lines of those used in (16) (more precisely, it states that "when a little boy asserts himself, he's called a leader. Yet when a little girl does the same, she risks being branded 'bossy'"). This discrepancy can only be construed as sexist in light of the fact that, while (9) and (16) describe the same behaviors, only (9) communicates a negative attitude toward these behaviors. That is, the speaker of (16) would assert roughly the same truth conditions as the speaker of (9), but without implicating any negative attitude toward those behaviors. This shows that the lexical negative attitude of the word *bossy* is detachable. The attitude is not, however, easily cancellable. Consider, for example, sentence (17):

17. She's very bossy, but I think that's a good quality.

(17) seems to fall into the same trap that was discussed for (14): in some contexts, it is felicitous, but it seems to be more so if the speaker is someone who is themselves likely to be targeted by the term *bossy* in the first place. Thus, (17) seems more like an act of reclamation, or perhaps an echoic use of the term (Bianchi 2014), rather than a true cancellation of the lexical negative attitude.

Because of the reasonably clear propositional content of the terms *slut* and *bossy*, it is fairly easy to apply such diagnostics to them. But what about a word like *bitch,* which can mean very different things in different contexts? *Bitch* may select for a number of different traits (Nunberg 2017), including being seen as aggressive, rude, feeble, non-autonomous (in cases where someone is referred to as someone else's *bitch*), or, in some contexts, simply female. What exactly, then, is the lexical negative attitude of a word like *bitch,* or other vaguer gendered insults such as *cunt* or *twat*? To answer this question, I will refer back to the framework Adam Croom (2013) devised to account for the literal meaning of slurs. This account is discussed in

more detail in Section 1.4.2, but I will briefly recap: on Croom's account, the extension of a slur

is somewhat flexible, and may encompass people regarded as having any subset of a set of traits

associated with the term. These traits are ranked, with some traits being more salient than others

(though the ranking of traits may vary quite a bit from speaker to speaker). In a given context, a

speaker need not necessarily invoke every trait on the list—this allows Croom to account for

paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic derogatory uses, as well as appropriated uses of slurs.

Words like *bitch,* I would argue, behave in much the same way. *Bitch* encodes a variety

of traits (a non-exhaustive list of which is given above), but not every one of these traits is salient

in every single use. The lexical negative attitude of a word like *bitch*, in my view, applies only to

the traits saliently invoked in a given context (and, in general, it is possible to describe these

traits in a more neutral way, preserving the idea that the lexical negative attitude is detachable).

In a context where *bitch* is used to insinuate that a target is weak (as it generally does when the

target is a man), the lexical negative attitude is a negative attitude toward the target's weakness;

in a context where *bitch* is used to derogate a target on the basis of rudeness, that rudeness is the

target of the lexical negative attitude. This brings me back to my earlier argument that some

gendered insults are more *inherently* sexist than others—particularly, those that encode gender as

at least some component of their truth-conditional semantics (though not necessarily an

indispensable part), as *bitch* does, are sexist by virtue of their literal meaning. In a context where

bitch refers only to its target's womanhood (and thus behaves as a slur), the lexical negative

attitude is directed toward the gender of the target. For gendered insults that do not encode

gender at all, the sexist attitude is entirely separate from the lexical negative attitude. Even for

gendered insults which do include gender as one of their family-resemblance traits, I think it is

worth examining the two attitudes separately despite the inherent sexism of the lexical negative

attitude. In the next subsection, I will discuss the mechanism that I believe to be responsible for communicating the sexist attitude.

3.2: Linguistic Metadata: The Sexist Attitude

Nunberg (2017) holds that "racists don't use slurs because they're derogative; slurs are derogative because they're the words racists use." Pullum (2016) and Nunberg both use the concept of "metadata" to describe the source of the derogatory aspect of slurs; I too will make use of this term. "Metadata" refers to some sort of information about the *way* that a given linguistic expression is likely to be used or interpreted, separate from its lexical meaning. For example, a given term's level of perceived formality is an aspect of metadata. Consider the following examples, adapted from Pullum (2016):

18. At which station did you leave it?

19. Which station did you leave it at?

While (18) and (19) are equivalent in their semantics, (18) seems much more formal than (19). The comparative formality of (18) has nothing to do with the lexical meaning of the sentence or its constituent parts. Instead, it derives from an aspect of the linguistic metadata of its grammatical construction. In this section, I put forth a similar argument for the sexist nature of gendered insults: for many gendered insults, the sexist attitude instead is an aspect of an insult's metadata rather than its literal meaning. This concept is advantageous because, unlike a radical contextualist account (Kennedy 2002; Hom 2008)[10], it allows us to acknowledge the fact that the sexist attitude of a gendered insult is communicated regularly, while still accounting for the

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[10] On a radical contextualist account, the offensive content of an epithet varies in each particular context of its utterance.

sexist attitude of gendered insults (or the bigoted content of slurs) within the realm of pragmatics (the advantages of which are argued throughout this section).

The concept of linguistic metadata is tied closely to the linguistic practices surrounding a term. The phrase "linguistic practice" is, admittedly, a vague one, so I will clarify this notion further. The linguistic practices that surround a term encompass a variety of different systematic patterns that the term follows. The group of people who tend to use a given word, the people to whom a word is used to refer, and other words that frequently co-occur with a word can all be considered pieces of the linguistic practices surrounding a word. Linguistic practices include both synchronic and diachronic patterns. The practices that surround a given word do not constitute the word's *meaning,* but they are nevertheless facts about the word that are relevant to the information that a word communicates. A word's metadata, I argue, arises when linguistic practices form patterns that are clear and systematic to the point that they are folk-linguistically recognizable (the "Ban Bossy" campaign, for example, is evidence of folk-linguistic recognition of a linguistic practice wherein *bossy* is primarily used to derogate girls and women).

It is important to note, here, why I believe that there is a distinction between the ways in which the lexical and sexist attitudes of gendered insults are communicated. To illustrate this, it is useful to consider a word like *nag,* which bears little resemblance to a paradigmatic slur in that it does not encode gender as part of its presuppositional or propositional content. The word *nag* encodes its lexical negative attitude (that is, a negative attitude toward the behavior of persistently urging someone to perform some action) on the level of conventional implicature, as discussed in section 3.1. The fact that *nag* communicates a negative attitude and *remind* does not

is a matter of a semantic difference between the two words[11]. The sexist attitude of the word *nag*, however, cannot be entirely understood through an understanding of the meaning of the word itself. In order for a hearer to perceive the sexist attitude of the word *nag,* they must on some level be familiar with how the word is *used* (and thus, its metadata), and not just what it means. The fact that *nag* is more gendered than *remind* has little to do with the literal meaning of the words and everything to do with the ways in which these words are used. Again, the distinction between the two types of attitude I isolate is less clear for terms that more closely resemble slurs; nevertheless, these same principles can be extrapolated to other sorts of gendered insults, at least to some extent.

When a speaker uses a gendered insult, that speaker invokes not only the lexical meaning of the word, but also the hearer's past experiences of hearing the word. The use of a word constitutes an act of affiliating oneself with the group of people who generally use that word—it follows that if a word is saliently associated with a group of people or a history that is considered to be sexist, then the use of that word may be considered an act of sexism. This account is, I think, easier to demonstrate for adjectives like *bossy, shrill,* and *hysterical,* and verbs like *nag.* However, I believe that it applies as well to nominal epithets like *bitch* and *slut,* which might be deemed more offensive than the former type. The difference between the two types of insults results from multiple intersecting phenomena. In part, it stems from noun aversion (Horn 2016), a phenomenon briefly mentioned in Section 1.1. Nouns have frequently been observed to make particularly powerful insults, because rather than describe their subjects or attribute certain traits

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[11] *Nag* and *remind* also differ in their syntactic properties as well: one can be *nagged* in general, but must be reminded *of* something or other. This may be linked to the negativity, or perhaps even the gendered nature of *nag,* given that *nag* can be felicitously used without the speaker specifying any purpose to the nagging—thus, the word *nag* may somehow imply that the behavior is unnecessary. *Reminding,* however, needs to be done with some sort of purpose.

to them, nouns have the potential to "brand" or essentialize their subject. Nouns somehow insinuate that their referents are primarily defined by the semantic content of the noun used to describe them. This is not so for adjectives: there is a sharp contrast between the adjectival and nominal forms of the same word. Consider for example, the contrast between the phrases *gay people* and *the gays.* The latter reads as distinctly more derogatory than the former (Shrayber 2014). However, the difference in harshness between *bitch* and *shrill* cannot entirely be chalked up to a difference between parts of speech—after all, it is maintained if *bitch* is replaced with the adjective *bitchy.* Some words, even synonyms, are simply considered "worse" or "stronger" than others. This distinction arises from a different, though not entirely unrelated, aspect of linguistic metadata[12].

There are a number of advantages to accounting for the sexist attitude conveyed by a gendered insult within the realm of pragmatics. One of these advantages is that it accounts for disagreement within a speech community about how sexist a term actually is. Consider again Christopher Hom's (2008) concept of semantic externalism, or the idea that the semantic values of words are determined in part by the behavior of a speech community. While I think this position is valid, it does a poor job of explaining why the bigoted attitude of a slur is semantically encoded, given that among speakers there is considerable disagreement about whether slurs are legitimately bigoted or offensive. This lack of communal consensus is particularly prevalent for adjectival and verbal insults like *bossy, hysterical,* or *nag.* In an article in *The Telegraph,* journalist Martin Daubney (2014) lamented that the "Ban Bossy" campaign, spearheaded by Sheryl Sandberg and backed by a number of prominent women (including

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[12] Intuitions about derogatory force may differ wildly from speaker to speaker with respect to how "strong" a given insult's derogatory force is. In some cases, there are more systematic differences that emerge from dialect to dialect: for example, a far stronger taboo exists on the word *cunt* in American English than in British English.

Beyoncé and Condoleezza Rice) was "yet another example of the vocal feminist minority finding offensive, sexist behavior where it doesn't exist." "*Bossy* isn't even gender-specific," he opined. The very existence of the Ban Bossy campaign, as well as the backlash from people who decried *bossy* as a sexist word but called for reclamation rather than "banning" (Talbot 2014, Moore 2014), however, are a testament to the fact that not all speakers agree on whether *bossy* can be considered a sexist term. The level of societal consensus about a given insult's offensiveness or lack thereof likely varies from word to word: some people, for example, might consider *bitch,* but not *nag,* to be sexist. Even terms like *bitch* and *slut* though, are not universally considered sexist. It is difficult to see how a semantic account of the sexist content of gendered insults can account for this fact. The concept of metadata is better able to account for cases of "relaxed conversation between bigots" (Camp 2013), in which the hearer does not interpret the content of an utterance to be offensive or sexist (even if an overhearer would). As Nunberg (2017) points out, many real-world uses of identity-linked insults occur in the context of conversations between like-minded individuals.

Furthermore, treating the sexist content of a gendered insult (or the bigoted content of any slur) as an aspect of linguistic metadata rather than encoded meaning accounts well for how rapidly the practices surrounding the use of particular words can change. Consider, for example, the rapid turnover of conventional racial labels for African Americans (Smith 1992). Within the span of a few generations, the customary means for referring to black people shifted from *colored* to *negro* to *black,* and then partially from *black* to *African American.* The part of this history that is significant to my analysis is not merely the fact that various terms have quickly shifted in and out of common use, but the fact that the terms *negro* and *colored* now read to

many as offensive[13]. When an older speaker uses such dated terms, the speaker is likely to be

perceived as culturally unaware, rather than purposefully hateful, but in the mouth of a younger

speaker the effect is a bit more sinister. This discrepancy is, I think, a perfect example of

Nunberg's (2017) framework (in which slurs are a means of expressing affiliation with a

particular group of people—generally bigots) at work. The group of people associated with a

given word often changes over time. Thus, when a speaker whom the hearer presumes to have

been alive at a time when *colored* was in vogue uses the term, the hearer is less likely to perceive

the speaker as overtly racist. The use of *colored* does indeed communicate an affiliation with a

particular group regardless of who uses it, but when it is used by an older speaker, this group

might merely be a community of speakers that existed decades ago, when the word was not

predominantly used by overt white supremacists[14]. If a speaker is presumed to have grown up

after words like *negro* and *colored* fell out of convention, they are communicating some sort of

affiliation with either a historical period famous for rampant racial discrimination, or with the

people who use such words today. It would be, I think, more difficult to explain this

phenomenon on a semanticist account: though words may certainly undergo semantic shift, this

does not cleanly explain why some speakers would be more exempt than others from the most

reprehensible interpretations of particular words.

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[13] Again, though, taboos are not straightforward: the use of these words persists in certain contexts, such as the word *colored* in the acronym NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

[14] This is not to erase the fact that "negro" was construed as offensive by some, even when it was in wider use. As early as 1928, Roland A. Barton wrote that "the word, 'negro'...is a white man's word to make us feel inferior" (Smith 1992). Similarly, many terms for women that are not necessarily insults per se can be seen as diminutive and in that sense demeaning to women; examples include *lady* and *chick* (Baker 1981). Lakoff (1974) refers to *lady* as a "euphemistic" term for women: she argues that women are far more commonly referred to by such euphemisms than men are (even if parallels, like *gent,* do technically exist for men). Recently, a parallel trend has developed wherein women are often referred to as *females* in the same breath that men are called simply *men* (Brown 2015).

Within the realm of gendered insults, there are also examples of phenomena like the one discussed above (as well as other racial labels, such as *oriental*). A number of these examples are discussed by Baker (1981), who looked in depth at the types of labels that are used to apply to women. Consider, for example, the term *broad,* which has undergone a number of evolutions (Allum 2015). While, at one point, it was used generally to refer to prostitutes[15], it later went on to be used roughly as a synonym for *woman,* without necessarily communicating any negative attitude about its referents, general or specific[16]. In some cases, it was used to insinuate that a woman was hard or in some way unfeminine, as in the expression *tough old* broad, but in other cases it was used to refer to women more generally. Today, *broad* sounds antiquated, though it has recently undergone some reclamation efforts, such as the title of the sitcom *Broad City.* Though I have no experimental data to corroborate this claim, it is my intuition that the word *broad,* used to refer to a woman, would sound more shocking, and perhaps more intentionally offensive, if uttered by a younger speaker outside of a reclaimed context. By my intuition, the reclaimed use is only available to women: it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which a man could call a woman a *broad* without communicating some sort of sexist attitude.

Treating the sexist attitude as an aspect of metadata can also explain the example, raised by Nunberg (2017) (and others) of childrens' use of slurs—or, in this case, gendered insults. In the case of taboo nominal epithets, like *bitch,* a child using the term might make the hearer uncomfortable. But, if the hearer presumed the child to be unaware of the taboo nature of the term, they would be less likely to attribute a sexist attitude to the child. It is not only the taboo nature of these nominal epithets that is relevant to this example, however, but the lexical

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[15] The term *gay* also used to refer to female prostitutes, prior to becoming a term used to denote men attracted to other men (Chauncey 1994).

[16] Though some, such as Robin Lakoff (1974), consider *broad* fairly offensive: Lakoff draws a parallel between *broad* and *nigger*—though she does not by any means argue that the two are equally inflammatory.

negative attitude present within them. In the case of a child, though, it is also possible that that child might be presumed to understand the lexical negative attitude of a word but still fail to communicate a sexist attitude to the hearer, given that children are less likely to be aware of the social practices (sexist or otherwise) surrounding terms than their adult counterparts. If the child is not presumed to be aware of these practices, then it is unlikely that any sexist attitude would be attributed to them by the hearer[17]. This scenario seems particularly likely to occur for words like *bossy* or *nag,* which do not encode gender as part of their semantic meaning.

Moreover, as Nunberg (2017) points out, a speaker's attitude toward women, or toward gender norms more generally, is rarely part of the "at-issue" content of an assertion consisting of a gendered insult (unless, of course, the speaker is uttering something along the lines of *all women are cunts*—but these sorts of utterances make up only a tiny portion of all uses of gendered insults). If a speaker uses the word *slut,* for example, their hearer may well presume by virtue of their word choice that they hold the belief that women and men should be held to different moral standards when it comes to sexual promiscuity. However, consider again sentence (7), reproduced below:

7. She's a slut.

When it comes to interpreting the propositional meaning of a sentence like (7), the speaker's attitude toward gendered sexual mores is neither here nor there. This is particularly true in cases of more casual conversation between like-minded bigots, which both Nunberg and Camp (2013) pay particular attention to. Consider the example of a man who, in conversation with another male friend, casually refers to *some twat who came into my work today,* without the intention of

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[17] By virtue of their using that word, that is.

communicating anything about the referent of *twat* other than her perceived gender. In this case, it seems a bit far-fetched to posit that the speakers utterance would entail that women are universally unpleasant or deserve fewer rights than men (or at least that the speaker believed that), as certain semanticist accounts of slurs, such as that of Christopher Hom (2008; 2010) would argue. To demonstrate this, consider the hypothetical exchange in (20):

20. Speaker A: Some twat came into my work today.

    Speaker B: #Hey wait a minute, that can't be true—women are equal to men!

Consider also (21):

21. Speaker A: That woman sure was a slut.

    Speaker B: #That's not true! Women and men should be held to the same standards of sexual behavior!

That Speaker B's responses, in both (20) and (21), are infelicitous demonstrates that the sexist attitude is not an aspect of truth conditional content: one cannot refute the truth of an assertion involving a gendered insult by refuting the sexist attitude.

   Nor does it seem to be an aspect of conventional implicature, in that the sexist attitudes of gendered insults are not as inextricably linked to their respective words as the lexical negative attitudes are. This can be demonstrated by considering examples in which insults that are gendered in their practice are used in ways that do not align with their overall patterns of use. For example, consider (22) and (23):

22. He's a huge slut[18].

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[18] As discussed previously, intuitions about the felicitousness of this sentence differ from speaker to speaker (based on personal conversations). Imagine that the speaker of (22) intends only to communicate that the subject is disposed toward sexual promiscuity, and not that he is feminine.

23. He's constantly nagging me about something or other.

In (22) and (23), the lexical negative attitudes of *slut* and *nag* are communicated. However, in both cases, the sentence defies a general pattern of use (which will be substantiated in section 5.1) wherein these insults are generally applied to women. The word *slut* cannot be divorced from historical and social patterns of gendered double standards for sexual activity—and yet, in (22), by derogating a man with the word *slut,* the speaker does not implicate a belief in such gendered double standards. Similarly, the word *nag,* in real-world use, is generally applied to women (particularly mothers and female romantic partners). In subverting this trend, the speaker of (23) also subverts the sexist attitude of the term[19]. The possibility of using certain gendered insults without communicating the sexist attitudes associated with them strongly suggests that conventional implicature is not at work. Thus, it becomes necessary to account for the sexist attitude on the basis of pragmatic, rather than semantic, forces.

Of course, the idea that the sexist attitude of a gendered insult is communicated as an aspect of metadata rather than as an aspect of semantic meaning—or indeed, that the sexist attitude is even present for non-taboo adjectival and verbal insults like *whine* and *bossy*—is dependent on the idea that the practices surrounding gendered insults are indeed sexist in some way. In the next section, I will discuss past studies how various insults are used and perceived differently for men and women. In Section 5, I present corpus data that sheds light on the ways in which the practices surrounding particular insults are gendered, and discuss what these practices say about culture, and about the sexist attitudes communicated by gendered insults.

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[19] This discussion brings me again to the point that some gendered insults *are* gendered by virtue of their semantics: referring to a woman as a *cuck* or a man as a *bitch* does not subvert the sexist attitudes associated with these terms in the same way that (22) and (23) do.

Section 4: Background on the Differences Between Male and Female Gendered Insults

4.1: Types of Insulting Terms

Quite a bit of research has been devoted to isolating the types of terms that are used colloquially to refer to men and women, in contexts which include but are not limited to overt derogation. In her 1999 paper "Rebaking the Pie," Caitlin Hines discusses the prevalence of metaphors comparing women to food, in particular the "women as dessert" metaphor—which, she argues, degrades women by reducing them to objects for consumption Hines notes that women are particularly likely to be referred to by the names of desserts which come in batches or slices. In 1981, Robert Baker published an essay "on women's liberation," in which he used data from his students to divide the sorts of terms that are sometimes used interchangeably with "woman" into distinct and cohesive categories. The categories he delineates are *neutral* terms (like *lady* or *gal), animal* terms (*chick, bird, fox), plaything* terms *(babe, doll), gender* terms (like *skirt)* and *sexual* terms *(snatch, piece of ass, lay)*[20]. These categories are slightly distinct from *insults,* per se, but it does provide some useful information about the different ways that men and women are described: men, Baker argued, are not frequently the targets of such diminutive language. In general, such terms reflect a pattern by which women are more likely than men to be referred to (particularly, but not exclusively, by male speakers) using the names of *objects* rather than people.

Numerous gendered insults, both male- and female-directed, are derived from terms for genitals. Slang terms for both penises (*dick, prick, putz, schmuck*) and vaginas (*cunt, pussy*) have

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[20] This is not an exhaustive list of the terms Baker found, merely a set of a few examples from each of the categories he named. Furthermore, it should be noted that these categories are, to some extent, fluid: consider, for example, the word *piece* or *slice,* which Hines (1999) gave much attention to. In some cases, *piece* could fall into under the umbrella of sexual terms (as in *piece of ass*), but it also exists in the contexts of phrases like *piece of pie*, which may also be used to refer to a woman. Interestingly, food terms do not make it into Baker's taxonomy.

made their way into the language as insults. There is considerable variation, even among terms that seem to be similar in origin, in which traits are implied by a given genital-based insult. For instance, while *pussy* and *cunt* are both used as colloquial terms for the vagina, their meanings as epithets are quite different. The former generally implies weakness or fearfulness, while the latter implies more general unpleasantness. In that sense, *cunt* bears more resemblance to *dick* or *prick* than it does to *pussy. Dick* and *prick* are somewhat more similar in terms of the traits they criticize, though *dick* seems slightly stronger.

Another category of gendered insult worth noting are those conventionally used to refer to homosexuals. This category of insults includes slurs for gay men (*fag, fruit, homo, fairy,* as well as *queer,* despite how the term's use has shifted over the past decades) and lesbians (*[bull]dyke, butch*), as well as the terms *gay* and *lesbian* themselves. Furthermore, the terms *woman* and *man* themselves can be used in a derogatory way, if *man* is applied to a woman or *woman* to a man (Leslie 2015). In certain cases, *man* applied to a woman may in fact act as a compliment of sorts, albeit still an implicitly sexist one. Sarah-Jane Leslie (2015) discusses in depth an instance in which Hillary Clinton was called the "only man" in Obama's cabinet. In some sense, this can be viewed as a compliment to her boldness or strength, but at the same time it insinuates that she is somehow an improper woman (while simultaneously insulting the masculinity of the male members of Obama's cabinet—though, as Leslie points out, it is unclear where this puts Janet Napolitano). Furthermore, *woman* and *man* can be powerful insults when applied to members of the transgender community, if a transgender person is referred to by the gender they were assigned at birth rather than the gender with which they identify (Ansara and Hegarty 2013). A number of insulting terms exist as well that specifically refer to transgender people, such as *tranny* and *shemale.*

4.2: Past Studies on Male vs. Female Gendered Insults

   While gendered insults exist as a linguistic phenomenon, they cannot be divorced by the social phenomena that surround them. In a 1987 study called "What's the worst thing? Gender-directed insults," sociologists Kathleen Preston and Kimberley Stanley asked a group of college students to answer give their opinions on four separate questions: what the worst thing is that a man can call a woman, what the worst thing is that a woman can call a man, what the worst thing is that a man can call a man, and what the worst thing is that a woman can call a woman. While there were 134 unique responses in total, the nature of these responses formed very clear patterns in terms of which insults were deemed the most insulting to a particular gender. Furthermore, Preston and Stanley noticed patterned differences in the ways that male and female respondents answered the set of questions. They found that insults referring to sexual promiscuity were directed almost entirely toward women, and that insults referring to homosexuality were disproportionately targeted at men, but that subjects perceived this set of insults as more insulting when they came from a male speaker, rather than a female one.

   These differences point to the fact that the sexist nature of gendered insults cannot be treated as a purely linguistic phenomenon—gendered insults also exist as a social phenomenon, and their slur-like, gendered component has quite a bit to do with the social expectations placed on different genders. Certain traits are simply deemed to be more insulting when attributed to women than when attributed to men, and vice versa. This is not entirely surprising, particularly when it comes to traits like sexual promiscuity or aggressiveness, traits for which double standards have been noted for years: in the words of Baker (1981), "when one man fucks many women he is a playboy and gains status; when a woman is fucked by many men she degrades

herself and loses stature[21]." The idea that concepts may be more insulting to members of

particular gender is also reflected in a study by Coyne et al. (1978), which empirically examines

the differences in speaker perception of traits associated with the word *bitch* (which is typically

gendered female) and the word *bastard* (which is typically gendered male). Coyne et al. found

that male subjects (but not female subjects) included the trait "dominant" in their

characterization of a *bitch* but not of a *bastard,* reflecting a deviation from the social norm of

ideal female behavior. Female subjects, however, tended to emphasize more stereotypically

masculine traits in their characterization of *bastard.* An intriguing finding of this study was that

across the board, subjects tended to differentiate the two terms by including traits in the term

associated with the opposite sex that they did not include in their characterization of the term

associated with their own sex: in their own words, "for men, the masculinity[22] of *bitch* provided

the distinction, whereas for women, it was the masculinity of *bastard.*" This finding brings up an

interesting point about the difference between *bitch* and *bastard*, which is that one insult targets

men for *adhering* to the cultural expectations for their gender, whereas the other targets women

for *failing* to adhere to those expectations.

It is not at all true that all male-gendered insults derogate their targets based on their

adherence to gender expectations, however. Particularly among those insults which Preston &

Stanley's subjects identified as being most insulting when coming from a male speaker, the exact

opposite was true. A great number of insults which are gendered male attack men for being weak

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[21] This quote also raises an interesting question about the semantics of the word *fuck*, namely whether *fuck* refers only to the act of sexually penetrating someone else, or if any participation in sexual intercourse can be considered *fucking*. Baker (1971) claims the former, though it's possible its usage has undergone some shift in the intervening decades. Jensen (2014) argues that *fuck* is a transitive verb with an agent and a patient, but does not specify that in heterosexual sex the agent must be male and the patient must be female (though she found that in about two thirds of appearances throughout a historical corpus, the patient of transitive *fuck* was indeed female).

[22] *Masculinity* in this case should be taken to mean that women who can be described as *bitches* are perceived as less prototypically feminine than those who would not be described as such.

or effeminate *(cuck* being a good example*),* and slurs such as *fag* are also often applied to straight men for a variety of reasons (Brown and Alderson 2010), often to diminish the target's masculinity. Preston and Stanley's (1987) study revealed a pattern wherein both male and female subjects disproportionately said that the worst thing a *woman* could call a man was some insult invoking being unethical or mean, whereas the worst thing a *man* could call a man was some term invoking homosexuality. The folk-linguistic belief, at least, is that women are more likely to insult men on the basis of their conforming to normative masculinity, whereas men are more likely to insult other men for failing to conform.

Preston and Stanley's (1987) results shed interesting light on the role of sexual orientation in gender-directed insults. An intriguing finding of their study was that male respondents frequently listed *lesbian* as the worst way for a man to insult a woman. However, female speakers did not share this intuition. This is consistent with the findings of LaMar and Kite (1997), who found that men in general hold more negative stereotypes of gay men and lesbians than women do. It is unsurprising, then, that this cultural trend is reflected in how men and women use and interpret language. The use of anti-gay slurs and insults specifically has been widely researched. A 2010 study by Tyler Brown and Kevin Alderson focuses particularly on the use of the words *fag* and *faggot* by heterosexual male speakers. Brown and Alderson divided uses of the word *fag* into three categories: *joking non-sexual, pressuring non-sexual,* and *sexual.* The latter corresponds roughly to Croom's (2013) notion of the paradigmatic derogatory use. The first two correspond to the non-paradigmatic derogatory use, with the *joking* uses being ones in which the word was used as a "generic" insult, and *pressuring* uses being those in which speakers particularly intend to highlight the target's lack of conformation to masculine ideals. The study explores the relationship of speakers' scores on metrics for opposite-sex sexual

orientation, masculine gender roles, and adherence to traditional gender ideologies (as well as ethnic background) to their usage of these three types of homosexual insults. Brown and Alderson found that men with higher scores for "masculine gender role" were more likely to use all three types of homosexual insults than men with low to moderate scores, and that men with high levels of adherence to traditional gender role ideology were particularly likely to use pressuring non-sexual and sexual homosexual insults. Men with higher levels of opposite-sex sexual orientation, they found, were more likely to use joking non-sexual homosexual insults. On their analysis, heterosexual men's motivations for using these insults are slightly more complex than a desire to derogate gay men: they argue that it served as a means of asserting their heterosexuality and masculinity to women, and to assert their position within groups of other heterosexual men.

The linguistic and social landscape of gendered insults is very complex. Particularly given how many different gendered insults there are, and how much variation there is within that category, it is difficult to put forth any blanket statement on how the linguistic content of gendered insults is tied to socially enforced gender norms. Folk linguistic studies like those of Preston and Stanley (1987) and Coyne et al (1978), however, do reveal some broad truths about how gendered insults are used and perceived in society. For one, there are systematic differences in the behaviors and personality traits invoked by male-gendered and female-gendered insults. Furthermore, speakers intuit not only that certain terms are more insulting when applied to a particular gender, but also that gendered insults behave differently depending on the *speaker's* gender. The finding that speakers differ along gendered lines in terms of which words they are more likely to use was also integral to Baker's (1981) discussion of the terms used to refer to women—he found that women (in addition to men) used terms within his neutral category, as

well as some in the animal category, but that men were far more likely to use terms within the plaything, gender, and sexual categories. In the next section, I will discuss my own findings about the ways in which the practices surrounding male- and female-gendered insults differ, and what information this provides about gendered insults as both a linguistic and social phenomenon.

Section 5: A Qualitative Corpus Analysis of Various Gendered Insults

In this section, I further examine the systematic ways in which certain insults are differently applied to men and women, based on qualitative corpus analysis. The following analysis is based on data from the Corpus of Online Registers of English (CORE). CORE is a freely available online corpus of over 50 million words, made available by Brigham Young University (Davies 2016-). The corpus contains data from many different registers, and sorts data based on those registers (*register,* in this case, refers not to the degree of formality of speech, but to the genre of the source material). These registers are quite disparate: the corpus contains data from song lyrics, religious sermons, opinion blogs, short stories/fan fiction, discussion fora, and a number of other sources. In part, this corpus was selected because of the availability of data from informal sources such as online discussion forums: while larger English corpora are available, many of these disproportionately come from news sources and academic texts. Because I am most interested in informal usage (given that many of the terms I am examining are generally considered uncouth), CORE is appropriate for my aims. Moreover, while CORE contains only English-language data, its sources come from a wide variety of English dialects. While CORE does not provide a speaker's gender, it provides extensive context, as well as links to original data sources—thus, it is often (though not always) possible to determine the speaker's gender.

One of the tools provided by CORE is the option of making customized word lists, which allows the user to search for instances of more than one word at a time. I created word lists of nominal epithets (and their adjectival forms) for a number of different categories of insults. These categories were divided on the basis of the behaviors and traits that they encode, and were heavily influenced by the findings of Preston and Stanley (1987). They include homosexual slurs, terms denoting promiscuity, female and male genital terms, and slurs regarding transgender identity. I also searched for instances of *bitch, bastard,* and *douche* separately, without grouping them into a word list. A few generally male-directed insults (such as *cuck/cuckold* and *fuckboy)* were excluded from analysis simply because they did not appear frequently enough in the corpus to make many substantive observations about. The words themselves will be discussed throughout this section. After running these searches, I used the CORE website to create a sample data set of 100-200 samples (depending on the number of words in the list) and read through those sample data sets. A number of patterns emerged. In particular, I was searching for patterns that differentiated the ways in which men and women are targeted by insults, but I discuss other observations as well. These patterns are discussed below, separated by category of insult. One aspect of CORE's data that bears mentioning is that the terms *he, him, boy* and *man* appear more frequently than the terms *she, her, girl* and *woman* by a factor of nearly two—it seems to be the case that in this corpus, there are simply more instances of men being talked about than women. This could skew the frequency of certain uses of terms.

As a clarificatory note on terminology, I refer to three different types of contexts of use for these terms, those being *insulting* contexts, *self-deprecating* contexts, and *appropriated* contexts. Insulting contexts are defined as contexts in which a speaker/writer, using the second or third person, refers to someone else using a relevant term. Self-deprecating contexts are those in

which speakers refer to themselves using a relevant term, without evidence that the term is being used in a positive light. Appropriated contexts are synonymous with reclaimed contexts—uses in which a speaker describes themself, or a group of people of which they are a part, using a relevant term with some clear indication that the term is being used in a neutral or positive light.

5.1: Nominal Insults

Insults denoting promiscuity

The word lists of insults denoting promiscuity comprised the words *slut, whore, skank, slutty,* and *skanky.* Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the findings of Preston and Stanley (1987), these terms are almost exclusively used to refer to women (in cases where the gender of the target was clear). In fact, in the data sample I created, I found only one type of exception to this rule. Though I found no instances of a man being called a *slut* or a *skank*, there were a few instances in which a man was referred to (at least in some sense) as a *whore.* However, in every single one of these cases, the word *whore* was modified by some noun or adjective such that the definition of the phrase did not refer to sexual promiscuity at all. There were instances of men being called *attention whore, media whore, consumerist whore,* and *oil/oil money whore.* In these cases, the men being targeted by *whore* were being criticized not for behaviors relating to their sexuality, but for what the speaker perceives as either excessive attention-seeking behavior or excessive greed/capitalist consumption. The use of the word *whore* seems to draw an analogy between these behaviors and prostitution or sexual promiscuity more generally—thus, I would argue that both the lexical negative attitude and the sexist attitude of the term are present (though certainly not at-issue) in these uses. There were also instances of phrases such as *attention whore* being used to target women, though in the majority of cases *whore,* when targeted toward a woman, referred to sexual licentiousness or (in fewer cases) the state of being a literal prostitute.

Homosexual slurs

This list consisted of the terms *fag, faggot, dyke,* and *queer*. Other terms such as *fruit, fairy* and *homo* were considered, but were eventually excluded from the list because the vast majority of their uses referred to something not at all relevant to homosexuality. *Queer* also turned out to be not particularly useful to the analysis—most uses of *queer* were in non-insulting contexts, either being used self-referentially as a neutral descriptor, or in a phrase such as *queer studies* or *queer rights*. I therefore decided to run a separate search, consisting only of *fag, faggot,* and *dyke* (I also searched for *cocksucker*[23], which returned only one result—though it was referring to a man). I found that, in general, *fag* and *faggot* appeared far more frequently than *dyke,* even accounting for the fact that men seem to be mentioned more frequently in the corpus than women. Furthermore, *fag* and *faggot* were primarily used in insulting contexts, rather than self-deprecating or appropriated ones. *Dyke,* however, appeared more frequently in appropriated contexts than in insulting ones (though there were indeed some instances of *dyke* in insulting contexts). Moreover, many uses of *fag* seemed to fall under the category of "non-paradigmatic derogatory uses," while there were relatively few of these instances for *dyke* (though both terms were used in both paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic derogatory contexts at least sometimes). There were no obvious instances in which *faggot* was used to refer to a woman or *dyke* to a man.

The discrepancy in frequency, and in the number of appropriated uses, between *fag* and *dyke* may be interpreted in a number of different ways. One of these interpretations is simply that *dyke* is farther along in the process of reclamation than *fag* or *faggot* are—while there are parallels across different words' reclamation processes, every word that comes to be reclaimed

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[23] If applied to a woman, of course, this term cannot really be considered an insult having to do with homosexuality.

will go through the process with a unique timeline and history. Another possible interpretation of these findings, however, would corroborate the findings of both Preston and Stanley (1987) and Brown and Alderson (2010). That is, due to some element of culture, calling a man gay is simply deemed a more effective insult than calling a woman lesbian, and thus *fag* and *faggot* are used with greater frequency than *dyke*. While this difference should be studied in future detail, I am inclined to say that some combination of linguistic and cultural forces is at work in this difference.

Terms for Female Genitals

This list consisted of the words *twat, cunt,* and *pussy*. These terms differ somewhat in meaning: *pussy* usually insults on the basis of perceived weakness of cowardice, while *cunt* and *twat* usually refer to a more general unpleasantness. Nevertheless, I grouped them together due to their shared basis in slang terms for female genitalia. My analysis includes only those uses in which these terms were used to refer to a person, and not those in which they were used to refer to actual genitals. I found that *cunt* and *twat* were in some cases used as a slurring term for women in general—for example, in one example the phrase *some twat*[24] was used apparently to refer to some indefinite woman, without any apparent reference to any quality of hers other than being female[25]. Aside from these derogative uses, though, in the *majority* of cases *cunt, twat,* and *pussy* were applied to men rather than to women—this is fairly surprising, as *twat* and *cunt* are, among gendered insults, some of the closest to paradigmatic slurs against women in terms of

[24] Both *cunt* and *twat* occurred more often in source material that came from British speakers as opposed to American ones—though it is not always possible to definitively pin down the nationality of the speaker of n example in CORE.

[25] I would distinguish these uses of *some twat* from the phrases *some pussy/some ass* in cases where these refer to a body part: while both are metonymic in some sense, *some twat* does not connote that the speaker sees the referent as a sexual target quite as strongly as *some pussy* or *some ass* do.

their semantics (as shown by their derogative uses, wherein they referred merely to the fact of someone's womanhood). All three terms appeared in both insulting and self-deprecating contexts. *Pussy* also appears as a component of a few other expressions, such as *pussy footing* (acting non-committally) and *pussy pass* (a term used in anti-feminist circles to refer to perceived immunity from consequences on the basis of womanhood).

The finding that terms for female genitals are disproportionately used to target men in insulting contexts and in self-deprecating contexts is an intriguing one. One possible interpretation of this trend is that, by using a term for female genitals to derogate a male target, the speaker insinuates not only that the man is cowardly or unpleasant, but also that he is feminine. It has been found in multiple studies (Preston and Stanley 1987, Brown and Alderson 2010) that insults attacking masculinity are perceived to be extremely powerful insults to men, particularly when those insults come from another man. "Masculinity," of course, can be construed in a number of ways, but common themes have emerged in previous studies that indicate a few more specific factors that go into defining it (such as sexual potency, strength, and heterosexuality). To compare a man to a body part associated with women (and by extension, femininity) seems to be a direct attack on how greatly a man conforms to a cis-normative standard of masculinity. These findings are also interesting in light of patterns that emerge in the uses of insults derived from male genitals, discussed below.

Terms for Male Genitals

This word list consisted of the words *dick, prick, putz,* and *schmuck.* As with terms for female genitals, this analysis does not include instances in which these terms were used to refer to literal penises (though among these four, only *dick* appeared frequently both as an insult and as a term referring to an actual penis). Other slang terms, such as *cock*, were not included

because they appeared nearly exclusively in the irrelevant context. Unlike terms for female genitals, terms for male genitals were not frequently used to target a member of the gender not associated with the terms. *Dick* is a partial exception, and did behave a little differently from the other three terms on the list. Unlike the others, *dick* was sometimes used more generically to refer to a group of people, which might include people of more than one gender. For example, (24) appears in the corpus:

24. Anyone who makes you feel bad for choosing to have painkilling drugs is a dick of the highest order.

In (24), there is no indication that *anyone* refers exclusively to men (and in fact, as this prticular sentence comes from a comment on an article about childbirth, it seems likely that *anyone* includes other women who have given birth). *Dick* also appears in phrases like *dick move* (which can roughly be defined as some action such that, by virtue of having performed it, the performer of that action is a dick) are not necessarily restricted to actions performed by men. There are a few cases, as well, in which an apparently female target is referred to as a *dick.* The other three terms are much more restricted to male targets (though *dick* also primarily derogates men—it's just a bit more flexible in that regard). Uses of *putz* and *prick* also have an interesting feature: a significant proportion of their appearances[26] (which are admittedly relatively few) within the corpus are contexts in which they immediately follow the word *little.* This suggests that *putz* and *prick* have a bit of a diminutive quality to them, in addition to referring to unpleasantness (conversely, there are no instances of *little dick* in the corpus).

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[26] This was particularly pronounced for *putz,* for which about one quarter of uses were preceded by *little*.

In light of how frequently terms for female genitals are used to derogate men, it is telling that terms referring to male genitals are much less frequently applied to women. Consider this in light of the finding by Coyne et al. (1978) that certain male-directed insults (specifically *bastard*, in the case of that study) insult men for the ways in which they conform to stereotypically masculine traits (such as aggressiveness), rather than the ways in which they fail to conform. Insults like *dick* and *prick,* it seems, fall into this category as well. By the same logic that using female genital terms insult a man by insinuating that he is feminine in addition to insinuating that he is unpleasant or otherwise deficient, it would stand to reason that referring to a woman by a male genital term insinuates that she is masculine. Thus, the fact that male genital terms are not "inverted" in this way suggests that there is a culturally perceived difference between the acts of calling a man feminine and calling a woman masculine, with the latter being less severe (indeed, as Leslie (2015) points out, insinuating that a woman is masculine can often be construed in some sense as a compliment, albeit a backhanded one). This systematic discrepancy between male and female genital terms (which are similar in obvious ways) is a prominent indicator that the practices surrounding particular insults are indeed sexist, and differ systematically along gendered lines.

Transgender slurs

This list originally included the words *shemale, tranny,* and *hermaphrodite,* though only the latter two appeared in the corpus. I also ran a separate search for the phrase *he she,* which appeared only once and appeared to be a typographical error rather than an actual usage of an offensive phrase for a transgender person. Neither *tranny* nor *hermaphrodite* appeared particularly frequently (the two combined had a total of less than 50 appearances, with many uses of *tranny* referring to the transmission of a car), so it's difficult to make and grand

observations about these terms. Among the instances in the corpus, most of them were in the

third person. It was unclear how much awareness there was on the part of the speakers that these

terms are particularly offensive, rather than merely neutral descriptors for transgender people.

This is not to say that these uses were not *transphobic,* but most of them were casual references

to *a tranny* without any apparent ire. These types of uses are among those that Nunberg (2017)

uses to argue against semanticist accounts of slurs, in that the speaker's attitude toward

transgender people may be inferred, but is not part of the "at-issue" content of a proposition.

Bitch

Of all the insults I have examined, *bitch* is one of the most (if not the most) diverse in

terms of the contexts of use in which it appears. One interesting feature of *bitch* is that, more

than other gendered insults, it is used to refer to experiences or other non-human entities. A

couple examples of this from CORE are printed below:

25. Oh, that hurt like a bitch.

26. We cut almost all our pizza toppings on it, plus the fresh mozzarella (which can be a real

    bitch to cut).

27. I say that's tough, life's a bitch.

Bitch also occurs in the frequently used idiom *son of a bitch*—an insult whose origin, I would

argue, is particularly sexist in that it derogates a man *by way of* derogating a woman (though the

phrase has become quite conventionalized—I do not mean to imply that in calling someone a *son

of a bitch* that the speaker conventionally derogates the target's mother). While this process

certainly could occur in reverse (phrases like *daughter of a bastard* are certainly conceivable),

there is no common idiom in the English language that does this. *Bitch* also has a verbal use,

which is roughly synonymous with the verb *whine,* and which frequently appears within the idiom *bitch and moan.* Some instances of the verbal use of *bitch* that appear in CORE are printed below:

28. If all you're going to do is bitch and moan about rubbish without explaining, please go away.

29. They wanted to bitch about the choice of food.

This verbal form occasionally appears in apparently appropriated contexts, as in (21):

30. Yes, I will bitch and moan to Baltimore County leaders and police that this doesn't repeat itself!

In the appendix of "The Social Life of Slurs," Nunberg (2017) discusses two different uses of the word *bitch,* which he terms the *pejorative* use and the *derogative* use. The derogative use is the one in which *bitch* is used simply to refer to a woman, with no reference to any particular personality trait; the pejorative use is that in which a personality trait (often aggressiveness, rudeness, or general unpleasantness) is part of the at-issue content of the proposition containing the word *bitch.* Both of these appear quite a bit in the corpus, but the pejorative use is more common. One interesting feature of the pejorative use of *bitch* is that it generally means something different when applied to a man as opposed to a woman. Applied to a woman, the pejorative *bitch* invokes characteristics like aggressiveness, rudeness, and dominance, which is consistent with the findings of Coyne et al. (1978). However, when applied to a man, *bitch* tends to communicate weakness (likely because of the association between the word *bitch* and woman/femininity). In fact, there is one use of the pejorative *bitch* that is used for men at least as much as it is for women, that being the use which follows a possessive, as in *his*

bitch or *my bitch* (though this can be used for women as well). Some examples of this use from CORE is printed below:

31. [John] Howard was routinely described as Bush's poodle, and his bitch.

32. And who said the Emir of Qatar was the Muslim Brotherhood's bitch?

In both of these cases, the referent of *bitch* is a man; in these contexts, calling someone a *bitch* asserts that they have a relationship of subservience or beholdenness to the possessor. This use is distinct from uses in which *bitch* followed by a possessive is used to refer to someone's female romantic partner—these cases fall more in line with a use of *bitch* that simply means *woman* (though *my bitch* seems to attribute more subservience to the romantic partner in question than, say, *my girlfriend,* despite the fact that both are syntactically possessive constructions).

With the exception of the word *bitch* as used in (31) and (32), the vast majority of uses of *bitch* were targeted toward women, for both nominal and verbal uses of the term. This was also true of the adjectival form *bitchy*. The only systematic difference between uses of *bitch* and *bitchy* was the fact that *bitchy* was most often used to describe particular *actions* of women, or to describe women in light of particular actions. Given the well-documented phenomenon of noun aversion (Horn 2013), this is hardly surprising. The only other context in which men were regularly targeted by the word *bitch* were in self-deprecating uses of the verbal form of *bitch.* Again, in light of noun aversion, it should not be entirely surprising that men are more likely to describe themselves as performers of the action of *bitching* than as *bitches:* in these cases, they deprecate themselves on the basis of something that occurred during a specific time interval, without categorically pigeonholing themselves into the set of bitches.

Bastard

  Bastard is another word that I examined separately, due to its lack of obvious semantic or etymological cohesion with any other insult. *Bastard* is sometimes considered to be the male counterpart of *bitch* (Coyne et al. 1978), and this is not a baseless consideration: both terms may be used to target someone considered generally unpleasant, without reference to a terribly specific trait or behavior. Furthermore, in CORE, it is entirely true that *bitch* is primarily used to target women and that *bastard* is primarily used to target men. However, in other ways the terms behave rather differently. While *bitch* does generally target women, it is sometimes "inverted" to refer to men: *bastard* is almost never inverted. This pattern is analogous to the pattern observed in genital terms, wherein terms for female genitals are much more often used to target men than terms for male genitals are used to target women (though *bitch* is not "inverted" at nearly the same rate that female genital terms are). This is further evidence that using a female-associated insult to insinuate that a man is feminine is a more frequent, and likely more powerful, mode of insulting than using a male-associated insult to insinuate that a man is masculine. One interpretation is that this disparity between *bitch* and *bastard* reflects a cultural trend in which femininity in a man is considered more undesirable than masculinity in a woman—this is consistent with the arguments of Leslie (2015).

  Furthermore, a much larger proportion of uses of *bastard* are self-deprecating (rather than insulting) as compared to *bitch* (or, in fact, any of the insults discussed thus far). While *bitch* sometimes appears in appropriated contexts, *bastard* appears in few if any. This is possibly connected to another unique feature of *bastard:* it is frequently used in contexts that express pity more so than disparagement, often within the phrase *poor bastard* (an example of which is printed below).

33. The poor bastard peddling me around in the blazing sun, I felt terrible.

While the referent of *bastard* in (33) is certainly not being aggrandized by the description, nor is he truly being derogated per se. Cases like (33) are somewhat belittling, but do not necessarily cast judgment upon the character of the referent of *bastard.* It is likely that the word's potential to cast its target as more deserving of pity than ire or disdain leads to a greater readiness on the part of speakers to apply the term to themselves. Other epithets such as *asshole* and *dick* are far less likely to occur following the adjective *poor* (and indeed, no examples of either of these arise in CORE).

Douche

The term *douche* was almost universally used to target men[27]. There were a few prominent exceptions in CORE, but the majority of them were cases in which the speaker was deliberately highlighting the fact that to call someone a douche is generally to implicate that they are male, as in (34), which comes from a blog post about (heterosexual) relationships:

34. There are douche bag chicks too (just a lower incidence of them as a proportion of the
   population).

(34) also exhibits another feature of the word *douche:* it is very regularly the first component of a compound noun. The most common of these compounds by far is *douche bag,* but it's actually somewhat productive as a morpheme. CORE contains examples of the phrases *douche hole, douche nozzle,* and *douche canoe.* There is no obvious difference between how these compounds

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[27] The status of *douche* as a gendered insult is not entirely clear, despite its being disproportionately directed at men. *Douche* does not clearly invoke any gendered social norm—though it is perhaps similar to *bastard* in that the traits it typically refers to conform to stereotypical masculinity (Coyne et al. 1978). If *douche* is taken not to be a true gendered insult, then it provides evidence that women are more likely to be derogated with gendered insults, while men are typically derogated with gender-neutral insults (*asshole,* too, is predominantly used for men, but I would hesitate to classify it as gendered).

and the plain form of the word are used. *Douche* also appears in the phrase *douche move,* which is roughly synonymous with the aforementioned *dick move.* Like *dick move, douche move* is generally used to describe an action—in that context, *douche* may apply to a woman as well as a man.

5.2: Verbal and Adjectival Insults

For verbal and adjectival adjectives, I created word lists that grouped words on the basis of the particular traits derogated by an insult. Categories include sexual inadequacy, physical unattractiveness, overbearingness, and irrationality. In this subsection, I will discuss some observations about the behavior of these terms in CORE.

Physical Unattractiveness

This list consisted of the word *ugly,* as well as the word *fat* (which is frequently used in a disparaging manner). In insulting contexts, both of these terms were used primarily (though by no means exclusively) for women. Furthermore, there were far more instances in CORE of female speakers using these terms in self-deprecating contexts. *Fat,* in particular, though, is a term that has undergone some reclamation efforts (Ruitang 2016), with supporters of these efforts urging people not to shy away from the term, but instead to treat it as a neutral descriptor like *blonde* or *tall* rather than as an insulting term. These reclamation efforts are to some degree reflected in CORE, as there are some instances of reclaimed uses, as in (35):

35. You want a piece of this? I'm a fat motherfucker! Raaaah!

However, the vast majority of uses of *fat* (where it described people) were either insulting or self-deprecating, which shows that that word is still in the early stages of reclamation. The discrepancy between uses of *fat* and *ugly* for men and their uses for women, too, is telling, and

reflects a cultural trend by which being seen as physically unattractive is considered worse for women than for men—and, in general, by which physical appearance is a larger factor in determining how women are assessed than how men are.

Sexual Inadequacy

This search consisted of the words *frigid* and *impotent*[28]*,* both of which suggest either an unwillingness or inability to engage in sexual activity. *Frigid* was, perhaps unsurprisingly, used more frequently to describe temperatures than to describe people, but in the few instances I found in CORE of *frigid* describing a person it was always used to describe a woman. *Impotent* was generally applied to men, in cases where it was applied to an individual person. *Impotent* was also frequently used to describe groups of people, particularly along lines of political ideology or affiliation, such as in (36) and (37):

36. ...the minority left is somewhat impotent.

37. Conservatives...are making the Republicn party almost impotent.

These cases are not the only instance in the English language of political and sexual power being likened to one another—another term which uses a similar framing is the term *cuckservative* (a portmanteau of *cuckold* and *conservative*), often used by members of the alt-right to derogate more moderate conservatives (Frost 2015). The term was also applied to more concrete political powers, such as *the crown, the police,* and *The United Nations.* In these cases, though, the word likely applied to a lack of power without any particular sexual connotation.

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[28] *Frigid,* throughout history, has been used to describe both men and women, but its modern use generally refers to "women who are sexually unresponsive" (Oxford English Dictionary). The term was, in fact, a medical one during the earlier half of the 20th century. For *impotent,* the OED lists meaning referring to both sexual infertility (or inability to copulate) and powerlessness more generally.

Given that one of these terms is applied primarily to women, and the other primarily to men, the semantic similarities and differences of the two warrant further discussion. While both terms have to do with sexual inadequacy in some sense, they refer to rather different "flaws" (so to speak). The quality of impotency has more to do with a lack of sexual power (often through implied lack of erectile function), whereas frigidity has more to do with sexual standoffishness or an unwillingness to engage in sexual activity. Men, that is, are more likely to be derogated on the basis of being seen as sexually powerless, whereas women are more likely to be derogated on the basis of perceived sexual inflexibility. If we are to assume that the ways various groups are derogated reflects cultural norms and expectations pertaining to those groups, then this pattern may be seen as evidence of a larger cultural pattern through which different expectations are placed on the sexual behavior of men and women: men are expected to be sexually powerful, whereas women are expected to be sexually docile, and yet sexually responsive. The use of *frigid* to describe women is not particularly surprising, particularly given its history as a medical term to describe lack of female sexual responsiveness. However, it is intriguing in light of the fact that words like *slut* and *skank* are also used to derogate women—at first glance, the behaviors these insults refer to seem to be the precise opposite of each other. Both, however, are reflective of a set of well-studied sexual mores pertaining to women, which Tolman et al. (2005) refer to as the "slut/prude tightrope."

Irrationality

The trope of the "crazy" girlfriend (or ex-girlfriend), which largely provided the motivation for this particular word list, is one that has been widely criticized by journalists and bloggers (O'Malley 2014; Flynn 2015), and has become widespread enough to become the namesake of the CW comedy *Crazy Ex Girlfriend*. The list consisted of the words *irrational,*

crazy, insane, psycho, and *hysterical.* For the first three terms, there were few enough instances of the terms being used to describe humans (as opposed to ideas, policies, etc.) that it was difficult to detect any particular gender bias. *Hysterical,* however, did seem to be skewed toward targeting women in insulting contexts (though it was occasionally used for men as well). Like *frigid, hysterical* has a history as a medical term to describe a condition attributed to women specifically, so this is not surprising. *Hysterical,* however, was often applied to other groups of people, often either to children or to particular national, political or religious groups (such as the *hysterical left* or *the hysterical Tea Party*). *Psycho,* as well, had a somewhat gendered component, though it was not obvious at first glance. Where *psycho* was used to derogate someone whose quality as a romantic partner was contextually salient, the target was almost invariably a woman. In other contexts, the term skewed slightly toward men. Because of the sheer number of uses of *crazy, insane,* and *irrational* in contexts where they did not describe people*,* it is difficult to tell whether this pattern holds for those words as well. This data does somewhat substantiate the criticism of the "crazy girlfriend" as a concept, but also suggests that in contexts not associated with romantic or sexual partnership, these insults do not communicate a sexist attitude.

Overbearingness

This list consisted of *nag* (as well as *nagging* and *nags*), *bossy,* and *clingy.* Among these words, there was a definite skew toward women as targets in both insulting and self-deprecating contexts. This skew was extremely pronounced for *clingy* (which almost universally applied to romantic contexts, and behaved similarly to *psycho* in those contexts)*,* and less pronounced for *bossy* and *nag. Nag* was frequently applied to non human entities (such as *nagging questions*), but in contexts where it was applied to a human, that person was often referred to as a wife or

mother, or there seemed to be some other intimate relationship between the speaker and the target of the term. *Nag* was also frequently used in self-deprecating contexts by women, often in the context of expressing a wish not to be considered a nag—similar contexts were present for *clingy* as well. The skew toward women exhibited by the instances of these terms in CORE does corroborate the popularly held belief that authoritative behaviors in women are more likely than those same behaviors in men to be described using terms, like *bossy* and *nag,* with a negative connotation.

Conversational Tone

This list consisted of the terms *whine* (as well as *whining* and *whines*) and *shrill. Shrill* was the more straightforwardly gendered of the two, being disproportionately applied to women in insulting contexts. *Whine,* however, was not clearly skewed toward any particular gender. Much like *hysterical* and *impotent,* it was often applied to other groups of people, however, indicating that it might have some other slur-like component that is not gendered. In general, these groups were either age-based (either applying to children or to a generation of people, generally young people), or based on political affiliation.

5.3: Discussion of General Trends in Corpus Analysis

As this analysis covered quite a few terms, it is difficult to condense the findings into one broad conclusion. Nevertheless, a few general trends did emerge from the data. One of these trends, which was particularly prominent in the data on nominal epithets, was the fact that "female" insults (such as *bitch* and terms for female genitals) were more frequently applied to men than "male" insults (such as *bastard* and terms for male genitals) were to women. This suggests that men are more likely to be insulted *by way of* implying that they are feminine than

women are to be insulted by way of being called masculine. The findings of my corpus analysis also suggest that many of the social trends discussed by Preston and Stanley (1987) are still at work thirty years later: women continue to be the primary targets of insults based in sexual promiscuity and physical unattractiveness, while men continue to be the primary targets of slurs referring to homosexuality and insults pertaining to sexual inadequacy.

Furthermore, the data in CORE suggests that, in general, when a non-taboo verbal or adjectival insult comes under fire for being gendered in nature (as words like *bossy, shrill,* and *nag* have), this is rooted in actual trends in the practice of these terms and not some sort of overblown feminist paranoia. There were, however, a few exceptions to this trend, in which an insult that has been criticized for being gendered does not seem to be disproportionately applied to any particular gender. Such was the case for terms like *crazy* and *whine.* This alone does not necessarily mean that an insult is *not* gendered, and certainly not that it is apolitical (indeed, the use of *whine* to describe political and religious groups suggests that its derogatory content does go slightly beyond merely a negative attitude toward high-pitched complaining). An account like Anderson and Lepore's (2013) account of slurs, if applied to different categories of insults, would lead to the belief that *whine* is indeed gendered. For Anderson and Lepore, "once relevant individuals declare a word a slur, it becomes one." Following that line of logic, enough public discourse surrounding the gendered nature of an insult can render that insult sexist, regardless of whether this sexism is obviously reflected by the distribution of an insult's targets. On that note, it's important to remember that a disproportionate number of uses targeting someone of a particular gender is not the only factor that can qualify an insult as a gendered one. This is demonstrated by cases like *psycho,* in which there is not an overall trend toward women, but the practice skews toward particular genders in different contexts.

Section 6: Conclusion

6.1: Connecting the Dots

While my two-pronged account of gendered insults and my analysis of data from CORE may seem somewhat disconnected, there are in fact links between the two. Outside of a radical contextualist framework (Kennedy 2002; Hom 2008), any pragmaticist account of the sexist content of gendered insults (or the bigoted content of slurs and other identity-linked insults), which posits that this content arises more from the practices surrounding their use than from their semantic meaning, must be grounded in firm evidence that sexist attitudes are in fact reflected in real world use. My analysis of CORE provides such evidence. This is not to say that my corpus analysis *proves* that these attitudes are best accounted for using a pragmatic strategy—merely that, for a pragmatic account such as Nunberg's (2017) of slurs or my own of gendered insults to hold water, it is a *minimum* requirement that real-world practice reflects sexist attitudes.

Furthermore, my corpus analysis gives some insight into *what* the practices surrounding gendered insults are, and thus who and what it is that speakers of gendered insults affiliate themselves with in using them. Corpus analysis also provides the evidence to posit a more robust and specific version of the sexist attitude that I laid out. The so-called sexist attitude cannot be distilled neatly into one succinct definition; rather, the sexist attitude of a gendered insult is one which varies greatly from term to term. The systematic differences between how various insults are used for men and for women, as shown by the data from CORE, are one example of the ways in which language and its uses reflect culture. These cultural patterns are the same ones reflected by the sexist attitude of gendered insults.

6.2: Limitations

While my corpus analysis provides some insight into the sociolinguistic patterns surrounding gendered insults, it is only one small piece of a much larger puzzle. While CORE has much to offer in terms of providing data from informal registers, it does not by any means provide an adequate representation of the whole of the English language. Particularly given that it contains mostly written, rather than spoken, English, CORE cannot provide a full picture of the phenomena I have examined: insults, particularly taboo ones, are more likely to appear in informal speech, and spontaneous spoken language tends to be less formal than written language. Furthermore, my analysis does not take into account diachronic patterns of use, given that CORE contains only fairly recent data. Additionally, while many of the trends I found reflect an earlier study by Preston & Stanley (1987), it would be useful and interesting to see if there have been any changes to folk linguistic intuitions, thirty years later on.

6.3: Contributions of this Study

In addition to providing evidence-based insight into the ways that gendered insults behave, and the ways in which female- and male-gendered insults differ in their use, this study connects discourse on slurs to other types of insults which, while syntactically and semantically distinct from slurs, share certain sociolinguistic and pragmatic similarities to them. Furthermore, I propose a slightly more in-depth analysis of what attitudes are communicated by identity-linked insults (slurs and otherwise)—in the case of gendered insults, I divide this into a lexical negative attitude and a sexist attitude (though this framework could also be applied to non-slurring racialized insults, like *thug*). In separating these attitudes, I attempt to reconcile certain aspects of semantic and pragmatic strategies of accounting for slurs that have been proposed in the past. Overall, I seek to argue through my analysis that the focus in the literature on determining

whether the offensive content of slurs and other identity-linked insults is a semantic or pragmatic phenomenon perhaps ignores some important underlying questions, such as a deeper exploration of the attitudes that these terms communicate and the trends that emerge in their real-world practice.

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