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A metapragmatic stereotype-based account of reclamation

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Abstract

Group-based slurs are words that express derogatory attitudes toward some group demarcated by a property that has historically caused social antagonism, for example, gender or ethnicity, among others. Reclamation, in turn, is the process whereby a slur starts being used non-derogatorily by members of the target group to express a positive attitude. Some content-based theories of slurs (which pin the derogatory force of such terms on their conventional meaning) account for reclamation by arguing that it involves a change in meaning so that reclaimed slurs are ambiguous. But these theories face a challenge, namely to account for the difference between reclaimed slurs and run-of-the-mill ambiguous terms, whose felicitous uses do not seem to be restricted to in-group speakers. In this article, we argue that the Reclamation Worry is not a problem for content-based theories of slurs by advancing an account of reclamation that is compatible with such views. As we shall argue, such a theory must rely on the sociolinguistic dimension of such terms.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Group-based slurs constitute a subclass of linguistic expressions characterized by their capacity to express derogatory attitudes toward human collectives based on their ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, among others (see Orlando & Saab, 2021 and references therein). Although slurs are by default derogatory, it has been noted that they also have non-derogatory uses, for example, in metalinguistic, pedagogical, or humorous contexts such as banter (Technau, 2017, 2018). Among non-derogatory uses of slurs, *reclaimed* uses have received

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much attention in recent literature.[1] Reclamation is the phenomenon whereby a slur, normally used to express hate or contempt toward some group, starts being used without its derogatory force. More specifically, reclamation may come in two flavors (Brontsema, 2004). On the one hand, a slur may be simply washed off its derogatory force. In those cases, everyone becomes a legitimate user, since the slur is no longer employed to demean or express hatred toward the original targets. This is the kind of process that a word like "queer" has undergone (see Brontsema, 2004): used as a slur in the early twentieth century, it has now become a non-derogatory term, accessible to any speaker.[2] On the other hand, a slur may start being used non-derogatorily only by some people with "special status" (typically members of the target group although, as we shall see, this is not necessary), to express pride, camaraderie, solidarity, or simply as a way of reinforcing group-identity. A paradigmatic example of this is provided by the N-word, a term that might be used non-derogatorily by African Americans, but that is completely off-limits for white speakers, who cannot avoid setting off its negative effects. In what follows, we focus on the second kind of reclamation process. As we shall see next, this phenomenon is interesting, among other things, because it poses a problem for a whole family of theories concerning the linguistic functioning of slurs.

The literature on slurs may be divided into two broad trends (see Anderson & Lepore, 2013, among others). On the one hand, content-based theories maintain that the derogatory force of slurs derives from their content. Different views within this general approach locate the putative derogatory content at different levels, either as part of the at-issue meaning (e.g., Hom, 2008; Hom & May, 2013; Losada, 2021), as a conventional implicature (e.g., McCready, 2010; Orlando & Saab, 2021) or as a presupposition (Cepollaro & Stojanovic, 2016; Marques & García-Carpintero, 2020; Moreno Zurita & Pérez-Navarro, 2021). On the other hand, non-content-based theories hold that slurs achieve their derogatory effects by pragmatic means, either by invoking social taboos or prohibitions (Anderson & Lepore, 2011, 2013), by giving rise to "ventriloquistic" implicatures (Nunberg, 2018), or as inferences based on the lexical choices of the speaker together with co-occurring expectations underpinned by use regularities (Bolinger, 2015).

Reclaimed uses are problematic for both kinds of theories. On the one hand, non-content-based theories need to explain reclaimed uses' lack of derogatory force, even though non-reclaimed uses are systematically derogatory (Cepollaro, 2017, p. 185). On the other hand, reclamation poses a problem for content-based theories. To deal with this phenomenon, such theories usually resort to ambiguity, that is, they contend that reclamation involves a change in meaning (Hom, 2008, p. 428; Richard, 2008, p. 9; Saka, 2008, p. 145). The challenge for these kinds of views is to explain why most speakers outside the target group (with some occasional exceptions) are unable to access the non-derogatory meaning of the term, since ordinary cases of ambiguity do not work that way. Following Cepollaro (2017), we will call this problem the *Reclamation Worry* (RW, hereinafter).

In this article, we focus on the RW. It is important to note at the outset that we do not aim to defend a content-based theory of slurs in general. In turn, our main goal is to argue that the RW is not a problem for content-based theories; whether such views are tenable overall depends on

[1]A note about terminology: some authors call the phenomenon "appropriation" (Anderson, 2018; Ritchie, 2017) whereas others prefer "reclamation" (Cepollaro, 2017), to avoid confusion with the phenomenon of cultural appropriation. In what follows we adopt the latter term.

[2]Consider expressions like "queer studies" or the name of the television show "A queer eye for the straight guy."

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further factors that we will not discuss here. To make our point, we put forward an account of reclamation that is compatible with content-based theories and successfully deals with the RW (we believe that the view we present below is compatible *both* with content-based and non-content-based theories of slurs, but we will not develop the latter point here beyond a few remarks toward the end of the paper).

Our proposal is based on two core ideas taken from the sociolinguistic literature: first, the thesis that linguistic devices (phonological, syntactic and lexical) may signal information about the social identity of both the speaker and the audience by virtue of being associated with metapragmatic stereotypes (Agha, 1998; see Eckert, 2008 and Irvine & Gal, 2000 for views in the same spirit); second, the view that speakers can (and often do) exploit these stereotypes to perform group-affiliating conversational moves, by means of which they position themselves as part of a certain social identity and/or distance themselves from others (Agha, 1998; Eckert, 2008; Nunberg, 2018). We contend, on the one hand, that slurs are no different from other lexical items in this regard, and, on the other hand, that acknowledging the sociolinguistic dimension of slurs provides the necessary tools for content-based theories to steer clear of the RW.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section, we present the RW in detail. We identify at least four observations connected to reclamation that any theory of slurs must account for. In section 3, we discuss the proposals developed by Anderson (2018), Ritchie (2017), and Cepollaro (2017) on behalf of content-based theories and argue that they face important challenges. Finally, in section 4, we put forward our own account of reclamation.

2 | THE RECLAMATION WORRY

As stated in the introduction, reclamation (at least the subtype we set out to discuss in this article) is the phenomenon whereby members of the target group of a slur start using it non-derogatorily, while out-group speakers, even after the slur has been reclaimed, still cannot avoid setting off the slur's harmful or negative effects. Many content-based theories of slurs account for this phenomenon in terms of ambiguity, that is, they contend that reclamation involves some kind of change in meaning.[3] Reclamation poses a challenge for these theories, since in paradigmatic cases of ambiguity (either homonymy or polysemy), there seems to be no restriction as to who can legitimately exploit the alternative meanings of a given term. So, for example, any speaker may use "bat" to refer either to a mammal or to a wooden implement (homonymy), as well as any speaker may use "book" to refer either to a physical or to an abstract object (polysemy). By contrast, reclaimed uses of slurs are typically banned for certain speakers, the most paradigmatic example being perhaps the N-word: whereas reclaimed uses of this word are completely off-limits for white speakers, African Americans use it non-derogatorily in many situations. Content-based theories owe us an explanation for this difference. Anderson & Lepore concisely formulate the challenge: "Ambiguity fails to explain why non-members cannot utilize a second sense. If it were just a matter of distinct meanings, why can't any speaker opt to use a slur non-offensively?" (2011, p. 19). This ban on out-group speakers is one of the main problems every theory of reclamation must deal with. For the sake of ease, we will call this *The Outsider's Ban Problem*.

[3]Content-based theories that explicitly appeal to ambiguity include Richard (2008, p. 16), Potts (2007, p. 10), Jeshion (2013, p. 326), Hom (2008, p. 428), Whiting (2013, p. 370) and Saka (2008, p. 42), a.o.

Although the paragraph above provides a good first approximation to the core phenomenon to be explained, it is a bit misleading, for it suggests that reclamation is a homogenous phenomenon whereby every in-group speaker can use the slur non-derogatorily on any occasion while, by contrast, no out-group speaker is ever allowed to do so. However, the empirical landscape is actually much more complex, showing more leakage that is often recognized. First, as Ritchie (2017) and Cepollaro (2017) have pointed out, there are some situations in which out-group speakers are in fact allowed to use a slur with its reclaimed sense ('outsider' uses). For the sake of convenience, we will call this *The Special Permission Problem*. Second, whether it is permissible for in-group speakers to use a slur non-derogatorily is often a matter of disagreement among members of the target group. Thus, as Smitherman points out (see Smitherman, 2021, chapter 3, for a detailed discussion), "Despite the frequent use of 'nigga' in public spaces today, there are some African Americans, particularly those who are middle-aged or middle class, who abhor this public language practice" (50). In the same line, Brontsema (2004) identifies opposition (of at least a subset of the target group) as one of the typical reactions to reclamation. Thus, she maintains that it is common that at least some members of the target group see pejoration as inseparable from the meaning of the slur (she discusses the cases of "queer" and "cunt," whose reclamation faced initial resistance among homosexuals and women) and consequently oppose reclamation. Put differently, it is a view held by many that "The master's house cannot be destroyed using the master's tools" (Brontsema, 2004, p. 6, cited from Lourde, 1984, p. 113). We will refer to this as *The In-group Controversy Problem*.

Finally, let us mention *The Intention-Reception Mismatch Problem*. In many cases of reclamation, there is a mismatch between intention and reception: even when an out-group speaker intends to use the slur non-derogatorily, as members of the target group do, and this intention is recognized by her audience, she cannot help but set off the words' offensive effects. Burnett (2020, pp. 35–36) illustrates the point by commenting on a conversation she had during a stay in France. A person she described as a very friendly gay man asked her if she had a partner. She answered that the lesbian scene there was not excellent. This man replied, "Aren't there any dyke bars in Toulouse?" As Burnett reports, her first reaction was to feel offended by the use of "dyke," even if it was clear to her that in that context this man had no intention of being offensive. Moreover, we want to highlight that this kind of mismatch between intention and reception goes beyond reclamation. In this line, consider Nunberg's discussion of the terms "spade" (as it was used by white hippies in the sixties) and "redskin" (a slur for Native Americans, as well as the name of an American football team) (Nunberg 2018, pp. 257–260): these expressions were employed with no derogatory intention by their users but were flagged as offensive by the corresponding target groups, even though the speakers' intentions were sufficiently clear.[4] Crucially, neither word had been reclaimed at the time those controversies took place. A theory of reclamation should also shed some light on these closely connected cases involving unreclaimed slurs.

Thus, we see that there is more to be explained than the mere fact that typically out-group speakers cannot use a slur non-derogatorily. Taking stock, here are (at least some of) the core facts surrounding reclamation that need to be accounted for:

(i) *The Outsider's Ban Problem*: most often, out-group speakers cannot felicitously use the slur non-derogatorily.

[4]Admittedly, some speakers' may have been thought to be insincere at the time. However, plausibly many users of "spade" and "redskin" were recognized as well-meaning speakers, and yet their uses caused offense.

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(ii) *The Special Permission Problem*: occasionally, some out-group speakers may felicitously use the slur non-derogatorily.
(iii) *The In-group Controversy Problem*: often, it is a disputed issue, even among members of the target group, whether a slur can be used non-derogatorily or not.
(iv) *The Intention-Reception Mismatch Problem*: there is a mismatch between intention and reception in outsiders' uses of a reclaimed slur, and moreover, this mismatch is also to be found in some non-reclaimed slurs.

In section 4, we advance an account of reclamation that is compatible with content-based theories and that can deal with these explanatory demands. But before we get into that, let us consider some alternative approaches to the issue.

3 | PREVIOUS APPROACHES TO THE RECLAMATION WORRY

There have been several attempts to account for the RW that are allegedly compatible with content-based theories. In this section, we critically review some of them. Let us start with Anderson's (2018) approach.

To deal with the RW, Anderson resorts to the notions of *speech community* and *community of practice*.[5] He defines a speech community as a group of people sharing some significant dimension of experience related to how they use, value, or interpret language. It is worth noting that this definition responds to what he identifies as "linguistic plus" definitions of speech communities, namely definitions that appeal to extra-linguistic group-shared features in addition to purely linguistic ones. Roughly put, Anderson's thesis is that "there are certain illocutionary acts whose successful performance requires membership in a particular speech community" (2018, p. 17). More specifically, he claims that reclaimed uses of the N-word typically perform a particular kind of speech act, to wit, the act of *addressing* (to be distinguished from the act of *calling*, whose illocutionary point is to express contempt), which is at least neutrally valenced, and requires, as part of its felicity conditions, that the speaker be a member of the African American speech community. In principle, this view accounts for The Outsider's Ban Problem. According to this approach, white speakers typically cannot opt to use the N-word non-derogatorily because they are not members of the African American speech community, hence they cannot felicitously perform the speech act of addressing that African Americans typically perform in using the N-word.

As Anderson himself notes, however, appealing to speech communities does not suffice to account for The In-group Controversy Problem, since in those cases we find disagreements among members of one and the same speech community (the African American speech community) concerning whether reclaimed uses of the N-word by other members of the community are to be allowed or not. To account for this phenomenon, Anderson supplements his view with the notion of community of practice. As Eckert (2006, p. 981) defines it: "a community of practice is a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor." According to Anderson, several communities of practice emerged within the broader African American speech community, from which different kinds of illocutionary acts involving the N-word unfolded, some of which allow for reclaimed uses, some of which do not. This move seems to account for

[5]We should note at the outset that Anderson's paper focuses exclusively on the N-word. Thus, he does not aspire to provide a general account of reclamation. Still, it is worth assessing whether his approach can be successfully extended to reclamation in general.

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The In-group Controversy Problem, allowing the view to be "more flexible in accounting for heterogeneity among African American speakers concerning N-word usage" (Anderson, 2018, p. 19). Likewise, Anderson's view seems to be able to account for The Special Permission Problem: he claims that being African American is not a necessary condition for being a member of the African American speech community (although it is of course a very important factor). This explains why some out-group speakers may occasionally be allowed to use the N-word nonderogatorily.[6] Finally, although Anderson does not address the issue, one may extend his view to account for The Intention-Reception Mismatch Problem by saying roughly that the relevant mismatches between production and reception are due to one and the same word being associated with different illocutionary practices in different speech communities or communities of practice.

Admittedly, Anderson's view works well as an account of reclamation in the case of the N-word. However, we find it problematic if considered as a *general* explanation of reclamation. In a nutshell, the problem is that reclamation is not always related to independently established speech communities. To illustrate this, consider again the kind of definitions of speech community favored by Anderson, namely "linguistic plus" definitions. These definitions make use of extra-linguistic properties to characterize speech communities. However, and most importantly, linguistic plus definitions still need to refer to linguistic properties as a basis for delimiting speech communities, as well as for describing the linguistic varieties spoken by their members. The linguistic variety of the African American speech community is African American Vernacular English (AAVE). AAVE has been clearly observed to have such specific linguistic properties. These include phonological properties (e.g., loss of nasals and nasalization of precedent vowels), morphological properties (e.g., neutralization of the past tense), and syntactic properties (e.g., zero copula in sentences like "He nice" with the meaning of "he is nice right now").[7] It is partly by virtue of AAVE possessing these properties that the African American speech community has been identified as a legitimate speech community. In light of these facts, as we said, Anderson's view regarding the N-word seems plausible. However, it is not obvious that all reclaimed slurs match a clearly identified speech community in this sense (or, for that matter, a community of practice within such speech community). Consider, for example, the slurs "puta" ('hooker') and "kuka" in Rio de la Plata Spanish (RPS from now on), used to derogate sexual workers and supporters of political leaders Néstor and Cristina Kirchner correspondingly.[8,9] Both slurs have reclaimed uses. However, arguably none of these groups share the kind of idiosyncratic phonological, morphological, and syntactic patterns that would justify classifying them as bona fide speech communities in the

[6]Anderson also mentions the distinction between *being a member* of a speech community and *participating* in a speech community, taken from Saville-Troike (2002). One could make use of this distinction to account for outsider's uses by saying that (i) some out-group speakers participate in the African American speech community (although they are not members of it) and (ii) the speech act of addressing requires either being a member of the African American speech community or participating in it.

[7]For details, see Wardhaugh (2009, pp. 342–345) and references therein.

[8]The word "puta" in Rio de la Plata Spanish is polysemic. Here we are considering its use as synonymous to 'sex worker'.

[9]Throughout this paper, we will use many examples taken from RPS. It is worth noting, however, that although sometimes we restrict some observations to this variety (which is the variety of which we are native speakers), this does not mean that all such observations are valid exclusively for RPS. Sometimes they are, sometimes the observations extend to different varieties as well. Given that it is not relevant for the matter of the present discussion the exact distribution of these observations, we will not go into those details.

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relevant sense. This is as expected, since individuals in these groups are geographically dispersed and linguistically disconnected (except maybe for comparatively small subgroups of sexual work activists or political campaigners). Anderson's view is ill-equipped to manage these cases of reclamation.

Now, it could be argued in response that the lexical availability of reclaimed uses constitutes by itself the linguistic trait that justifies classifying these groups as legitimate speech communities. However, we believe that such a move would be viciously circular: membership in a speech community would play a crucial role in accounting for reclamation while at the same time reclamation is presented as evidence for the existence of a certain speech community. We conclude that although a speech-community-based theory of reclamation may work for cases where a speech community can be robustly identified on independent grounds, it is not plausible as a general account of reclamation.

Another proposal that attempts to deal with the RW is that of Ritchie (2017). Ritchie's main goal is to provide an answer to the RW on behalf of content-based views of slurs. She does not commit to any specific content-based analysis (she claims her view to be compatible with any content-based view available), but in order to illustrate her proposal she formalizes derogatory content in terms of conventional implicatures. First, Ritchie notes that the first-person plural pronoun has non-extensional uses that are sensitive to one's social position. For example, said by a Muslim congressperson, "we" in (1) below denotes the class of Muslim congresspersons, and not just any contextually salient set of individuals that includes the speaker:

1. [said by a Muslim congressperson] we are rare.

Now, Ritchie contends that the conventional implicature of a reclaimed slur contains a first-person plural pronoun that behaves as in (1), and as a consequence, restricts contexts of felicitous use to those where the speaker of the context is a member of the target group. She illustrates the analysis with the slur "bitch." According to her, the interpretation for both derogatory and reclaimed uses of "bitch" is as follows (where TC stands for truth-conditional content and CI stands for conventional implicature):

2. a. "Bitch" as a slur:
   TC: ⇝ 'Woman'.
   CI: ⇝ 'They are despicable for being women'.
   b. "Bitch" as a reclaimed term:
   TC: ⇝ 'Woman'
   CI: ⇝ 'We women are laudable for being woman'.

Allegedly, the first-person plural pronoun in the reclaimed version of the slur restricts felicitous uses to speakers in the target group. If this is on the right track, Ritchie's analysis directly accounts for The Outsider's Ban Problem. As regards the Special Permission Problem, Ritchie considers two alternative explanations. On the one hand, content-based views could argue that out-group speakers may count as members of the target group for the purpose of particular exchanges, and therefore meet the presupposition introduced by the pronoun. On the other hand, she outlines a pragmatic view according to which speakers outside the target group are in fact unable to express the reclaimed meaning of the slur, but their utterance is not taken to be offensive whenever it

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is clear to the audience that the speaker had no intention of being offensive. As the reader may guess, this second possibility clashes with The Intention-Reception Mismatch Problem: for example, the view owes us an explanation of the kind of case reported by Burnett (2020) regarding the use of "dyke," where it was clear from the context that the speaker's intentions were in the right place, yet the use was taken to be derogatory. Finally, although she does not consider the issue, it is not clear how Ritchie's account could deal with The In-group Controversy Problem. In those cases, both the people who accept and the people who reject reclamation are familiar with the reclaimed meaning of the slur and both belong to the same group (that is, they both belong to the same "we"). So, these disagreements cannot be explained in terms of ambiguity in Ritchie's view. Nor can they be explained in terms of her pragmatic view, since it is typically common knowledge in these cases that in-group speakers who favor reclamation do not have derogatory intentions. In sum, Ritchie's indexical account may be able to solve The Outsider's Ban Problem and The Special Permission Problem, but it has difficulties in accounting for both The In-group Controversy Problem and The Intention-Reception Mismatch Problem.

Before presenting our own proposal, let us end the section by considering Cepollaro's (2017) approach to the RW. Cepollaro contends that the RW is based on an incorrect generalization, to wit, that the alternative meanings of an ambiguous term are always available for every speaker. To show that this is a mistake, she presents a case of ambiguity that allegedly parallels that between reclaimed and non-reclaimed uses of slurs. Put differently, she argues that there are plenty of examples where "the context, together with the speaker's intentions, provides constraints on who can felicitously access a certain meaning of a polysemic term in each situation" (Cepollaro, 2017: 186). Thus, slurs are not special in this regard. She illustrates the point with the Italian form "lei"[10]:

3. Lei gradisce del tè?
   a. Would you [formal] like some tea?
   b. Would she [informal/formal] like some tea?

As can be seen in (3), "lei" can be used both as the second-person singular and the third-person singular pronoun. However, the social relations between the speaker and other participants constraint which meaning of "lei" a speaker can felicitously express in a given context: if the context is informal, the speaker cannot felicitously use "lei" in (3) with the meaning in (3a); by contrast, if the context is formal the speaker may use (3) either with the meaning in (3a) or in (3b). Thus, "lei" is ambiguous between "you[formal]" and "she[formal/informal]." Now, the example purports to show that there are cases of ambiguity other than those of slurs where social information about the speaker and her relationship with other participants in the conversation can affect how the term is both used and interpreted, and most importantly, where this information constrains

[10]It is worth noting that the kind of ambiguity exhibited by *lei* is a well-known case of syncretism, that is, a neutralization of a morphological distinction within a given morphological paradigm. In this case, this is a neutralization of a person distinction. The same syncretism occurs in Spanish. So, (i) parallels the behavior of (3).

i. ¿Le gusta el té?
   a. Do you [formal] like some tea?
   b. Does she [informal/formal] like some tea?

Examples as such are pervasive (consider, for example, the pronoun *Sie* in German).

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who can use it in virtue of the conventional meaning of the expression. If this is on the right track, the RW loses its force.

Hence, in the picture Cepollaro puts forward (on behalf of content-based theories of slurs), slurs parallel "lei." In this view, reclaimed and non-reclaimed slurs are thought to be ambiguous in virtue of each conventionally encoding a different restriction over contexts of felicitous use related to the social status of the speaker: reclaimed slurs restrict contexts of felicitous use to those where the speaker belongs to a certain social category, while non-reclaimed slurs pose no restriction in this regard. It is important to note that the restriction in question does not have to do with whether the speaker is part of the target group or not, for this would make it very hard to account for outsider uses. In turn, Cepollaro contends that reclaimed slurs constrain contexts of felicitous use to those where the speaker has *authority*, that is, contexts where she can be taken as "genuinely and felicitously[11] expressing a positive attitude towards the target class" (Cepollaro, 2017, p. 187). Presumably, being part of the target group (or not) constitutes a strong piece of evidence in this regard, but it is not the only one (background information about the speaker and intention recognition also play a part), and most importantly, it is evidence that can be defeated, so that a speaker may have authority and not be part of the target group, and vice versa.

We believe that Cepollaro's view faces an important challenge, namely as it stands it cannot account for The In-group Controversy Problem and The Intention-Reception Mismatch Problem. On the one hand, the view fails to account for The In-group Controversy Problem. As stated above, The In-group Controversy Problem highlights the fact that there is often disagreement among members of the target group concerning whether it is acceptable to use the slur with its reclaimed sense. This kind of situation may arise even if there is no doubt about the conventional meaning of the reclaimed slur, and most importantly, even if advocates of reclamation have *authority* in the relevant sense. This is what we observe, for example, in the case of the N-word: middle-class African Americans who abhor reclaimed uses of the N-word do not necessarily believe that those who use the word in that way do not have authority in Cepollaro's sense, that is, that they are not genuinely expressing a positive attitude.[12] Thus, Cepollaro's view does not have the resources to explain why speakers who are competent with the meaning of the reclaimed slur and have the relevant authority still may be criticized by other members of the target group. If it were just a matter of different meanings plus having authority, why do not all members of the target group accept reclaimed uses by authoritative speakers? On the other hand, Cepollaro's approach has difficulties in accounting for The Intention-Reception Mismatch Problem, to wit, the fact that the same kind of mismatch between production and reception that we observe in cases of reclamation may arise for some non-reclaimed slurs as well. Recall the cases of "spade" and "redskin" we discussed above. In these examples, the disagreement is not about who can use the term non-derogatorily, but whether the term is derogatory at all. Arguably, the problem with the use of "redskin" by fans of the football team or "spade" by Californian hippies from the sixties was not that they could not be taken to be genuinely and felicitously expressing a positive attitude toward the target class. The claim of African Americans and Native Americans who criticized the use of these terms was that they were offensive even if those who used the terms meant well, that is, even

[11]We are not sure how to understand "felicitously" in this context. Of course, it cannot mean that the speaker has authority to use the slur with its reclaimed sense, for that would be circular.

[12]Something analogous could be said for the example involving "cunt" that we mentioned in section 2 (see references there).

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if they were genuinely and felicitously expressing a positive attitude toward the target class. Hence, the situation cannot be accounted for by appealing to the idea that only authoritative speakers (in Cepollaro's sense of authority) can felicitously use the term non-derogatorily.

In the previous paragraphs, we have identified what we see as challenging problems for some alternative views on reclamation. Despite this, we do not see the observations above as conclusive, since one may try to fix some of the accounts in question by introducing amendments, for example, Cepollaro may try to define authority differently. Whether this can be done successfully remains an open question. Be that as it may, we believe that the difficulties we have identified suffice to motivate and justify the search for a different approach. But, what kind of approach? All the views we have considered share a common insight, namely that reclamation is somehow to be explained by incorporating information about the social status of the speaker among the overall information transmitted by the term. They implement this idea in different ways: Anderson represents it by means of a felicity condition on the speech act of addressing, Ritchie tries to capture it via a first-person plural pronoun with a special behavior located at some level of content, and Cepollaro suggests to understand reclamation as a case of polysemy based upon a difference in use-conditions (in analogy to the difference in register we observe between second- and third-person singular pronouns within many romance languages). Despite the differences between these views, however, they all concur in locating information about the social status of the speaker at some level of conventional meaning (felicity conditions, use conditions, and conventional implicatures). Here we want to explore a different approach, according to which information about the speaker's social status stands outside the conventional meaning of slurs, and is transmitted instead by virtue of their sociolinguistic functioning. Thus, the view takes independently motivated tools from the sociolinguistic literature and provides a uniform treatment of slurs and other sociolinguistically marked linguistic traits. This allows us to conceive slurs in a more integrated fashion with other linguistic phenomena and not as radically different vocabulary items. In the next section, we present such an approach.

4 | AN ACCOUNT OF RECLAMATION

In this section, we sketch an account of reclamation that is compatible with content-based theories of slurs. Such a view relies basically on two interrelated theses:

4. *Thesis 1*: Many expressions are associated with metapragmatic stereotypes
   Thesis 2: In virtue of this association, these expressions may serve a group-affiliating or group-identifying function.

In the first subsection, we discuss theses 1 and 2. In the second subsection, we present our take on reclamation.

4.1 | Preliminaries

The notion underlying thesis 1 comes from the sociolinguistic literature (we will heavily rely on Agha (1998), but similar theses can be found in Eckert (2000, 2008), Irvine and Gal (2000) and Burnett (2017, 2019)). On the one hand, many words, sentences, patterns of pronunciation, and

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patterns of speech are regularly associated with certain types of speakers (in the sense of being regularly used by them), who in turn bear a certain social identity. On the other hand, language users possess a reflective ability to formulate stereotypic conceptions of the value of their own speech and the speech of others. Thus, they tend to formulate ideological constructs linking speech with different categories considered to be relevant for social life, for example, class, place of birth, age, gender, profession, and activity, among many others. According to Agha, as a result of this process, many patterns of language use end up being *personified*, that is, inherently associated with certain types of speakers and social identities through a process of iconic motivation. Agha calls these ideological constructs *metapragmatic stereotypes*.[13] The regular association of this or that social identity with a pattern of speech is essentially a pragmatic phenomenon. However, the construction of stereotypes about these identities involves a reflexive activity by part of language users regarding this pragmatic phenomenon. For this reason, Agha classifies these ideological constructs as metapragmatic rather than pragmatic.

Metapragmatic stereotypes need not be accurate, that is, they do not necessarily carve social reality at its joints. Thus, the group a certain linguistic trait becomes associated with need not be stable or clearly defined. Moreover, the use of a certain word may be stereotypically associated with speakers of a certain group even though not all of them exhibit the features contained in the stereotype, or even though the word is also part of the lexical repertoire of speakers with alternative social identities. In the same vein, in line with Putnam (1970), we do not conceive of stereotypes as encoding true information; to the contrary, they are in general vaguely defined and may transmit incorrect information. In addition, the metapragmatic stereotypes that language users construct surrounding patterns of language use constitute "typifiable categories of conscious awareness," and as such are "reportable, discussable, open to dispute" (Agha, 1998, p. 152). Hence, although the process of stereotype construction is not entirely under the control of language users, "it is a process over which language users routinely seek to exercise some control." In particular, speakers "consciously and strategically engage in the metapragmatic activity of describing the pragmatics of speech" (Agha, 1998, pp. 167–168). Thus, they often attempt to construe differences in speech in parallel with differences in social identity, at least partly by actively and consciously describing the former in terms of the latter, and by normatively prescribing or proscribing the (in)appropriateness of certain forms of speech to speakers with this or that social identity.[14][15]

[13]In the same vein, Eckert (2000) maintains that speakers both make and notice stylistic distinctions in speech (e.g. differences in phonological features) and use them both to present themselves with a certain social persona and to locate other speakers in the social landscape, and Irvine and Gal (2000, p. 37) argue that "a linguistic form can become a pointer to (an index of) the social identities and typical activities of speakers."

[14]Similarly, Eckert (2000) claims that speakers' stylistic choices are ideological moves, so that they constantly engage in the production or reproduction of stereotypes, and Irvine & Gal (2000, p. 37) maintain that both speakers and hearers often notice, rationalize and justify this kind of association between linguistic patterns and linguistic "indices," something similar to what Agha calls metapragmatic stereotypes.

[15]Reactions to so-called "neutral" Spanish, an artificial variety of Spanish used in the dubbing of products that reach audiences across Latin America, provides a good illustration of this kind of normative practice. The main purpose of neutral Spanish is to work as a lingua franca among countries where different varieties of Spanish are spoken. As a result of its employment in cartoons and other shows oriented to a very young audience, many children end up using expressions taken from neutral Spanish instead of their local counterparts. In Argentina, for instance, a child may use, e.g., "pastel" (*cake*, neutral Spanish) instead of "torta" (*cake*, RPS). When this occurs, it is common to see parents engaging in the kind of normative practice mentioned above, that is, they proscribe the use of the neutral form and prescribe the use of the local one instead (for an example of this worry in media see https://www.clarin.com/familias/hijo-habla-dibujos-animados-lenguaje-neutro-hacer_0_8Glrup6gG.html).

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Let us move on to thesis 2. Once linguistic traits are personified, speakers may use them to evoke the social identity these traits are associated with. Put differently, speakers may exploit metapragmatic stereotypes to signal information about their own and others social identities, and conversely, interpreters may put these stereotypical construal to work to extract additional information from the speech of others.[16] Moreover, in many cases these maneuvers become routinized strategies for producing and interpreting speech; in other words, "such stereotypes formulate social standards by which individual acts of language use are judged" (Agha, 1998, p. 152). In consequence, the overall impact of an utterance on a conversation may go beyond its conventional meaning and the individual intentions of the speaker: because of the potential of certain linguistic patterns associated with metapragmatic stereotypes to signal information about one's own and others social identities, they are well-suited to serve, in addition, a *group-affiliating* or *group-identifying* function, that is, to present oneself as having a certain social identity, as well as to distance oneself from alternative ones. In using a word (or a phonological form, or a certain grammatical construction) that is transparently associated with certain metapragmatic stereotype, in addition to performing the primary speech act, for example, an assertion, a question, etc., a speaker may be presenting herself as part of a certain group (in opposition to those who are not part of it), or at least as someone who is closely connected to such a group (e.g., shares values, points of views, an agenda, etc.).

Crucially, this self-affiliating message is not transmitted by virtue of the conventional meaning of the linguistic device being used, in the sense of being encoded at this or that level of content (truth-conditional meaning, use conditions, conventional implicature, felicity conditions, etc.), but it is instead conveyed by means of some sort of pragmatic inferential mechanism. There are several options here, but we need not commit to any view concerning the exact nature of this mechanism for the purposes of this article. One may argue that this kind of information is communicated through standard Gricean mechanisms (Burnett (2019) and Nunberg (2018), for example, treat the transmission of sociolinguistic information a conversational implicature) or, alternatively, that it is merely transmitted (but not *communicated* in the Gricean sense of the term) via an inference made by the audience based on their cultural competence with the term, similarly to the way in which certain dog whistles have been argued to work (see Henderson & McCready, 2019; Khoo, 2017; Lo guercio & Caso, 2022).

Let us illustrate the view described in the previous paragraphs by discussing first some examples that do not involve slurs. The phenomenon can be instantiated in phonological, syntactic, and lexical features. That phonological features may be associated with metapragmatic stereotypes has been argued by many authors. By way of illustration, consider Kathryn Campbell-Kibler's (2007) work on the pronunciation of -ING in English. Her experimental work indicates that the velar variant is associated with education, intelligence, and articulateness (or, alternatively, with pretentiousness and uptightness), while the apical variant is associated with lack of education and inarticulateness (or, alternatively, with relaxed, easygoing and unpretentious speakers, see also Eckert, 2000). The phenomenon extends to syntax as well. An interesting example comes from RPS, namely the so-called *capicúa sentences*, which are constructed by iterating the phonological word containing the verb of the sentence, as in (5):

5. *¡Vino Ramón, vino!*
   'came Ramón, came'.

[16]Similarly, Eckert claims that speakers use style in order to "pick out locations in the social landscape" or "to signal different ways of being" (2000, pp. 454–456).

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As Saab (2010) observes, speakers associate *capicúa* sentences with uneducated speakers from poor neighborhoods (so-called "villas"). Finally, and more relevant to the purposes of this article, the phenomenon involves lexical choices. In Argentina, the word "compañero" ("partner" or "buddy") has undergone a process of personification in virtue of the place it has occupied (and still occupies) within Peronist rhetoric[17] whereby it has become stereotypically associated with a kind of speaker (the Peronist speaker) and thereby with a particular social identity (at least when the word occurs in political contexts). As such, speakers may use the term to signal their own political affiliation, as well as to mark an opposition with an alternative, anti-peronist identity. To see the point, consider sentence (6) below.

6. Ayer tuve el honor de participar del homenaje al compañero Néstor Kirchner.[18]
   Yesterday I was honored to be part of the tribute to our COMPAÑERO Néstor Kirchner

On one level, the speaker of (6) is just making an assertion, by means of which she conveys having participated in an act in honor of former president Néstor Kirchner, which is also characterized as the speaker's partner. In addition, the utterance serves as a way of signaling that the speaker identifies with a certain social identity, namely Peronism. In effect, it would be pragmatically infelicitous for a non-peronist speaker, in a political context, to use the word "compañero" in that way. So, in (6) the speaker exploits the pragmatic stereotype associated with the word "compañero" to (i) signal a social identity and (ii) identify herself with it.[19]

To exemplify thesis 2, let us introduce another example from RPS. Some conservative groups in Argentina during the 19th and 20th century considered the variety of Spanish spoken in Spain as "pure" Spanish and, by contrast, thought of RPS as a deviation (for an historical review, see Di Tullio, 2003). In a text published in 1955, Luis Pinto reacts to this position and declares the following:

> A Spanish purist characterizes us as "pro suburbians" or "lunfardists," which is no less than an insult for all Argentinians who identify neither with the former, nor with the latter, and yet do not accept to imitate the speech of Spain, which in their lips would sound as a ridiculous and farcical parody.
>
> (Pinto, 1955, reproduced in Glozman, 2015, p. 179)[20]

In a nutshell, the argument Pinto uses to attack linguistic conservative positions is that people from Argentina cannot use the Spanish variety without sounding like a bad parody. This

[17]Peronism is one of the main political movements of Argentina since the 1940s.

[18]Néstor Kirchner was a lawyer and a peronist politician. He became president of Argentina during the period 2003–2007.

[19]It may be objected that it is the meaning of the word "compañero," together with knowledge of the context (e.g. that Néstor Kirchner was a Peronist) what somehow conveys the information that the speaker is also a peronist (maybe as a conversational implicature). However, it can be seen that the metapragmatic stereotype associated with "compañero" plays a crucial role by replacing it with a synonymous expression with a different associated metapragmatic stereotype, like "camarada" ("comrade"), typically linked to followers of the communist party. Although the sentence "Ayer tuve el honor de participar del homenaje al camarada Néstor Kirchner" means roughly the same as (6) above (i.e., it has the same truth conditions), it cannot be felicitously used to signal that the speaker identifies with Peronism.

[20]The translation is ours. The original version in Spanish is as follows: "Un purista español nos cuelga, de yapa, las adjetivaciones de 'arrabaleros' y 'lunfardistas', lo que es ya una injuria lanzada al hombre argentino en general que no es ni una cosa ni la otra, pero que tampoco acepta imitar el habla de los españoles que en sus labios sonaría como parodia ridícula y sainetesca."

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document clearly attests that speakers are often somewhat conscious of the sociolinguistic dimension of their own speech, and that they seek (whether successfully or not) to exercise control over it.

Before ending this subsection, it will be worth discussing a second kind of example involving a lexical choice, the word "faso" in RPS. Until approximately the end of the 1990s, "faso" was used exclusively to refer to tobacco cigarettes.[21] At that point, however, it began to suffer a change in meaning, when younger speakers started using it to refer to marijuana cigarettes instead.[22] As a result of this process, the word became polysemous. But although everyone was familiar with the two senses of the expression, older speakers were more inclined to use it with its standard meaning, whereas younger speakers were more prone to use it with the new one. Most importantly, as the word became polysemous each of its meanings got stereotypically associated with a different type of speaker and social identity, to wit, the former sense got associated with speakers from older generations, while the latter sense got associated with speakers from new generations. In consequence, speakers could exploit these stereotypes to signal a certain social identity and affiliate themselves with it. Thus, a mature speaker could use (7) to refer to marihuana cigarettes:

7. Anoche me fumé un faso
   Last.night CL smoked a FASO.
   'Last night I smoked a FASO'.

and by doing so (i.e., by using the word as young people use it), she could distance herself from the old, standard stereotype associated with the term and signal her sympathy for younger generations instead, that is, transmit the kind of group-affiliating message previously discussed.[23] Crucially, distancing from a certain stereotype may sometimes be difficult, depending on the context and the background information that the audience has about the speaker. Thus, for example, in an Argentinian television show aired on June 28th, 2018, "Nosotros a la mañana,"[24] Lucía Rubio, a young model, uttered (7) on air. The rest of the participants of the show tried to hide that she was talking about marijuana (to avoid an accusation of promoting drug consumption) by trying to let Lucía Rubio's words mean that she smoked tobacco cigarettes. However, although that interpretation was possible, the age of the speaker together with the information available in the context made the explanation far from convincing, and the strategy ultimately failed.

The main moral of this example is that alternative metapragmatic stereotypes may be sometimes associated not with different words, but with this or that alternative meaning of the same (polysemous) word. Thus, it is only by using the word *with that particular meaning* that a speaker is able to exploit a certain metapragmatic stereotype to signal a social identity and convey a group-affiliating message. However, when performed in the wrong circumstances, these speech

[21]This date is only a rough estimation based on our linguistic intuitions as native speakers.

[22]A similar example is the word "boliche," which older generations used as synonymous with 'restaurant', but younger people started using as synonym with "dance club."

[23]Note that "faso" did not replace alternative terms for referring to marihuana cigarettes (e.g. "porro"), which were widespread. So, it was not (and still it is not) the only word available for referring to them. Hence, employing this word was not mandatory for older speakers in order to be able to communicate.

[24]See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYVE5f3OAx8.

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acts may sometimes fail (even if the interpretation makes sense in the context), as Lucía Rubio's example shows.

To sum up: in this subsection, we showed that language users often personify their own and others' speech. Following Agha, we account for this in terms of metapragmatic stereotypes. The examples of *capicúa* sentences and the velar/apical variants of -ING pronunciation show that metapragmatic stereotypes are not part of the conventional meaning of words, since syntactic structures (as far as a construction-based syntax is not assumed) and pronunciation patterns are not of a lexical nature. Finally, we showed that different metapragmatic stereotypes may be associated with the alternative senses of a polysemous word. In the next subsection, we argue that a similar situation arises in the case of reclaimed and non-reclaimed uses of slurs.

4.2 | Sketch of a stereotype-based account of reclamation

As aforementioned, it is our intention to argue for the thesis that the RW is not a problem for content-based theories of slurs. Thus, for the sake of the argument, we assume that a content-based theory of slurs is true. So, let us suppose that slurs' derogatory content, that is, the information that the speaker holds a negative attitude toward members of the target group, is encoded at some level of their conventional meaning.[25] Finally, let us assume that slurs that have been reclaimed are ambiguous, that is, that reclaimed uses of slurs differ from non-reclaimed uses of slurs in that the latter conventionally encode a positive attitude toward the target group rather than a negative one. What we need then is an approach that allows us to account for the facts about reclamation that we discussed in section 2 (repeated here for the sake of clarity), in a way that supports such a view:

(i) *The Outsider's Ban Problem*: most often, out-group speakers cannot felicitously use the slur non-derogatorily.
(ii) *The Special Permission Problem*: occasionally, some out-group speakers may felicitously use the slur non-derogatorily.
(iii) *The In-group Controversy Problem*: often, it is a disputed issue, even among members of the target group, whether a slur can be used non-derogatorily or not.
(iv) *The Intention-Reception Mismatch Problem*: there is a mismatch between intention and reception in outsiders' uses of a reclaimed slur. Moreover, this mismatch is also to be found in some non-reclaimed slurs.

Our main contention is that, by appealing to the ideas presented in the previous subsection, plus certain widely acknowledged facts about slurs, we can come up with such an approach. We shall outline its main tenets below.

As many other linguistic traits slurs may undergo a process of personification, that is, they may become associated with metapragmatic stereotypes. More specifically, since slurs are regularly used by certain types of speakers, who are in turn affiliated with concrete social identities, these words may acquire, on top of their conventional meaning, a sociolinguistic dimension by virtue of which language users link those words to the relevant social identities through a process

[25]Some content-based theories adopt a different approach, according to which slurs encode a *stereotype* about the target group (Croom, 2014; Orlando & Saab, 2020a, 2020b).

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of iconic motivation. Crucially, as with other cases of sociolinguistically marked expressions, the metapragmatic stereotypes associated with slurs need not provide an accurate description of the actual social landscape and they are often open to dispute. Put differently, they are mere social constructs.

Crucially, note that since metapragmatic stereotypes lie outside semantics, this is compatible with slurs encoding derogatory content at some level of conventional meaning. Thus, slurs behave similarly to other words associated with metapragmatic stereotypes in that speakers can (and often do) exploit them to signal a social identity and to affiliate themselves to (or distance themselves from) it. In other words, just as a speaker may use "compañeros" to flag herself as a Peronist, or "faso" (meaning marihuana cigarettes) to signal sympathy to new generations, she may use a slur to present herself as part of the social group that uses such word and, by contrast, to distance herself from the target group.[26][27]

We contend that slurs that have been reclaimed (according to the kind of content-based view we are assuming) function in this regard more similarly to "faso" than to "compañeros." In section 4.1 we argued, on the one hand, that "faso" was a polysemous word with two senses, each of which was stereotypically associated with a different social identity (old/young generation) and, on the other hand, that speakers may exploit these stereotypes to present themselves as somehow identified with this or that group (although this strategy is constrained by context, as seen ín Lucía Rubio's case). Likewise, according to the view we are putting forward, reclaimed slurs are ambiguous terms whose alternative meanings are associated with different social identities. For example, in this view, the N-word is ambiguous between a reclaimed sense, which expresses a positive attitude toward African Americans, and a non-reclaimed one, which expresses a negative attitude toward them. However, whereas uses of the term with the former meaning are stereotypically associated with a white hegemonic social identity, uses of the term with the latter meaning are stereotypically associated with an African American social identity. Similarly to what we saw for "faso," speakers may try to exploit the alternative meanings of the term (with their different associated stereotypes) to signal a certain social identity and affiliate themselves with this or that group, and this strategy may or may not be successful depending on the context (more on this below).

Let us see then how a content-based theorist can account for the relevant facts about reclamation by appealing to this kind of view. First, consider The Outsider's Ban Problem and The Special Permission Problem. We contend that the approach we have sketched, together with some characteristic properties of slurs, suffice to account for these facts. By way of illustration, consider a sincere use of a reclaimed slur like the N-word by an out-group speaker, and further assume that the audience recognizes such use as sincere, and yet it condemns or rejects the utterance. According to our approach, in using the N-word non-derogatorily an out-group speaker successfully employs the slur with its reclaimed sense, which conventionally encodes a positive meaning, but, in addition, she signals a metapragmatic stereotype about African Americans, and typically transmits a self-affiliating message whereby she seeks to present herself, if not as someone who identifies with the African American social identity, at least as someone who, without being part of the group, somehow participates in it. Out-group uses are banned when such affiliating moves receive a negative uptake. Put differently, in our account banned outsider's uses are

[26]See Nunberg (2018) for discussion of similar ideas in the context of a non-content-based approach.

[27]Alternatively, a speaker may signal a social identity through the non-reclaimed use of a slur in order to distance herself from it, as in humorous or echoic uses.

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analyzed as failed attempts by out-group speakers to present themselves as part of (or alternatively, as sufficiently close to) the relevant group.

Now, The Outsider's Ban Problem captures the fact that in the case of slurs these attempts are typically unsuccessful. To be sure, thesis 1 and 2 allow us to put forward an alternative characterization of outsider's bans as rejections to group-affiliating conversational moves, but they do not provide an explanation for the regularity of this phenomenon. We contend that the regularity of negative uptakes is to be explained not by appealing to the mechanics of the process, but to the very own nature of slurs as socially contested expressions. In effect, many expressions are associated with metapragmatic stereotypes, but crucially not every stereotype raises the same social issues, is equally divisive or contested within the community, or equally central to the conversational partners' overall social identity. In particular, as Nunberg points out (Nunberg 2018, p. 239) slurs typically evoke properties "that have historically been the focus of discrimination or social antagonisms that we see as rents in the fabric of civil society." This applies to all slurs, but it is particularly strong in the case of reclaimed slurs. To be sure, the very fact that a slur has been reclaimed already indicates that there is a strong social dispute between individuals targeted by the slur and other groups in the community. In fact, in many cases of reclamation, a marginalized or vulnerable group seeks to take control of an expression (e.g., the N-word or certain slurs for homosexuals or lesbians) connected to a long-standing history of oppression and discrimination. It should not be surprising then that members of these groups are reluctant to contextually accommodate group-affiliating conversational moves by individuals outside the group. Moreover, as noted above, speakers often exploit pragmatic stereotypes as part of *routinized* strategies for producing and interpreting speech, so one expects a certain regularity regarding who can felicitously deploy such self-affiliating moves by means of a reclaimed slur. This, we believe, suffices to account for The Outsider's Ban Problem.[28]

That being said, whether such group-affiliating moves receive the desired uptake or not in concrete situations depends also on many contextual factors. One of them, probably the most important one, is whether the speaker belongs to the target group. But other factors like the psychological and social proximity between speaker and audience, or the speaker having a strong track record of commitment against discrimination toward the target group (among other things) may suffice to override the default interpretation and secure an out-group speaker the desired uptake. This is as expected since, as Burnett (2017) has pointed out, the audience's previous beliefs and attitudes toward the speaker significantly constrain socio-linguistic interpretation. Thus, our approach accounts for The Special Permission Problem. And it also correctly predicts that background information about a certain *in-group* speaker may lead the audience to interpret her use of a reclaimed slur in a non-default way, in the sense that her affiliating move may face a negative uptake as well (see Cepollaro, 2017, pp. 188–189 for discussion).

The In-group Controversy Problem and The Intention-Reception Mismatch Problem can also be accounted for by the present approach. We already mentioned that metapragmatic stereotypes

[28]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for discussion on this issue. It should be noted that our account predicts that the weaker the slur (that is, the milder the social antagonism surrounding the slur) the easier it will be for out-group speakers to make reclaimed uses of the slur without facing social sanctions. Although the issue requires more careful consideration, slurs for football team's supporters provide prima facie confirmation for this. Thus, "bostero" and "gallina" (slurs for supporters of Boca Juniors and River Plate correspondingly, the strongest rivalry in Argentina's league), which have both been reclaimed, can be used positively by the corresponding rivals.

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are somewhat consciously grasped by language users, so that they are always discussable and open to dispute. We also mentioned that although the process through which a certain linguistic device becomes associated with a metapragmatic stereotype is not entirely under the control of language users, they often attempt to exercise some degree of control over it by issuing prescriptions or proscriptions concerning the use of such devices as ways of flagging social identities, as well as by providing rationalizations or justifications (or, alternatively, criticisms) of metapragmatic stereotypes. These observations apply to slurs, insofar as they are associated with metapragmatic stereotypes. Therefore, given these considerations plus the fact that slurs raise very sensitive social issues, it is expected that they lead to disputes, both within the target group and between in-group and out-group speakers. The present approach equips content-based views with a conceptual tool for making sense of these disputes.

If we assumed that slurs (both reclaimed and non-reclaimed) convey information about social identity as a matter of their conventional meaning, as Ritchie and Cepollaro propose, public disputes about reclamation and about the social import of words like "spade" or "redskin" should be characterized as disagreements over the conventional meaning of these words. This is counterintuitive: none of the sides in these debates seem to be arguing that the other side is wrong about the meaning of the word. Likewise, such disputes do not look like mere cases of miscommunication, misunderstandings, or verbal disputes; to the contrary, there is a substantial issue being discussed. In our view, the debate is indicative of a social struggle for control over the metapragmatic stereotype associated with these kinds of words. In effect, the disagreements under discussion make more sense if understood as disputes about the perceived shape of the metapragmatic stereotype associated with a given linguistic device, as in the case of the dispute over "spade" or "redskin" (Nunberg, 2018), or about the prospects for a successful neutralization or replacement of the metapragmatic stereotype associated with non-reclaimed uses of a certain slur (or, alternatively, about how much control over such process the target group really has), as in discussions about the reclamation of the N-word or the slur "bitch" between members of the corresponding target groups (Brontsema, 2004).

If what we have argued so far is on the right track, our view accounts for the four explanatory demands we identified in section 2. In addition, it is worth noting that our approach accounts for some cases that were problematic for other views, namely the cases of "puta" and "kuka" presented above. Recall that these examples are challenging for Anderson's view, since in those cases there is no identifiable speech community (or community of practice within a speech community) underpinning the reclamation process. Given that in our view metapragmatic stereotypes need not be tied to specific speech communities, it avoids the problem.

It may be objected that our view suffers from a parallel problem. Although both sexual workers and Kirchnerists (supporters of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner) constitute bona fide social identities (as reviewed in Acién González (2019), "puta" as a reclaimed slur is typically used as a political tool by women who share the practice of prostitution and claim themselves as political subjects; supporters of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, on the other hand, constitute a social identity defined by their political commitments)[29] it may be argued that they are not associated with stable, clearly defined metapragmatic stereotypes. However, we do not require that metapragmatic stereotypes have these features. To the contrary, as stated in section 4.1, we follow Agha's contention that metapragmatic stereotypes need not be accurate, that is, they may not provide a faithful representation of social reality, and they are not completely stable or clearly defined, to

[29]For a discussion on the properties that characterize the social identity of Kirchner supporters, see, for example, Yablowski (2016).

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the contrary, they are constantly being reshaped by both reflective and unreflective conversational moves by language users.[30]

Another possible worry is that thesis 2 is not specific enough to do the explanatory work we expect it to do. In particular, we may ask how do we determine, in our view, what the contextually relevant social identity is? To see the point, consider a slightly different version of Burnett's example involving a reclaimed use of "dyke." Plausibly, although "dyke" is closely associated with a specific metapragmatic stereotype related to the lesbian community, it may also evoke a broader social identity, namely that of the whole LGTBIQ+ community. Thus, one may imagine a case like Burnett's where the user of the reclaimed slur intends to evoke this broader social identity, whereas its interlocutor interprets it in a more constrained fashion. In such a case, the ensuing negative uptake would be due either to a disagreement or a misunderstanding.

Admittedly, thesis 2 by itself does not suffice to determine, for every context, what the relevant social identity being evoked is. To account for this, we need to rely on further pragmatic reasoning on the part of language users. However, we do not see this as a serious problem for our view. First, all the theories of reclamation that we have discussed outsource the resolution of these kinds of issues to pragmatic reasoning outside the theory. Thus, Anderson's view does not provide a way of reliably determining whether a speaker belongs to this or that speech community in particular contexts and Cepollaro's approach does not offer a criterion for determining in context whether a speaker has the relevant kind of authority or not. Arguably, in both cases one must rely on further pragmatic processes by the speaker and hearer to fill in this gap. Likewise, Ritchie's approach must appeal to some pragmatic view about the way in which the reference of first-person plural pronouns is determined (since this kind of pragmatic reasoning is required to interpret indexicals in general). Second, since the scenarios under discussion are in fact possible, we believe that the theory should not a priori block them. Thus, we do not consider this to be a negative aspect of the view.

Finally, to further support this approach, it is worth mentioning that the view is also able to explain a fact observed by Nunberg (2018), namely that "a vast majority of the uses of these words occur among the members of the group they belong to, out of earshot of any of the people they target. Indeed, a community may have a slur for a group of people that its members have no expectation of ever encountering" (Nunberg 2018, p. 253).[31] In effect, by describing the way in which speakers exploit metapragmatic stereotypes to signal a social identity both with the goal of distancing themselves from the target group and of affiliating themselves with a certain social identity, the approach we outlined above has the required flexibility to address not only the derogatory function of slurs, but also their cohesive function.

If we are on the right track, the view that we have put forward in the previous paragraphs accounts for all the observations we have identified in section 2 and provides a general account of reclamation based on independently motivated sociolinguistic notions, in a way that is compatible with content-based theories of slurs. We conclude that reclamation is not a problem for such theories. Before closing the article it is worth noting, in addition, that our view is in principle compatible with at least some non-content-based theories as well (although a detailed discussion of this issue goes beyond the scope of this article). In fact, our

[30]We thank an anonymous reviewer for discussion on this and the next point.

[31]In the same vein, Anderson (2018) notes that, in addition to being linguistically conventionalized tools for professing hatred toward certain groups, slurs serve a cohesive function, to wit, showing other bigots that one is on the same page with them.

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view is of the same spirit as that of Nunberg (2018), who assigns a central explanatory role to the sociolinguistic structure of the lexicon and highlights the importance of the 'provenance' or history of words (captured in their 'metadata'), Burnett (2020), who contends that slurs may be associated with different social personae, and Bolinger (2015), who accounts for the behavior of slurs by arguing that speakers' interpretation is governed in part by co-occurrence expectations between the word and a certain kind of non-linguistic context. Unlike content-based views, the latter proposals appeal to sociolinguistic aspects of slurs to explain *every* aspect of their behavior, not just reclamation. But crucially, we have shown that the core insight of these proposals, namely that slurs (like many other linguistic devices) may transmit information about the social status of the speaker by virtue of their sociolinguistic features, is compatible with content-based theories insofar as one assigns it a circumscribed role in accounting for certain phenomena.

5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we focused on the RW, that is, the objection that content-based theories that deal with reclamation in terms of ambiguity cannot explain the differences between reclaimed slurs and run-of-the-mill ambiguous terms. First, we discussed the RW in detail, and we identified four aspects that every theory of slurs must account for. Second, we reviewed previous attempts to account for reclamation on behalf of content-based theories of slurs and we found them all wanting. Finally, we put forward an account of reclamation that draws on the sociolinguistic dimension of slurs, more specifically on the idea that (i) slurs are associated with metapragmatic stereotypes, and (ii) speakers may exploit this association to affiliate themselves with certain groups of social identities. If we are on the right track, our proposal accounts for all the features of reclamation we identified in section 2 in a way that is compatible with content-based theories of slurs.

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