RECLAMATION AND THE EPISTEMIC OBJECTIONABILITY OF SLURS

Pasi Valtonen

RECLAMATION is a phenomenon whereby social groups, for their own ends, use oppressive language that otherwise targets them. Reclamation aims to neutralize the derogatory power of slurs by transforming their meaning. Here, I argue that by transforming the meaning of slurs, the members of oppressed groups challenge epistemic distortions that target them. To support this claim, I discuss a specific view of slurs. The introduced epistemic view holds that slurs are not only morally objectionable but also epistemically objectionable.

Before introducing the epistemic view, I discuss expressivism. I think that expressivism offers a strong explanation for the meaning of slurs and for reclamation. Expressivism holds that in addition to their truth-conditional content, slurs express a negative moral evaluation of the target. For example, the meaning of 'Boche' is something like "Boo the Germans!" In the context of reclamation, expressivism becomes a polarity-reversing view. The negative evaluation is transformed into a positive evaluation: "hooray" rather than "boo." The polarity reversal is a simple and effective explanation for reclamation. It is no surprise that the polarity-reversing views of reclamation are popular.[1]

However, expressivism is not the whole story. I argue that expressive views do not fully explain the meaning of slurs. This also hinders the chance of exhaustively explaining reclamation. To elaborate on this claim, I mainly discuss Robin Jeshion's expressive account of reclamation. She emphasizes two things in relation to reclamation: *self-labeling* and *self-definition*. The expressive polarity-switch view explains self-labeling well. Expressivism also offers an explanation for self-definition, but I argue that the expressive account of self-definition may not be a full picture of self-definition. To put it a bit crudely at this stage, I argue that expressivism does not have enough resources to account for a full picture of self-definition. A full picture of self-definition requires more than just "boo" and "hooray." Hence, I propose an alternative view of reclamation

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1 See Cepollaro, "The Moral Status of the Reclamation of Slurs," 678, and "Let's Not Worry About the Reclamation Worry," 181–93. See also Ritchie, "Social Identity, Indexicality, and the Appropriation of Slurs," 155–80.

that stems from an inferentialist view of the meaning of slurs. According to the proposed view, derogation derives from negative stereotypes. The view also holds that the meaning of slurs is not only morally objectionable but also epistemically objectionable. The meaning of 'Boche' is epistemically objectionable because it enables the transition from a slurring statement like "Hans is a Boche" to a conclusion that Germans are cruel. From this perspective, I formulate a view of reclamation as a way to challenge epistemic distortions. It should be emphasized that the proposed view is not incompatible with expressivism. Rather, it details the picture. It can make sense of the polarity switch, and it can also make sense of challenging the negative stereotype in reclamation.

1. RECLAMATION AND SELF-DEFINITION

1.1. Identity and Self-Definition

Reclamation takes place in a complex social surrounding. I have discussed the wider social surrounding in "Reclamation and Authority." There, I discussed the authority over self-definition in reclamation, arguing that the authority remains with the target group even though sometimes members of out-groups can join reclamation. The in-group authority over reclamation enables a view according to which reclamation is analogous to other social phenomena like gender ascriptions. Recently, Quill Kukla and Mark Lance have argued that gender ascriptions are not just descriptions but rather "social negotiations over how someone will be positioned within social normative space."[2] Kukla and Lance emphasize that gender ascriptions should not be assessed just as true or false descriptions but as performatives with the right kind of authority. Similarly, reclamation depends on the authority of the target group. Crucially, both gender ascriptions and reclamation involve identity. So the question regarding the resources to express that identity turns out to be very important. I argue here that the epistemic view expands decisively the resources to investigate reclamation as an expression of self-identity.

The proposed view and expressivism adhere to the idea that the meaning of a slur changes in reclamation. According to Katherine Ritchie, this idea is rather popular. She notes that at least Mark Richard, Christopher Potts, Robin Jeshion, Christopher Hom, and Paul Saka adhere to the change in meaning.[3] However, there are also views according to which reclamation need not involve a change in meaning. For example, Christopher Davies and Elin McCready argue that reclamation need not involve a change in meaning. Reclamation as

2   Kukla and Lance, "Telling Gender," 1135.
3   Ritchie, "Social Identity, Indexicality, and the Appropriation of Slurs," 156–57.

an expression of solidarity within the in-group can be achieved with the conventional meaning of slurs. It is more likely to depend not on the meaning of slurs but on the identity of the speaker and the audience and on the intentions behind the usage.[4] I agree with these claims. These claims about the identity of speakers, audience, and intentions emphasize the authority of the in-group. Therefore, the claims are not incompatible with the idea that the reclamation involves a change in meaning.[5] Next, I discuss self-definition in more detail through the ideas presented by Jeshion, but before that I discuss another notion related to reclamation.

1.2. Self-Labeling

According to Jeshion, reclamation is about weapons control. The aim of reclamation is to take the slur word from the bigot's arsenal by neutralizing its derogatory force. Her expressive strategy proceeds to neutralize slurs *via* the polarity reversal. To use a real example, the polarity of 'queer' was, in the initial stage, reversed from negative to positive, and then in the long run, the term became the neutral term it nowadays is.[6] Jeshion's insightful view highlights two aspects of reclamation: self-labeling and self-definition. Let us start with self-labeling. Self-labeling simply means that the oppressed group starts to apply a derogatory term to themselves, thereby taking the sting out of the term. I agree that self-labeling is an effective way to diminish the negative power of slurs.

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4   Davis and McCready, "The Instability of Slurs," 70.

5   In fact, the claims help to overcome an objection against the change-in-meaning view. In reclamation, slurs become polysemous, according to the change-in-meaning views. Slurs have a negative meaning and a reclaimed non-offensive meaning. Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore formulate an objection against this view ("Slurring Words"). According to them, polysemy "fails to explain why non-members cannot utilize a second sense. If it were just a matter of distinct meanings, why can't a speaker opt to use a slur non-offensively?" (42). See also Anderson, "Calling, Addressing, and Appropriation," 10. They continue that the change-in-meaning views need an explanation that details the rules governing the access to the appropriated meaning. I have argued that the in-group has the authority to grant and deny access to the non-offensive meaning (Valtonen, "Reclamation and Authorization, 463–73). Cassie Herbert quite rightly points out that reclamation has a hazardous nature. Unsuccessful reclamation can in fact reconstitute the mechanism of oppression ("Precarious Projects," 132). The distinction between reclaimed meaning and the standard derogatory meaning of slurs and the idea that the in-group has the authority over the reclaimed meaning bring significant relief to Herbert's worries about the hazards of reclamation. The distinction, coupled with the idea of authority, sets the conditions for successful reclamation. It has to be the nonderogatory meaning, and it has to be authorized by the in-group.

6   See Jeshion, "Pride and Prejudiced," 108–15, especially 113–15.

According to Jeshion's expressive explanation of the phenomenon of self-labeling, when speakers reclaim a slur, they switch the negative evaluation to a positive evaluation.[7] Adam Galinsky and his colleagues have studied the effects of self-labeling. The results of the study are very encouraging to proponents of views that rely on the combination of polarity reversal and self- labeling.[8] As Bianca Cepollaro points out, the study shows that self-labeling has important empowering effects.[9] Ritchie comments that the study found that "self-labeling with a slur increases an individual's sense of power and increases an observer's evaluation of both the self-labeler's power and the power of the target group.... Self-labeling led to decreased perceptions of negativity in the slur that was used to self-label."[10] The study is particularly important because it shows the measurable effects of self-labeling, as Ritchie points out. Self-labeling not only increases the sense of power within the group but also decreases the negative perception outside the group. In other words, the overall effect is that self-labeling takes the sting out of slurs.

It should be noted that the work of Galinsky et al. does not exclusively support polarity-reversing views. Rather, the study supports the idea that self-labeling works, and hence, the results derivatively support any effort to explain the phenomenon. For example, Mihaela Popa-Wyatt combines Galinsky's study with her game-theoretic view, according to which agents in a dialogue are assigned roles based on their power. Reclamation radically changes these power relations.[11] Claudia Bianchi also appeals to the study to support her echoic account, according to which reclamation echoes derogatory content with a dissociative effect.[12] However, as explained in section 2.3, the epistemic view introduced here has the necessary resources to accommodate the expressive explanation for self-labeling. That is why the focus here is on the expressive explanation of self-labeling.

1.3. Self-Definition

As important as self-labeling is, Jeshion argues that more is at stake in reclamation, self-definition. In her view, polarity reversal also affects the representation of the target group. The reversed polarity is used as "an identity-label, as a means

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 7 Jeshion, "Pride and Prejudiced," 121–22.
 8 Galinsky et al., "The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels," 2020–29.
 9 Cepollaro, "The Moral Status of the Reclamation of Slurs," 676.
10 Ritchie, "Social Identity, Indexicality, and the Appropriation," 164.
11 Popa-Wyatt, "Reclamation," 159–76.
12 Bianchi, "Slurs and Appropriation," 35–44.

to self-define as a group on their own terms."[13] She connects self-definition with oppressive norms that affect social representations. Jeshion points out that social representations involve norms. *Mutatis mutandis*, the representations of oppressed groups involve oppressive norms. Jeshion argues that reclamation as self-definition aims to break these oppressive norms. She says that "acts of reclamation strive for a reversal of social norms," and reclamation does so "by breaking established linguistic conventions on an expression or representation that manifests and whose use reinforces those norms."[14] Indeed, there are norms that systematically oppress and stigmatize people, and reclamation strives to counter these norms.

Still, the proposed view offers a different take on self-definition. Just because the epistemic view has richer resources, it can challenge the negative stereotypes *and* the oppressive norms that derive from the stereotypes. While expressivism challenges the oppressive norms, the epistemic view goes straight to the source by challenging the stereotypes that are responsible for the oppressive norms. In section 2.3, it is elaborated that competent speakers (including the reclaimers) may not be aware of the specific stereotypes associated with the target group. In these cases, the polarity switch is very likely the right analysis. But often the users of slurs and, more importantly, the reclaimers are aware of the stereotypes. The epistemic view provides insight into these cases. According to the proposed view, oppressive norms derive from stereotyping, and the view explains how this specific way of thinking based on stereotypes can be challenged. For example, oppressive norms regarding women derive from the misogynist view that women are promiscuous. At the same time, the derogation associated with the slur 'slut' derives from this stereotype. This means that both the derogation associated with slurs and the oppressive norms stem from negative stereotypes. By challenging the stereotypes, the derogatory power of slurs *and* the oppressive power of norms are mitigated. According to the epistemic view, the goal of reclamation is neutralization. As Jeshion points out, reclamation is a process, and when the stereotypes are challenged, the aim is to purge the meaning of a slur from this objectionable element. Objectionability has a very special meaning in the context of the epistemic view, as detailed in the next section.

The proposed view also contrasts with Lauren Ashwell's view. While her view is not an expressive one, she still adheres to the idea that the derogation associated with slurs stems from oppressive norms. She argues that while 'sluts' refers to a subset of women—to those who are deemed promiscuous—the

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13   Jeshion, "Pride and Prejudiced," 122.
14   Jeshion, "Pride and Prejudiced," 111.

oppressive constraint stemming from the stereotype affects all women.[15] Hence, the stereotypical conception leads to an oppressive norm that all women should be monitored. Ashwell also argues that the derogation associated with 'slut' derives from the oppressive norm, not from the stereotype.[16] I disagree. To me, it seems fairly obvious that the derogation derives from the stereotype.[17] According to the epistemic view, by challenging the meaning of 'slut', reclamation challenges the stereotypical conception and thereby the basis of the oppressive norm.

2. RECLAMATION AND EPISTEMIC OBJECTIONABILITY

2.1. The Epistemic View of Slurs

The proposed view of reclamation is based on the epistemic view of the meaning of slurs. Hence, before discussing the epistemic view of reclamation, we need to explicate the epistemic view of the meaning of slurs. I have previously developed the epistemic view of the meaning of slurs.[18] In the following, I briefly explain the features that are relevant to reclamation.

The central claim of the epistemic view is that slurs are not only morally but also epistemically objectionable. The idea that slurs are epistemically objectionable dates back to the work of Michael Dummett. According to his inferentialist view, the inferential rules for terms determine the semantics for language. Conversely, the referential direction goes the other way around; valid inferential rules are determined on the basis of semantics. According to Dummett, the meaning of slurs is epistemically objectionable because the meaning of slurs allows one to infer unwarranted information. He says that the condition for the application of 'Boche' is that the target is German, but the consequence of the application is that the target is "barbarous and more prone to cruelty

15   I agree that slurs are often used to refer only to a subset of the target group. In section 2.1, I argue that the stereotype associated with the target group is attributed generically, allowing exceptions. Elsewhere I have argued that the interpretation of the generic element is the following. While only some women actively behave promiscuously, all women are disposed to such behavior, according to the misogynist mindset. This accommodates the subset usage.

16   Ashwell, "Gendered Slurs," 236–39.

17   Justina Diaz Legaspe points out that Ashwell fails to account for the full derogatory force of slurs. Even though yelling, "You are not acting according to what is expected from Black folks!" will most likely lead to a heated discussion about how exactly Black people should behave, it is certainly not as derogatory as yelling the n-word. See Diaz Legaspe, "Normalizing Slurs and Out-Group Slurs," 244. Given this, the negative stereotype provides a more plausible source for the derogation.

18   Valtonen, "Generic Inferential Rules for Slurs," 6533–51, and "Gendered Slurs and the Subset Argument," 762–79.

than other Europeans."[19] In the inferentialist framework, introduction rules specify the conditions for the introduction of a term. Here, the condition for the introduction of 'Boche' is that x is German. Then, elimination rules specify the consequences of introducing the term. In this case, the consequence of introducing 'Boche' is that Germans are cruel. For clarity, Dummett's proposed rules can be explicated as follows:

Boche-I: x is German; therefore, x is a Boche.

Boche-E: x is a Boche; therefore, x is cruel.

Inferentialism imposes a *harmony constraint* on the inferential rules. Briefly, the constraint says that the introduction rules and the elimination rules must match. Crucially, the Boche-I and Boche-E rules do not match. To use Ian Rumfitt's terminology, the rules are lacunose because Boche-E unpacks more than Boche-I packs in.[20] This results in an inferential gap, so the conclusion in Boche-E is unwarranted. If inferentialism is right, and the inferential rules explicate the meaning of language, then the *meaning* of 'Boche' is objectionable; it permits the attribution of cruelty to Germans without any actual evidence. The objectionability is based on an intuitive conception of deductive practice. In deductive reasoning, one should not add information at any step of the inference. One should only, so to speak, manipulate information already in the premises.[21] Boche-E clearly adds information, and the objectionability stems from that.[22]

The epistemic objectionability is the main target of Timothy Williamson's objection. According to him, just because of the epistemic objectionability, Dummett's view cannot explain how slurs are actually used. To illustrate, when we look at the semantics of the Boche-I and Boche-E rules, the extension of 'Boche' is a union of the German people and cruel people. In other words, 'Boche'

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19 Dummett, *Frege*, 454–55.

20 Rumfitt, "'Yes' and 'No,'" 785–89.

21 Dickie, "Negation, Anti-Realism, and the Denial Defence," 164.

22 The harmony constraint and epistemic objectionability have become the cornerstone of inferentialism since Buel Belnap formulated it as a response to Arthur Prior's objection. Prior argues that inferentialism does not have the resources to rule out bad inferential rules ("The Runabout Inference-Ticket," 38–39), but Belnap shows that, with the idea of harmony, inferentialism does have the necessary resources ("Tonk, Plonk and Plink," 130–34). Concerning the importance of harmony, see also Williamson, "Reference, Inference, and the Semantics of Pejoratives," 137–41; and Valtonen, "Generic Inferential Rules for Slurs," 6534–36. There are inferentialist views of slurs that do not rely on epistemic objectionability. Robert Brandom famously rejects the notion (*Articulating Reasons*, 66–79). Lynne Tirrell develops the "Brandomian" line of inquiry in her seminal work (e.g., "Derogatory Terms," 41–79). However, in this article, the aim is to motivate the idea that epistemic objectionability can be a useful explanatory notion regarding reclamation.

can refer either to the set of German people or to the set of cruel people. However, Williamson argues that this is not how slurs are used. Even though Stalin was undoubtedly cruel, he was not a "Boche"; he was Russian. Thus, 'Boche' is applicable first and foremost to German people. This reflects the neutral counterpart assumption, according to which slurs have neutral counterparts: 'Boche' is coextensional with 'German'; 'Frog' is coextensional with 'French'; and so on. In the next section, I discuss why the counterpart assumption is important for the epistemic view. However, for now, I concentrate on how the epistemic view can accommodate the counterpart assumption despite Williamson's objection.

Williamson thinks that the counterpart assumption is incompatible with epistemic objectionability. He goes on to argue that the rules can be easily made compatible with the counterpart assumption. One needs only to modify the elimination rule to a reversal of the introduction rule: "x is a Boche; therefore, x is German." However, the problem is that even though these rules now accommodate the counterpart assumption, the modified rules no longer support the claim that the meaning of slurs is objectionable. The introduction rule and the modified elimination rules match.[23] In the following, I aim to preserve the idea that slurs are epistemically objectionable *and* still accommodate the counterpart assumption.[24] To this purpose, I propose the following rules for 'Boche'. The conditions for the introduction of 'Boche' are the same as before ("x is German; therefore, x is a Boche"), but the elimination rule adds the information that Germans are typically cruel. The elimination rule can be more formally stated as

Boche-E(Gen): x is a Boche; therefore, x is German $\land$ Gen x $\big[$German$(x)\big]$ $\big[$cruel$(x)\big]$

This is a standard way to represent the structure of a generic statement. The stereotypical conception is attributed to Germans generically.[25] 'Gen' is a

23 Williamson, "Reference, Inference, and the Semantics of Pejoratives," 145–48.

24 In his response to Williamson, Daniel Whiting agrees with Williamson, and he formulates the rules broadly in the way Williamson suggests. He goes on to say, just like Williamson, that the derogatory part is fleshed out with a conventional implicature that Germans are cruel. See Whiting, "Conservatives and Racists," 375–88, especially 384–87. See also Williamson, "Reference, Inference, and the Semantics of Pejoratives," 149–52. By doing this, Whiting loses the objectionability but gains an explanation for the projection behavior of slurs. It is often thought that the projection behavior requires some kind of nontruth conditional element, and conventional implicature is just that—nontruth conditional. Nevertheless, I do think the epistemic objectionability is worth saving. For one thing, as I argue below, it offers a fresh and unique perspective on reclamation. However, I also have to address the issue of projection, which I do at the end of the next section.

25 The suggested analysis applies also to gendered slurs. The rules for 'slut' are roughly that 'slut' refers to a woman, and women are typically promiscuous; and 'bitch' refers to a

generic operator comparable to quantifiers, but unlike quantifiers, it does not specify the exact relationship between sets within the scope of the operator. In natural language, the generic operator can be substituted with terms like 'usually', 'generally', or 'typically', although it is often omitted altogether—as in "Tigers are striped."[26]

As I have explained elsewhere, an important part of this proposal is that the generic element receives a Leslie-style interpretation. Sarah-Jane Leslie argues that generics do not have truth conditions in the traditional sense.[27] The Gen operator that appears in Boche-E(Gen) does not contribute to the truth conditions of generics in the way that, for example, quantifiers do. Rather, generics are based on a psychological mechanism, and hence, they have much looser *worldly truth-makers*, as she calls them. The relevant truth-maker is the one related to striking-feature generics. According to Leslie, the psychological mechanism is regularly triggered in the presence of a striking feature, and often, the feature is something horrific or appalling.[28] In the case of "Germans are cruel," the mechanism is indeed triggered, but it goes without saying that the worldly truth-makers do not support this generalization. The most important point here is that the Leslie-style interpretation allows one to adhere to the counterpart assumption. The assignment of reference is the set of German people because the generic part does not contribute to the truth conditions of the conjunction in Boche-E(Gen). Hence, Boche-E(Gen) does not contribute to the assignment of reference. Assignment is done solely on the basis of Boche-I(Gen). To be clear, if the generic component did contribute to the assignment of the reference, it would result in a rather odd situation. The reference of 'Boche' would be indeterminate since it could be one of two sets: the set of German people assigned by the introduction rule or an empty set assigned by the Boche-E(Gen) since the false generic component falsifies the whole conjunction.

2.2. *Counterpart Assumption and Objectionability*

One of the virtues of the counterpart assumption is that it provides a simple and effective explanation of the semantics of slurs. For example, 'Boche' is a bad word for Germans, 'Frog' is a bad word for the French, and so on. According to the counterpart assumption, the truth-conditional contribution of slurs is the same as that of their neutral counterparts. Semantically speaking, the

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woman, and typically women are overbearing. See Valtonen, "Gendered Slurs and the Subset Argument," 762–79. In section 2.5, I argue that the analysis also applies to slurs involving body shaming.

26 Leslie, "Generics," 1–6.

27 Leslie, "Generics and the Structure of Mind," 386–88.

28 Leslie, "Generics and the Structure of the Mind," 383–86.

epistemic view is compatible with expressivism. They both rely on the counterpart assumption. Although the proposed view is semantically compatible with expressivism, the view has something in common with what might be called "semantic views," like Christopher Hom and Robert May's semantic innocence.[29] According to the proposed view, there is something wrong with the meaning of slurs. Namely, the meaning is epistemically objectionable. Expressivism does not have this feature. According to expressivism, there is nothing semantically wrong with slurs. The term 'Boche' works just as it should when it expresses hostility toward a German. Rather, it is the expressed racist attitude that is objectionable. In contrast, Hom and May argue that the meaning of slurs is morally objectionable, and this objectionability seeps into the truth-conditional contribution of slurs, as unnegated slurring statements are systemically false. So based on their view of the moral objectionability of slurs, Hom and May reject the counterpart assumption.[30]

Eleonore Neufeld argues that slurs involve essentialization with a similar effect. She claims that slurs "designate an essence that is explanatorily connected to a set of negative stereotypical features of a social group."[31] As a consequence, she comes to a similar conclusion as Hom and May: the extension of slurs is empty. Leslie also says that generalization involves essentialization, which can have pernicious effects concerning social kinds since it can lead to generalizations like "Germans are cruel" and "Muslims are terrorists."[32] The comparison between Neufeld and the current proposal emphasizes Leslie's interpretation of generics and the claim that generics do not have a truth-conditional contribution in Boche-E(Gen). According to the proposed view, slurs are epistemically objectionable while the counterpart argument is maintained. Thereby, the view takes on board the appealing intuitions of expressivism and of semantic views. On the one hand, the epistemic view maintains the idea that slurs are bad names for groups. This is the contribution of the counterpart assumption. On the other hand, the epistemic view holds that there is something wrong with the meaning of slurs, just like semantic views argue. In fact, the epistemic objectionability only emphasizes the connection between the derogation and the counterpart assumption. Slurs are bad because they derogate targets on the basis that the targets belong to a certain demographic group. Despite your personal moral integrity and accomplishments, with slurs, you are reduced to a criminal, a slacker, or a vulgarian on the basis of a demographic

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29   See Hom and May, "Moral and Semantic Innocence."

30   Hom and May, "Moral and Semantic Innocence," 294–300.

31   Neufeld, "An Essentialist Theory of the Meaning of Slur," 2.

32   Leslie, "The Original Sin of Cognition," 393–421.

marker.[33] The proposed view adds that this is done in an epistemically objectionable way. (The idea of epistemic objectionability is revisited in section 2.5, where the epistemic view of reclamation is detailed.)

The final note concerning the differences between expressivism and the epistemic view is about the projection behavior that is a much-discussed feature of slurs. This means that slurs project out of the scope of truth functional operators.[34] For example, the conditional "If Macron is a Frog, then so is his partner" is derogatory even though neither of the constituents are actually asserted. Similarly, slurs project out of indirect speech reports. In "John said Macron is a Frog," it is not clear whose attitude the slur expresses. Is it the speaker's or John's?[35] It has often been thought that to explain the projection, one needs to introduce nontruth conditional content like expressivism does. Since the derogatory content is nontruth conditional, it is not a big surprise that it escapes the scope of truth conditional operators.[36] Admittedly, the epistemic view does not attribute a separate nontruth conditional content to slurs. Hence, at first sight, one might think that it struggles to explain projection behavior. Nevertheless, there are alternative explanations for projection. One prominent is the *taboo* status of slurs associated originally with Luvell Anderson and Ernest Lepore's prohibitionism. According to prohibitionism, taboo words are not to be used or even mentioned in any context. This then explains the projection. Nonetheless, as Anderson and Lepore point out, embargoes are not absolute but often contain some caveats, and according to them, in-group use of slurs is one of them.[37] This gives enough room for reclamation. Similarly, the epistemic view argues that the derogatory nature of slurs leads to the taboo status, which then explains the projection behavior. Crucially, the explanation does not require nontruth conditional resources.[38]

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33 Similarly, Deborah Mühlebach observes that slurs differ from ordinary swear words in that while a pejorative like 'asshole' might be derogatory, the derogation might be warranted. 'Asshole' targets individuals based on their actions or character, not on their membership in a specific social or demographic group. Mühlebach, "A Non-Ideal Approach to Slurs," 15–16. See also Diaz-Legaspe, "What Is a Slur?" 1399–422.

34 See McCready, "Varieties of Conventional Implicature," 12.

35 In comparison, in "John said that the moon is made of cheese," there is no doubt who has the silly belief.

36 See, e.g., Potts, "The Expressive Dimension," 167–76.

37 Anderson and Lepore, "Slurring Words," 25–48. See also Berkovski, "Slurs, Synonymy, and Taboo."

38 It seems to me that it is a very natural idea that the taboo status derives from the bad meaning of slurs. However, Anderson and Lepore disagree on this issue ("Slurring Words"). Their view is highly deflationary. They think that slurring terms and their neutral counterparts are synonymous in every way. It is just that at one point, the other one was declared

2.3. Self-Labeling and the Competence Objection

As noted, expressive views explain self-labeling well. The reason for this is the
expressive conception of the meaning of slurs. At the same time, it is argued
here that the epistemic view can tap into the expressive resources to explain
self-labeling. In this section, I explain how the epistemic view can use the
resources of expressivism. It is important to note that this discussion does not
bring out any advantages concerning the epistemic view. In fact, in this sec-
tion, it appears that expressivism has the upper hand as it is admitted that the
competence objection is a powerful objection against the stereotype views.
However, I argue that as a stereotype view, the epistemic view can handle the
competence objection. Moreover, the offered solution does lead to an advan-
tage that is detailed in the next section. In short, the advantage is the following.
While expressivism and the epistemic view can both explain self-labeling, the
epistemic view has more resources to explain self-definition; therefore, it pro-
vides a more detailed picture of reclamation as self-definition.

First, let us look at the dispute between expressive views and stereotype
views. A stereotype view, like the epistemic view, holds that derogation stems
from a stereotypical conception of the target. In contrast, according to expres-
sivism, derogation is not based on any specific stereotypes; rather, derogation
is based on an expression of a negative attitude toward the target. Instead of
a specific stereotype, the meaning of 'Boche' adds a hostile attitude toward
the Germans, similar to 'Boo the Germans!' As Jeshion points out, the source
of the derogation is a nonpropositional attitude, like contempt. Even though
contempt can be "a highly structured affectively and normatively guided moral
attitude," it is still nonpropositional and nondescriptive. The contempt is not
propositionally encoded.[39] In her paper "Slurs and Stereotypes," Jeshion rejects
the stereotype view in the following way:

> I challenge its most fundamental claim—that a speaker who uses a slur
> thereby expresses and endorses a stereotype ... of the group that the
> slurring term references.[40]

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a prohibited word, and it became taboo. To emphasize, this declaration has nothing to do
with the meaning or any other feature of the word (39). In other words, Anderson and
Lepore argue that slurs are bad *because* they are prohibited. The current view argues that
it is the other way around. Slurs are prohibited because they are bad. Recently, Stefano
Predelli has presented similar thoughts, exploring the connection between taboo and
various aspects of meaning ("Unmentionables," 726–44).

39 Jeshion, "Expressivism and the Offensiveness of Slurs," 316–18.

40 Jeshion, "Slurs and Stereotypes," 320.

From this, Jeshion goes on to formulate what might be called the *competence objection*. She points out that the "rationale for requiring the encoding of stereo-types" to the meaning of slurs "is questionable."[41] The ordinary competence in the use of slurs does not support it. Competence does not require knowledge of any specific stereotype; for example, a speaker can use 'Frog' competently without knowledge of any specific stereotype associated with French people.[42]

The competence objection is a genuine challenge for the stereotype view. Slurs can be used competently to express hostility even if one is completely ignorant about the stereotypes associated with the target group. This is just a fact about the *use* of slurs. However, it need not be a fact about the *meaning* of slurs. Therefore, in order to defend the stereotype view, I have previously distinguished between the use of slurs and the meaning of slurs. According to the stereotype view, derogation is based on a negative stereotype associated with the target group. I argue that stereotypes are part of the meaning of slurs. For example, 'Frog' involves the idea that French people are vulgar, and 'Boche' involves the idea that Germans are cruel. The meaning and the use of slurs are then two different things. It seems to me that the linguistic fact that a speaker can *use* 'Frog' to express general hostility toward French people derives from the meaning of 'Frog', which can include the attribution of a negative stereo-type. With the distinction between meaning and use, the current view adheres to Dummett's conception of the social character of language. According to Dummett, none of us have perfect knowledge even of our native tongues. Even if a speaker is a native speaker of English, for example, they might be ignorant about the English vocabulary of theoretical physics. Similarly, Dummett says that one can have only partial knowledge concerning individual words and yet be a competent user of those words: "we constantly use words whose meanings we do not fully know, but we use them with confidence that what we are saying is true, and that we are therefore transmitting correct information."[43] He illus-trates this with an example. Consider someone who knows that 'chess' refers to a board game played by two people but does not know the rules of chess. In this case, it is fair to say that the speaker has only partial knowledge of what 'chess' means. Yet the speaker can use the term correctly when the speaker says two of their friends play chess in the park every Sunday. Dummett also gives an example of complete ignorance. He says that his knowledge of the term 'gasket' is nonexistent. Still, he can pass on the information that his car does not work because the gasket is leaking. The guy at the garage said so. In this

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41   Jeshion, "Slurs and Stereotypes," 320.

42   Jeshion, "Expressivism and the Offensiveness of Slurs," 321–23.

43   Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*, 84.

case, Dummett says that this is not real knowledge, and he does not know what 'gasket' means.[44] It seems to me that Dummett is merely quoting what the guy at the garage told him.

The crucial question for us is which example resembles the expressive use of slurs (without the knowledge of the stereotype), and it seems to me that the expressive use displays genuine partial knowledge. In fact, it seems to me that an expressive user of 'Frog' knows quite a lot. The speaker knows that 'Frog' applies to French people, and the speaker also knows that the term conveys contempt toward the French. As an upshot, I disagree with Jeshion's characterization of the "fundamental claim" of the stereotype view. The central claim is not that the competent use of a slur is always an expression and an endorsement of a partic-ular stereotype. In light of previous discussion, this claim is too strong. Rather, the main claim is more likely on the lines of: even though the meaning of slurs includes stereotypes, partial knowledge can also result in competence. Just like the term 'chess' can be used competently without the knowledge of the rules of chess, slurs can be used competently without the knowledge of the stereotype. The adherence to Dummett's notion of partial knowledge enables the current stereotype view to explain the expressive use and also the meaning of slurs, which involves stereotypes. When slurs are used expressively, the view can attri-bute competence to the speaker on the basis of partial knowledge just because the knowledge of stereotypes is not required, but still, the full meaning of slurs involves stereotypes. One way to illustrate the proposed view is to compare it with Leopold Hess's recent view. He argues that in his inferentialist account, the truth conditional content of "Hans is a Boche" is that Hans is German. He goes on to argue that there is also explicit and implicit nontruth conditional content. The explicit nontruth conditional content is the speaker's contempt toward Germans. Additionally, the implicit nontruth conditional element is the stereotype that Germans are cruel.[45] While there are obvious similarities between my development and Hess's view, there are also slight differences. In my view, the meaning does not involve three components. My view involves only the rules that assign the reference of 'Boche' to Germans. Furthermore, the rules suggest generically that Germans are cruel. Given Dummett's view of competence, the latter part enables the expressive usage.

The outcome of the previous is that the epistemic view is able to borrow the expressive resources to explain self-labeling. Reclamation as self-labeling hap-pens exactly like expressivism describes. Hence, expressivism provides a satis-factory explanation for self-labeling. As Ritchie points out, self-labeling is about

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44   Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*, 83–84.

45   Hess, "Inferentialist Semantics for Lexicalized Social Meanings," 358.

changing the evaluation of the targeted group: "Galinsky [and others] found that self-labeling with a slur … increases an observer's evaluation of … the power of the target group."[46] Crucially, this change in evaluation leads "to decreased perceptions of negativity in the slur that was used to self-label." If we consider the epistemic view, the response to the previous objection regarding competence has a rather fortunate outcome. As a result of the distinction between the use and the meaning of slurs, the epistemic view can borrow the expressive explanation for self-labeling. Not only are expressivism and the epistemic view semantically compatible because they both adhere to the counterpart assumption, but the epistemic view also acknowledges the expressive use of slurs. So when slurs are used to express hostility toward the target, reclamation works as a polarity switch, as expressivism predicts. Nevertheless, taking a cue from Jeshion, I argue that in addition to self-labeling, reclamation also involves self-definition. The epistemic view argues that the meaning of slurs involves more than just hostility toward the target. The full meaning of slurs also involves stereotypes, and this becomes crucial in order to provide a detailed picture of reclamation and self-definition, as seen next.

2.4. Self-Definition and Public Representations

Jeshion argues that the point of reclamation is to break oppressive norms, but all descriptive elements are left out because the derogation associated with slurs—and hence the reclamation of slurs—does not contain any descriptive elements. In contrast, the epistemic view holds that the derogation associated with slurs and the oppressive norms both derive from stereotypes. An example of this situation is the oppressive conception that women must be monitored and controlled because they are prone to promiscuity, alongside the gendered slur 'slut', which captures this stereotypical conception. By challenging the meaning of 'slut', reclamation challenges the vehicle of the stereotypical conception of promiscuity and therefore undermines the basis for the oppressive norm. Since, according to the stereotype view, slurs encode stereotypes, the *primary* aim of reclamation as self-definition is to challenge the meaning of a slur that puts forward these stereotypes. As a consequence, the effects of the oppressive norms are mitigated. This view takes a cue from Elisabeth Anderson, who argues that stereotypes are part of a public representation, even if all parties reject it. According to Anderson, just because they are part of the public representation of the targeted group, harmful stereotypes hang on like a "cloud."[47] To illustrate her point, she describes an encounter she had in Detroit

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46   Ritchie, "Social Identity, Indexicality, and the Appropriation of Slurs," 164.

47   Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*.

with a Black man who helped when she was having car trouble. The encounter
started with the stranger's assurance that he was there to offer help, not to rob
Anderson. She goes on to point out:

> This man suffered a harm of racial stigmatization in this interaction. He
> was harmed, regardless of how he felt about it, and notwithstanding
> the fact that I refused to apply the stereotype of the criminally violent
> black male to him. . . . The harm consists in the fact that he walks under
> a cloud of suspicion in … encounters with strangers. To gain access to
> cooperative interactions, he must assume the burdens of dispelling this
> cloud, of protesting and proving his innocence of imagined crimes.[48]

The proposed view suggests that reclamation is a way to protest and chal-
lenge the meaning of slurs as vehicles of harmful stereotypical conceptions,
thereby contributing to the redefinition of the public representation of the
target group. To connect reclamation to the two different conceptions of the
meaning of slurs, you might say that reclamation of the n-word, according to
expressivism, is something like "We are Black and we are proud!" The n-word
refers to the same set as its neutral counterpart, but the negative evaluation,
which is similar to contempt, is switched to a positive evaluation that is similar
to pride. The epistemic view adds, "The n-word links criminality with Black
people, and we need to change that!" The epistemic view sets the stage to view
reclamation this way as it allows one to view the act of reclamation as a chal-
lenge to the meaning of a slur that unwarrantedly attributes a harmful stereo-
type to the target.

2.5. Challenging the Meaning

Reclamation concerns the meaning of slurs and aims to transform the meaning
of the contested word. Expressivism aims to transform a pejorative word into a
positive one. The epistemic view also aims to transform the meaning of slurs by
challenging the epistemically objectionable part. Expressivism explains self-la-
beling with a polarity switch: a negative attitude toward a target is changed to
a positive one. In contrast, the proposed view does not work like that. I pro-
pose that the epistemic challenge should not be understood as switching from
a negative stereotype to a positive stereotype. Rather, the challenge should be
understood as a challenge to the way a slur word captures a negative stereo-
type. The aim of reclamation is to *neutralize* the slur by transforming its meaning.
Cepollaro notices that the polarity-switch strategy is potentially problematic for

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48   Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, 53.

expressivism.[49] Specifically, if it is unwarranted to condemn someone merely on the basis of a demographic marker, then surely it is equally unwarranted to praise someone on the basis of that same demographic marker. She goes on to argue that this potential worry can be dealt with by comparing reclamation to affirmative action. Just like in affirmative action, a short-term imbalance can be justified with long-term benefits, such as "turning the slur to a less powerful weapon in the long run."[50] It seems to me that this is a good response to the potential worry. In a similar fashion, one can object against the proposed view that if the adding of the negative stereotyping makes slurs epistemically objectionable, then surely the attribution of positive stereotypes is equally objectionable. (This is discussed in detail below, but at this point, I just highlight that objectionability does not depend on the content of what is added; it derives from the fact that something is added in the first place.) One can counter this objection with a similar train of thought as Cepollaro defends expressivism. The long-term benefits of the attribution of positive stereotypes outweigh the objectionability of meaning. However, it is questionable whether positive stereotypes have long-term benefits.

Alexander M. Czopp and his colleagues provide a comprehensive meta-analysis of studies of positive stereotypes. Their meta-analysis suggests that positive self-stereotyping may have similar effects to what Galinsky and others found in regard to self-labeling. Czopp and others point out that positive self-stereotyping can act as "a compensatory coping strategy in response to the stigmatization associated with their group's negative stereotypes."[51] Self-definition with positive stereotypes may protect against negative stereotyping, and hence, defining oneself with positive stereotypes can help "to preserve a positive self-concept." Furthermore, the meta-analysis suggests that others' impressions of the targeted group are improved.[52] Given these two points, at least initially, it seems like positive stereotyping has similar effects to self-labeling. It not only insulates the group from negative stereotypes and helps to improve the group's self-image but also improves others' impressions of the group. However, Czopp and others go on to suggest that the phenomenon of positive stereotyping is more complex, and positive self-stereotyping often comes with a high price.

First, positive stereotyping can result in resentment because the targets feel that despite the flattery, positive stereotyping is depersonalizing. It is based on demographic markers rather than personal merits.[53] Even though Czopp and

49   Cepollaro, "The Moral Status of the Reclamation of Slurs."
50   Cepollaro, "The Moral Status of the Reclamation of Slurs," 672–88.
51   Czopp et al., "Positive Stereotypes Are Pervasive and Powerful," 453.
52   Czopp et al., "Positive Stereotypes Are Pervasive and Powerful," 454.
53   Czopp et al., "Positive Stereotypes Are Pervasive and Powerful," 456.

others do not discuss the issue of accuracy in relation to self-stereotyping, it seems to me that self-stereotyping, even positive self-stereotyping, is on shaky ground if one does not believe that the attribution of the stereotype is merited. Second, positive stereotypes often maintain a complementary relationship to negative stereotypes. To put it another way, positive stereotypes can exclude other positive stereotypes. For example, Asian people are stereotypically perceived as smart but cold. Conversely, when women are stereotyped as warm and friendly, they are perceived as less competent than their male counterparts.[54] Needless to say, stereotyping yourself as warm and friendly but less competent than your colleagues is not good for your career. Third, I started the discussion of self-definition by noting that the purpose of self-definition is to break oppressive norms concerning the target group. Ironically, Czopp and others suggest that positive stereotypes might possess even more normative force than negative ones. They argue that positive stereotypes can create expectations that are "more likely to encourage and reinforce stereotype-consistent behaviors than … negative stereotypes."[55] To illustrate, Czopp and others point out that people generally do not think that Black people *ought* to be uneducated and aggressive, even though that might be how Black people are stereotyped. In contrast, a Black person might be under the pressure to excel in sports, and an Asian person might feel the pressure to excel in math just because those are positive stereotypes.

As a consequence of these three points, Czopp and others conclude that positive stereotypes provide "a uniquely powerful mode of perpetuating inequality" and that positive stereotypes reinforce "hierarchies in which certain groups are consistently disadvantaged."[56] Taking a cue from Anderson, reclamation is intended to challenge the vehicles of harmful stereotypes, not to load the vehicles with other harmful stereotypes. The above discussion suggests that although self-stereotyping and self-labeling may have similar, initially positive effects, self-stereotyping might ultimately be more harmful than beneficial to the targeted group. Positive stereotypes, whether self-imposed or imposed by others, can be restrictive. If believed, they can restrict career and education opportunities, perhaps even more than negative stereotypes. If they are not believed, it is difficult to see how they can help the self-representation of the targeted group.

Doubt about the accuracy of stereotypes raises another separate but equally important question: Can there be accurate stereotypes? Discussion of this question reveals an important point about what is challenged in reclamation

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54 Czopp et al., "Positive Stereotypes Are Pervasive and Powerful," 456; and Czopp, "When Is a Compliment Not a Compliment?" 414.

55 Czopp et al., "Positive Stereotypes Are Pervasive and Powerful," 456.

56 Czopp et al., "Positive Stereotypes Are Pervasive and Powerful," 457.

according to the epistemic view. One of the most convincing arguments against stereotyping derives from the unwarranted nature of the stereotypes, which seems closely connected to depersonalization. According to the epistemic argument, stereotypes are unwarranted because they do not take into account the personal traits of a target. Rather, some (stereotypical) traits are inferred solely on the basis of skin color or some other demographic marker that connects the targeted individual with a group. However, Erin Beeghly questions the objectionability of these kinds of inferences. She asks whether there are any good epistemic arguments for the claim that stereotyping is always objectionable. She does not find existing arguments convincing and concludes, "Stereotyping could be … epistemically permissible in some cases."[57] Similarly, Uwe Peters distinguishes between *neutral* stereotypes and *loaded* stereotypes: a loaded stereotype can be "an epistemic injustice" to the target; neutral stereotyping, on the other hand, is "a tendency to treat certain noticeable markers of social identity automatically as accurate predictors of certain beliefs."[58] Admittedly, I sympathize with the idea that stereotypes are *always* unwarranted. However, I do not want my view to be a hostage to the possibility of neutral stereotypes—that is, to the possibility that some stereotypes are warranted. Hence, it needs to be emphasized how exactly the challenge works according to the proposed view.

The epistemic view holds that the objectionability of slurs stems from the meaning of slurs, not from the epistemology of stereotypes. Slurs are objectionable because it is the meaning of slurs, not actual evidence, that allows one to attribute cruelty to Germans and vulgarity to French people. Even though it is a fine distinction, there is a difference. Even if the evidence for a stereotypical conception, S, makes S warranted, the meaning of a slur that attributes S to a group, G, is still objectionable because the attribution is based not on evidence but on meaning. Whether or not there are neutral or accurate stereotypes does not change the objectionability of slurs. The meaning of 'Boche' is objectionable because it allows the attribution of cruelty to Germans without any evidence. This affects reclamation, which first and foremost challenges the vehicle of the stereotype: the meaning of a slur.

The previous point can be elaborated with Dummett's criticism of classical logic. Initially, this might seem like a rather far-fetched analogy, but a closer inspection reveals that it too hinges on the notion of epistemic objectionability. Dummett criticizes classical logic on the grounds that the rules for classical negation are lacunose and therefore proof theoretically objectionable. Dummett himself adheres to intuitionistic logic. The crucial difference between classical

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57   Beeghly, "What Is a Stereotype?" 675–91, especially 688.
58   Peters, "Hidden Figures," 33.

and intuitionistic logic is the divergent conceptions of negation. Intuitionistic and classical logic share the same introduction rule for negation, *reductio ad absurdum*, but the dispute is over different elimination rules. In intuitionistic logic, the elimination rule is just "A and not-$A \vdash \perp$"—which says that together A and not-A lead to absurdity. In classical logic, the negation elimination rule is double negation elimination rule, "not-not-$A \vdash A$." Dummett criticizes the classical rule because it smuggles in the idea of bivalence, which is not present in the introduction rule. So the classical rule, according to Dummett, is objectionable because it does not preserve warrants. Rather, the classical negation relies on a tacit additional assumption of bivalence. To use Rumfitt's phrase again, the elimination rule unpacks more than the introduction rule packs in. From this, the dispute usually expands to the nature of truth. For the proponents of classical logic, truth is evidence-transcendent, and the classical rule for negation is saved with this realistic notion of truth. If realism is right about the bivalent nature of truth, then the classical conception of negation is vindicated. Nevertheless, Dummettian intuitionists disagree. It is true that if there is a guarantee of decidability (that every sentence or its negation in the discourse is effectively provable), then all bivalent rules are justified even within intuitionistic logic, but that does not yet vindicate the classical conception of negation. Rather, the justification derives first from the demonstration of decidability to bivalence, then from bivalence to the law of excluded middle; and finally, the law of excluded middle warrants the use of the double elimination rule in inferences. However, that does not change the objectionability of the classical negation. It is still lacunose. Hence, for an intuitionist, the idea that negation involves bivalence even before we know that the discourse in question is decidable is unwarranted.[59]

I argue that in reclamation, the target group takes the intuitionistic attitude and challenges the meaning of slurs on similar grounds. Even if there are neutral and accurate stereotypes, that does not change the objectionability of slurs. The meaning of 'Boche' is objectionable because it allows the attribution of cruelty to Germans regardless of the evidence concerning the cruelty of German people.

Needless to say, there is a caveat concerning the analogy between the attitudes of a logical intuitionist and someone who reclaims a slur. The idea that people engage in reclamation because they know that the meaning of a slur is proof theoretically objectionable seems unrealistic. But I do not think they need to be aware of the proof theoretic badness. As it is already covered, mere self-labeling is beneficial for the targeted group. Furthermore, while reclaimers may not be aware of the proof theoretical badness, they are often aware that

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59   E.g., Tennant, *Taming of the True*, 175–76. My exposition here relies on Neil Tennant's discussion of the dispute mainly because of the clarity of his discussion but Dummett himself expresses very similar thoughts in "'Yes', 'No' and 'Can't Say'," 289–95.

reclamation is a way to challenge slurs as vehicles of stereotypical conceptions. For example, a body positivity activist, Raisa Omaheimo, was asked about her use of the term 'fat'. Her answer perfectly captures the connection between reclamation and the epistemic view:

> For many years, it has been my project to reclaim this word 'fat'. Traditionally, it has been associated with [an] awful lot of negative things. 'Fat' is stupid and lazy and … has no self-control, but I want to empty the word from these meanings. I think that 'fat' means that there is more fat in a [particular] body than in the average body, period. It describes a certain type of body, and it does not mean anything more. It has been very liberating to reclaim the term and take it away from the offensive usage.[60]

Omaheimo emphasizes that reclamation is about the meaning of slurs. More specifically, the aim of reclamation is to empty slur words of the negative and harmful stereotypes and thereby to neutralize the words. From the point of view of epistemic objectionability, when a word is neutralized, it is no longer objectionable. If the word 'fat' no longer inferentially takes you from a certain body type to stupidity or laziness, then it is no longer lacunose or objectionable. To illustrate, let us take Omaheimo's view of the meaning of 'fat' and formulate the inferential rules for 'fat':

Fat-I(Gen): x has more body fat than the average body; therefore, x is fat.

Fat-E(Gen): x is fat; therefore, x has more body fat than the average body, and typically, fat people are stupid, lazy, etc.

Given Omaheimo's recipe for reclamation, in reclamation, the rules for 'fat' are transformed into

Fat-I(Gen): x has more body fat than the average body; therefore, x is fat.

Fat-E(Gen)*: x is fat; therefore, x has more body fat than the average body.

As a consequence, the elimination rule no longer unpacks more than the introduction rule packs in. It just takes you back to where you started. The meaning of 'fat' is no longer objectionable. And to repeat the earlier point, the switch from negative stereotype to positive stereotype would be equally objectionable because the elimination rule would still unpack more than the introduction

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60 Omaheimo talked about her new book *Ratkaisuja Läskeille* (*Solutions to Fats*, my translation) on the Finnish daytime show *Puoli Seitsemän* (*Half Past Six*, on Finnish broadcasting channel Yle TV1) on November 17, 2022. The interview was in Finnish; I have translated the section quoted here. There is also an article based on the interview (https://yle.fi/a/74-20005131), which contains the relevant passage in a slightly edited form.

rule packs in. The goal of reclamation is to *neutralize* slur words—to empty them of their lacunose content. This is what the epistemic view takes Jeshion's weapons control to mean. At the same time, reclamation contributes to self-definition. Being fat does not mean that one is stupid or lazy. 'Fat' just describes a certain type of body and nothing more.

3. CONCLUSION

Taking a cue from Jeshion's account of reclamation, there are two key aspects of reclamation: self-labeling and self-definition. As has been shown, the proposed epistemic view can account for both of these aspects. Although the epistemic view can accommodate only self-labeling, it has been shown that it offers a unique perspective on self-definition.

The epistemic view borrows expressive resources to explain self-labeling. This is possible because of the distinction between the meaning and the use of slurs and because of Dummett's idea that even with partial language knowledge, speakers can achieve successful communication. Notably, the epistemic view acknowledges that slurs can be used to vent hostility toward the target group without any knowledge of stereotypes associated with the target.

Nevertheless, the epistemic view holds that the expressive usage of slurs stems from the meaning of slurs, which includes stereotypical conceptions of the targets. These conceptions are harmful because they impose oppressive norms on the targets. According to the epistemic view, reclamation challenges the meaning of slurs that convey harmful stereotypes. By doing so, reclamation neutralizes slur words by transforming their meaning from derogatory to neutral.[61]

Tampere University
pablo.valtonen@gmail.com

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