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Spanish slurs and stereotypes for Mexican-Americans in the USA: A context-sensitive account of derogation and appropriation

Peyorativos y estereotipos para los Mexicano-Americanos en EE. UU.: Una consideración contextual del uso despectivo y de apropiación

Abstract: Slurs such as *spic*, *slut*, *wetback*, and *whore* are linguistic expressions that are primarily understood to derogate certain group members on the basis of their descriptive attributes (such as their race or sex) and expressions of this kind have been considered to pack some of the nastiest punches natural language affords. Although prior scholarship on slurs has uncovered several important facts concerning their meaning and use –including that slurs are potentially offensive, are felicitously applied towards some targets yet not others, and are often flexibly used not only derogatorily to convey offense towards out-group members but also non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members– the literature remains largely focused on slurs that typically target African Americans (*nigger*), male homosexuals (*faggot*), and sexually active females (*slut*). Since no account of slurs that typically target Hispanics or Mexican-Americans has so far been proposed, here I offer the first systematic and empirically informed analysis of these that accounts for both their derogatory and appropriative use. Importantly, this article reviews over a dozen Spanish stereotypes and slurs and explains how the descriptive attributes involved in a stereotype associated with a slur can contribute to the predication of certain content in the application of that slur toward its target in context. This article further explains how the psychological effects of *stereotype threat* and *stereotype lift* can be initiated through the application of a relevant slur towards its target in context as well.

Keywords: slurs, appropriation, stereotype lift, stereotype threat

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Resumen: Las expresiones peyorativas tales como *spic* ('spic'), *slut* ('zorra'), *wetback* ('espalda mojada') y *whore* ('puta') son expresiones lingüísticas que se entienden principalmente para minusvalorar ciertos miembros de un grupo sobre la base de sus atributos descriptivos (como la raza o el sexo). Se ha considerado que las expresiones de este tipo conllevan algunos de los puñetazos más desagradables que el lenguaje natural puede proporcionar. Aunque la literatura especializada sobre expresiones peyorativas ha descubierto varios hechos importantes en cuanto a significado y uso –entre los que se incluyen que tales expresiones son potencialmente ofensivas, apuntan efectivamente hacia unos objetivos pero no hacia otros, y con frecuencia se utilizan con flexibilidad no sólo despectivamente para ofender a miembros por fuera de un grupo, sino que también de forma no despectiva para afiliar con miembros dentro de un mismo grupo–, tal literatura sigue centrada en gran medida en las expresiones peyorativas que típicamente apuntan contra los afroamericanos (*nigger* 'negro'), los homosexuales varones (*fagot* 'maricón'), y las mujeres sexualmente activas (*slut* 'zorra'). En tanto que no se ha propuesto al momento dar cuenta de expresiones peyorativas dirigidas contra hispanos o mexicano-americanos, en este trabajo se ofrece el primer análisis sistemático y empíricamente informado de tales expresiones, tanto en sus usos despectivos y de apropiación. Es importante destacar que en este artículo se revisan más de una docena de estereotipos y expresiones peyorativas en español, además de explicar cómo los atributos descriptivos que participan de un estereotipo asociado con una difamación pueden contribuir a la predicación de determinados contenidos en la aplicación de esa expresión hacia su objetivo en contexto. Asimismo, en este artículo se explica cómo comienzan los efectos psicológicos de la amenaza estereotipada y el realce estereotipado cuando se emplea una expresión peyorativa relevante contra un objetivo en contexto.

Palabras clave: peyorativos, amenaza estereotipada, realce estereotipado

1 Introduction

Slurs such as *spic*, *slut*, *wetback*, and *whore* are linguistic expressions that are primarily understood to derogate certain group members on the basis of their descriptive attributes (such as their race or sex) and expressions of this kind

have been considered to pack some of the nastiest punches natural language affords.[1] Tirrell (1999) for one points out in "Derogatory Terms" that these kind of "derogatory terms are rich with their own history and reflect (in some sense) the history of the community in which they have meaning, and [that] they are profoundly normative" (Tirell, 1999, p. 42; cf. Tirrell, 1998, 2012). So it is not altogether surprising then that previously published research on slurs has focused largely on the projection behavior of their derogatory force across various linguistic contexts, including those involving questions (cf. McCready, 2010, p. 7–8), negations (cf. McCready, 2010, p. 7–8; Croom, 2011, p. 345; Blakemore, 2014), conditionals (cf. McCready, 2010, p. 9; Croom, 2011, p. 345), belief reports (cf. Hom, 2008, p. 422; Blakemore 2014), modal operators of tense and possibility (cf. McCready, 2010, p. 7–8; Blakemore, 2014), indirect reports (cf. Hom, 2008, p. 424–426; Capone, 2013, p. 177–181), elided phrases (cf. Potts et al., 2009, p. 357–361), and identity conditions (cf. Hom, 2008, p. 421–422; Potts et al., 2009, p. 357–361; Croom, 2011, p. 352).[2] Yet it would be unrealistic to suppose that most competent users of natural language come to understand the potential offensiveness of slur-use through a series of systematic tests on their projection behavior. Neither is it realistic to suppose that most competent users of natural language come to understand the potential offensiveness of slur-use through a scholarly study of Latin etymology or dictionary definitions. Rather, it is more realistic to suppose that most competent users of natural language come to understand the potential offensiveness of slur-use through the testimony of others reporting, or even being directly involved in, actual occasions of slur-use in natural language discourse, including occasions of verbal threating and physical violence (cf. Fitten, 1993; Heller, 2010; Koestler, 2010; Gates, 2012; Ashby, 2013; Thompson, 2013a; Gunderson, 2014; Harrington, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Seiler, 2014). So one basic fact about slurs that has distinguished them from other more purely descriptive expressions in the literature is that they are

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1 Please note that throughout this article I will only be *mentioning* rather than *using* slurs. Here I submit that we simply acknowledge at the outset that we are non-prejudice scholars of language and accordingly carry on with our linguistic analysis of the relevant examples for the purpose of being as clear and accurate as possible.

2 An example of a *negated statement* involving a slur that typically targets Mexican Americans includes "Tino is no *nigger*; he's a *spic*" (Anderson & Lepore, 2013, p. 29, my emphasis), an example of a *disjunctive statement* involving a slur that typically targets Mexican Americans includes "Either Fred is a *spic*, or he is not" (Anderson & Lepore, 2013, p. 35, my emphasis), and an example of an *indirect report* involving a slur that typically targets Mexican Americans includes "John rather offensively said that Jim is a *spic*" (Anderson & Lepore 2013, p. 29, my emphasis).

among the most potentially offensive linguistic expressions natural language affords.[3]

Although a slur *qua slur* is generally considered capable of targeting and offending others, a particular slur does not offend or felicitously apply to all targets equally. Instead, it is by virtue of the fact that slurs are commonly understood to felicitously apply to *some* targets yet *not others* that language-users are able to *systematically distinguish* between relatively *broader* categories of slurs (for example, that the racial slur *spic* can be aptly distinguished from the sexual slur *slut*) as well as how speakers are able to systematically distinguish between relatively *narrower* categories of slurs (for example, that the racial slur *spic* can be aptly distinguished from the racial slur *chink*) within those broader categories. Prior research on slurs has correctly noted that there are actually a wide variety of slur expressions in natural language that target groups members on the basis of different attributes, including gender, immigrant status, nationality, race, religion, sexual orientation, and many others (Anderson & Lepore, 2013, p. 25). So another basic fact about slurs that distinguishes them from other more purely expressive or generally pejorative expressions is that they are commonly understood to felicitously apply to some targets yet not others (Henderson, 2003; Cupkovic, 2014).[4]

Although several scholars writing on slurs have expressed the view that "No matter the context of conversation, the use of a slur is offensive and expresses contempt" (Hedger, 2013, p. 238; cf. Embrick & Henricks, 2013), it is also important to remain cognizant of the fact that other first-person reports from in-group speakers have now made it clear that slurs are often flexibly employed such that they may also, at least in some restricted contexts, be used *non-derogatorily* to convey affiliation among in-group members. Moreover, recent empirical studies from the social sciences have also shown that slurs are often flexibly employed such that they may also, at least in some restricted contexts, be used non-derogatorily to diminish the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried (cf. Johnson, 2009; Croom, 2011, p. 355; Rahman, 2012; Croom, 2013, p. 200; Galinsky et al., 2013; Bartlett et al., 2014; Beaton & Washington, 2014;

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3 Cf. adequacy condition 1 of 9 on p. 426 in Hom (2008), adequacy condition 3 of 6 on p. 355 in Croom (2011), and adequacy condition 3 of 7 on p. 200 in Croom (2013).

4 Cf. adequacy condition 2 of 6 on p. 355 in Croom (2011) and adequacy condition 2 of 7 on p. 200 in Croom (2013). Note also that although the expressions *property* and *feature* are often used in the extant literature to identify that which can be ascribed to individuals (for example, *race*, *sex*, and so on), here I try to use the expression *attribute* instead since it does not seem to suggest as strongly that what is being ascribed to these individuals is something that the individual is *actually* endowed with. For one can be commonly *attributed x* even though one does not *actually possess x* as a genuine feature or property.

Bianchi, 2014, p. 36; Croom, 2014a, p. 236–239). Bianchi (2014) for instance points out that "targeted members or groups may appropriate their own slurs for non-derogatory purposes, in order to demarcate the group, and show a sense of intimacy and solidarity" (Bianchi, 2014, p. 37) and Johnson (2009) further explains that many teens and comedians, among others, "are doing what linguists call "melioration" – reclaiming a word meant to sting by removing its barb" (p. 1). Concerning slurs for Mexican Americans more specifically, Arellano (2010) reports that the expression *pachuco* is "a slur against Mexican youth during the 1940s that was eventually *appropriated by them* and turned into the iconic zoot suit-wearing *chuco suave*" (p. 1) and Ratliff (2008) similarly reports that the expression "*guachos* is a common epithet [or slur] in Argentina that can be used *disparagingly or admiringly*" (p. 199–200, my emphasis). So yet another basic fact about slurs that must be accounted for is that they are often flexibly employed and of potential use, not only derogatorily to convey offense towards out-group members, but also non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members, or to weaken the derogatory force that the slur had originally communicated.[5]

Although prior scholarship on slurs has uncovered several important facts concerning their meaning and use –including that slurs are potentially offensive, are felicitously applied towards some targets yet not others, and are often flexibly used not only derogatorily to convey offense towards out-group members but also non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members– the literature remains largely focused on slurs that typically target African Americans (*nigger*), male homosexuals (*faggot*), and sexually active females (*slut*). This has left the case of slurs that typically target Mexican Americans largely neglected (cf. Hom, 2008; Potts, et al. 2009; Hom, 2010; McCready, 2010; Hom, 2012; Hedger, 2013; Hom & May, 2013; Whiting, 2013). Since no account of slurs that typically target Mexican-Americans has so far been proposed, here I offer the first systematic and empirically informed analysis of these that accounts for both their derogatory and appropriative use.[6] Importantly, this article reviews over a dozen Spanish stereotypes and slurs and explains how the descriptive attributes involved in a stereotype associated with a slur can contribute to the

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5 Cf. adequacy condition 7 of 9 on p. 428 in Hom (2008), adequacy condition 4 of 6 on p. 355 in Croom (2011), and adequacy condition 6 of 7 on p. 200 in Croom (2013).

6 Note that in this article I will primarily be using the expression *Mexican American* instead of *Hispanic* or *Latino* since Rodriguez (2014) recently reported that, although ""Hispanic" and "Latino" are often used interchangeably and aim to describe the same group of people [...] within Hispanic communities in the United States, most people identify with their country of origin and often use hyphens to represent their loyalties to both cultures: like "Mexican-American"" (cf. Passel & Taylor, 2009; CNN, 2014; Rodriguez, 2014).

predication of certain content in the application of that slur toward its target in context. This article further explains how the psychological effects of *stereotype threat* and *stereotype lift* can be initiated through the application of a relevant slur towards its target in context also.

But before we carefully consider face-threatening acts and the paradigmatic derogatory use of slurs in section 3, stereotypes and stereotypical attributes in section 4, family resemblance concepts and category membership in section 5, and the appropriation of slurs in section 6, let us first turn to briefly review some common slurs for Mexican Americans in the next section.

2 Spanish slurs

Although no general account of slurs for Mexican Americans has so far been proposed in the literature, there are in fact a large number of such slurs that would be useful to become familiarized with and better understand. Some of the most common slurs that have been used to target Mexican Americans, for example, include (*i*) the slur *brazer*, which originated in Chicago, Illinois and was derived from the expression *bracero* or *fieldworker*, (*ii*) the slur *cheddar*, which originated in Denver, Colorado and was derived from the expression *ranchero* or *farmer*, (*iii*) the slur *chicali*, which originated in Coachella Valley, California and was derived from the expression *mexicali*, (*iv*) the slur *chook*, which originated in McAllen, Texas and was derived from the expression *pachuco*, (*v*) the slur *fronchis*, which originated in El Paso, Texas and was derived from the expression *frontera chihuahua*, (*vi*) the slur *mojarra*, which originated in Dallas, Texas and was derived from the expression *mojado* or *wetback*, (*vii*) the slur *paisa*, which originated in American prisons and was derived from the expression *paisano* or *countryman*, (*viii*) the slur *TJ*, which originated in Oxnard, California and was derived from the expression *Tijuana*, (*ix*) the slur *wab*, which originated in Orange County, California and was derived from the expression *went across border*, and (*x*) the slur *webber*, which originating in East Los Angeles, California and was derived from the expression *wetback* (cf. Arellano, 2010; Arellano, 2012; Valdes, 2000, p. 162–163; Davis, 2001, p. 38).[7]

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7 At least this is what has been reported in what little scholarly research exists on the origins of these expressions. Other slurs and epithets that typically target Mexican Americans include *beaner*, *bronc*, *bully*, *chopa/chopita*, *greaser*, *jagger*, *pepper belly*, *roach coach*, and *taco bender*, although the place of origin and etymology for many of these expressions remain uncertain (cf. Arellano, 2010; Arellano, 2012). The reader is also referred to Beaton and Washington (2014) for

With regard to the slur *mojado* or *wetback*, Gerber (2013) reports that "The term, originally coined after Mexicans illegally entered the U.S. by swimming or wading across the Rio Grande, evolved to include a broader group of immigrants who snuck into the country on foot or in cars" and that "Everyone seems to agree that the English version of the term is highly offensive to Latinos when others use it" (cf. Koestler, 2010; Fain & Horn, 2011, p. 216; Matthews, 2014; Whitaker, 2014). The perceived offensiveness of this slur is also evidenced by the fact that Mel Gibson was reportedly dropped by his agency, William Morris Endeavor Entertainment, over a scandal where he had been recorded using the slur *wetback* during a threat he directed towards his (now ex-) wife (cf. Heller, 2010)[8] as well as the fact that Republican Congressman Donald Young "prompted a firestorm in social media and brought a swift reaction from lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle" for referring to workers on his family farm as *wetbacks* (cf. Associated Press, 2013; Avila, 2013; Cubias, 2013; Dunham, 2013; Fox News Latino, 2013; Gentilviso, 2013).[9]

Another common slur for Mexican Americans is *spic*. As defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2009) the slur *spic* is "a derogatory word for a person from a Spanish-speaking country in South or Central America or a Spanish-speaking community in the U.S." and *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* further notes that "The word spic is very offensive. Do not use this word" (cf. Sherring, 2012). In fact, some writers such as Gonzalez (2012) have even expressed the view that "It's NEVER OK to call ANYONE a "spic"!" Furthermore, the perceived offensiveness of this slur is also evidenced by the fact that the Bridgeport Police Hispanic Society demanded the resignation of Assistant Police Chief James Nardozzi for allowing a college professor to repeatedly use the slur *spic* to refer to Mexican Americans during an ethics training session for sergeants and lieutenants (cf. Ocasio, 2013) as well as the fact that Miss Universe Dayana Mendoza charged comedian Lisa Lampanelli's use of the slur *spic* towards her as "degrading [to] an entire Spanish culture" (cf. Gratereaux, 2012; Huffington Post, 2012a). So here it is clear that the Spanish slurs *spic* and *wetback* are similar to other slurs that have been previously studied –

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a discussion on the slur *favelado*, as well as to Cashman (2012) for a discussion of the slurs *puto*, *marica*, *joto*, and *maricon* (p. 56).

8 In reference to one of the staff members working at his (now ex-) wife's house, Mel Gibson said, "I will fire her if she is at your house [...] I'll report her to the fucking people that take fucking money from the wetbacks" (cf. Heller, 2010; Radar Online, 2010). To hear a clip of the audio recording cf. Radar Online (2010).

9 Donald Young claimed: "My father had a ranch. We used to have 50 or 60 wetbacks to pick tomatoes" (cf. Associated Press, 2013; Avila, 2013; Cubias, 2013; Dunham, 2013; Fox News Latino, 2013; Gentilviso, 2013).

including slurs that typically target African Americans (*nigger*), male homosexuals (*faggot*), and sexually active females (*slut*)– in that these linguistic expressions are all commonly understood to be potentially offensive expressions that felicitously apply towards some targets yet not others.

Now in order to better understand the meaning or use of slurs that typically target Mexican Americans, it is useful to consider the kinds of violent acts of discrimination against Mexican Americans that have often accompanied the derogatory use of these slurs. Consider for instance that according to the FBI, 534 hate crimes were perpetuated against Mexican Americans in 2012 (Thompson, 2013a), that Anthony Santoscoy was targeted with slurs against Mexican Americans before being shot to death in Rialto, California on 8 November 2013 (Thompson, 2013a), and that Luis Ramirez was targeted with slurs against Mexican Americans before being brutally beaten to death in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania on 12 July 2008 (Amaya, 2009). As a consequence of violent slur-involved events of this kind, the repercussions for using slurs against Mexican Americans remain severe. For example, Hector Benavides was arrested for targeting police officers with slurs against Mexican Americans on 3 May 2013 (Ashby, 2013), the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries ordered the owner and employee of a California company to pay $200,000 to two other employees for creating a threatening environment at work through the use of slurs against Mexican Americans (Gunderson, 2014), and police consultant Brian Young was arrested for targeting former state Assembly worker Monica Miranda with slurs against Mexican Americans in a racist email (cf. Harrington, 2014; Seiler, 2014; Dicker, 2012).[10] Fitten (1993) has accordingly argued that slurs like *wetback* and *spic* should be considered "fighting words" since they have often been used to initiate violence and carry out hate crimes (p. 1), and Jeshion (2013) likewise proposes that "Slurring terms are used as *weapons* in those contexts in which they are used to derogate an individual or group of individuals to whom the slur is applied or the socially relevant group that the slur references" (p. 237, my emphasis; cf. Hall, 2006, p. 136).

After considering in this section the various ways that the use of slurs has often been implicated in verbal threats, physical violence, and hate-fueled homicide, it should be clearer now why slurs more generally, as well as for Mexican Americans more particularly, have been considered by many to pack some of the nastiest punches natural language affords. The next section will now turn to address how it is that slurs are able to do the kind of dirty work that they do.

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10 Brian Young wrote: "You are nothing but a worthless 3rd world non american piece of garbage [...] Do us all a favor. Take your spic family and that unborn welfare addict in your gut and go the [expletive] back to mexico!" (cf. Harrington, 2014; Seiler, 2014; Dicker, 2012).

3 Face threating acts and the paradigmatic derogatory use of slurs

Acquiring practical knowledge and developing a command over the use-conditions of expressions commonly exchanged with others in society is of great practical importance, and language-users typically learn the norms governing the differential use-conditions for various linguistic expressions during their socialization into a linguistic community (cf. Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002; Croom, 2013, p. 183; Liu, 2014). Jay (2009) has pointed out, for example, that prohibitions on taboo words are often reinforced during child-rearing practices. In several studies focusing on slurs, Croom (2011, 2013) has further suggested that *descriptive* expressions like *male* and *female* are commonly used and understood to be most apt for neutrally picking out public items of the shared inter-subjective or objective world, that *expressive* expressions like *fuck* and *yikes* are commonly used and understood to be most apt for expressing one's own heightened (positive or negative) emotional state, and that *slur* expressions like *slut* and *chink* are commonly used and understood to be most apt for typically targeting certain members on the basis of their descriptive attributes (such as their race or sex) in order to derogate, offend, or disassociate (or in cases of appropriation, affiliate) with them on this basis (Croom, 2008, p. 38–45; Croom, 2011, p. 349–353). That is to say, language-users that have developed a facility or attunement to the use-conditions for slur expressions will typically expect that their use will correlate with the speaker being in a heightened derogatory or discriminatory state toward some target member (or wishing to create that impression), and accordingly, that speakers will only use slurs when they are in a heightened derogatory or discriminatory state toward some target member (or wishing to create that impression). Because competent language-users have common knowledge of such use-conditions for slur expressions, the actual use of a slur by some speaker S towards a target H typically serves as a prima facie reliable signal of derogation from S to H on the basis of H's attributes (Croom, 2013, p. 183).

So in referring to a person with a slur expression like *spic*, and thereby ascribing the category *spic* to that person, one may presumably be taken to accept and allow into the communicative background certain obligations, expectations, and feelings that are commonly considered *apt* or *fitting* for typical members of the category *spic* (Croom, 2008, p. 38–44; Croom, 2011, p. 355–357). Importantly, Brown and Levinson (1978) proposed that a speaker S that conveys through their use of language that they are of higher social standing and hence more powerful than their hearer H is engaging in a form of risky communication

–due to its potential for initiating conflicts over relative power or social standing between *S* and *H*– but that "if he [*S*] gets away with it ([and] *H* doesn't retaliate, for whatever reason), *S* succeeds in *actually altering the public definition of his relationship* to *H*: that is, *his successful exploitation becomes part of the history of interaction, and thereby alters the agreed values of D* [*social distance between S and H*] or *P* [*relative power between S and H*]'' (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 228, my emphasis).[11] Additionally, in *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, Anderson (1999) insightfully suggested that shows of deference from others can make one feel more self-confident and secure (Anderson, 1999, p. 75), and similarly, a meta-analysis of empirical research on stereotypes (*n* = 43) conducted by Walton and Cohen (2003) suggested that "When a negative stereotype impugns the ability or worth of an outgroup, people may experience *stereotype lift* –a performance boost that occurs when downward comparisons are made with a denigrated outgroup" (Walton and Cohen, 2003, p. 456). So a desire to experience *stereotype lift* may serve as at least one reason for why a speaker *S* might choose to strategically communicate through their use of derogatory language more generally, and slurs such as *spic* or *wetback* more specifically, that they are more powerful or of a higher social status than their target *H*.

Furthermore, Croom (2014b) carried out a critical review of recent empirical research on racial slurs and stereotypes and argued that, insofar as through the application of a slur to a target an associated negative stereotype can threaten that target by means of (a) increasing the amount that they are worrying, (b) reducing their working memory, (c) decreasing their motivation to learn, or (d) degrading their ability to encode novel information necessary for skillful action, and insofar as (a)–(d) can negatively influence the welfare of an individual by hindering their physical and social performance, it follows that *the application of a slur towards some target can thereby negatively influence their welfare*. In fact, this proposal is consistent with recent empirical research on stereotype threat, for as Silverman and Cohen (2014) explain, *stereotype threats* involve "the concern one has about being judged in light of negative stereotypes," which "threaten a person's sense of self-integrity, which in turn prompts defensive avoidance of stereotype-relevant situations, impeding growth, achievement, and well-being" (Silverman & Cohen, 2014, p. 1; cf. Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Blascovich et al., 2001; Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007; Fogliati & Bussey,

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11 It is important to note that Brown and Levinson (1987) maintain that, "situational factors enter into the values for P, D, and R, so that the values assessed hold only for S and H in a particular context, and for a particular FTA" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 79; cf. Sifianou, 2012, p. 1557).

2013). Indeed, results from the recent psychological literature suggest that stereotype threats result from the fact that the physiological and cognitive components involved in how one responds to stressfully threatening events interfere with components crucial for one performing well in stereotype-relevant situations, thereby disrupting how well one resultantly performs on a variety of stereotype-relevant tasks (cf. Schmader, Johns & Forbes 2008). For instance, an Operation-Span Task (memory) study on participants (n = 75) conducted by Schmader and Johns (2003) found that stereotype threat interferes with test performance because it hinders working memory capacity, an HRV (heart rate variability) study on participants (n = 164) conducted by Croizet et al. (2004) found that the situational salience of a reputation of lower ability undermined intellectual performance by triggering a disruptive mental load (Croizet et al., 2004, p. 721), and an EEG (electroencephalography) study on participants (n = 71) conducted by Mangels et al. (2012) found that emotional responses to negative feedback under stereotype threat predicted both interference with learning attempts and disengagement from learning (Croizet et al., 2004, p. 230). There is therefore good reason to believe that the derogatory use of slurs like *spic* or *wetback* can actually harm the individuals that they attack as well as constrain the range of action-possibilities that they can exercise in society. So a speaker *S* that derogates a Mexican American target *H* on the basis of their presumed possession of negative properties stereotypically attributed to Mexican Americans through *S*'s ascription of the slur *spic* to *H*, might thereby effectively work to support and contribute to a history of derogatory acts and negative stereotypes that actually harm the social identity and practical action-possibilities of Mexican Americans. Further, an *S* that derogates an *H* on the basis of their presumed possession of negative properties stereotypically attributed to Mexican Americans through *S*'s ascription of the slur *spic* to *H*, might thereby effectively work to support and contribute to increase the difference in asymmetrical power relations among *S* and *H* more specifically as well as the groups to which they belong more generally.

Now that we have considered how the derogatory use of slurs like *spic* and *wetback* can actually harm the individuals that they attack and constrain the range of action-possibilities that they can exercise in society, the next section will further clarify the role that stereotypes and stereotypical attributes contribute to *S*'s predication of certain content in the application of a slur towards a target *H* in context.

4 Slurs, typical targets, and stereotypical attributes

Prior work on slurs has occasionally appealed to stereotypes and stereotypical attributes to explain certain facts pertaining to their natural language use (cf. Jeshion, 2013; Croom, 2014b) and here I will briefly offer 4 reasons for why stereotypes are important to consider for understanding slurs. For one, slur-use towards targets readily raises to conscious awareness the stereotypes relevant to that target *qua* their membership in the relevant group. Second, slur-use towards targets are often extraordinarily harmful to their self-conception in ways that pertain to them *qua* their group membership, and one may aim to explain this by appealing to stereotypes of the target *qua* their membership in the relevant group. Third, the use of slur expressions are more strongly offensive than the use of other more purely expressive or generally pejorative expressions (such as *jerk* and *asshole*) and one could plausibly explain this by pointing out that since slur expressions presumably appeal to stereotypes of the target *qua* their membership in the relevant group, whereas other more purely expressive or generally pejorative expressions do not, the former class of expressions are usually capable of offending targets on a much more specific or personal level than the latter class of expressions.[12] And fourth, slur expressions are more strongly prohibited than other more purely expressive and generally pejorative expressions, and one could plausibly explain this by pointing out that since slur expressions are presumably capable of offending targets on a much more specific or personal level than other more purely expressive or generally pejorative expressions (on the basis of the third point just considered), it may therefore seem reasonable to impose relatively stronger prohibitions on slur expressions than other more purely expressive or generally pejorative expressions (cf. Anderson & Lepore 2013).[13] It has accordingly been proposed in the literature that the derogatory content of slur expressions may be accounted for by drawing upon stereotypical features of the group members that those slurs are typically used to target (cf. Croom, 2011, p. 353–357; Miscevic, 2011; Jeshion, 2013, p. 314; Croom, 2014b). What is more, as I have just pointed out in the previous section, an appeal to stereotypes further enables one to draw upon facts concerning *stereotype threat* and *stereotype lift* to explain some of the real psychological effects of slur-use for both slur-users and targets.

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12 For further discussion of the target aptness and lexical aptness of slurs cf. p. 235 in Croom (2014).

13 For further discussion of slurs and prohibition cf. Anderson and Lepore (2013).

Now, concerning stereotypes applied to Mexican Americans more specifically, Vera and Feagin (2007) report that there are both positive and negative stereotypes for *spics*, including that they are "oversexed," "stick to their families," "are lazy," "dumb," and "have rhythm," "are a musical people," "talk funny," "eat spicy foods," "deal drugs," "are criminal," and "cannot control their emotions" (Vera & Feagin, 2007, p. 467). *The Huffington Post* (2012a) also published a "Slideshow on Latino TV Stereotypes" that reviewed popular stereotypes from shows that included *That 70's Show*, *Rob!*, *Modern Family*, *Chico and the Man*, *Glee*, *The Goonies*, *Suddenly Susan*, *Work It*, *Will and Grace*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Scrubs*, *and I Love Lucy*, and the following positive and negative stereotypes that typically applied to Mexican Americans were highlighted in discussion: (*i*) Rob Schneider's character in *Rob!* is married to a Mexican-American woman that is stereotyped as having a "very big, very Mexican family" (slide 1 of 19), (*ii*) Santana from *Glee* is stereotyped as "a loud, aggressive Latina from a rough neighborhood" that is nonetheless "also strong and independent" (slide 2 of 19), (*iii*) Wilmer Valderrama's character from *That 70's Show* is stereotyped as a "Foreign Exchange Student" with an "odd accent and style" that "sings in Spanish" (slide 3 of 19), (*iv*) Sofia Vergara's character from *Modern Family* is stereotyped as a "loud, sassy Colombian housewife with the hot bod, expensive clothes, narco ex-husband, and confusing English" (slide 4 of 19), (*v*) Freddie Prinze's character from *Chico and the Man* is stereotyped as an "energetic and optimistic young Chicano" (slide 5 of 19), (*vi*) Carla Espinoza's character from *Scrubs* is stereotyped as "the sexy Latina" that is "enraged, mind-blowing and so-so-out-of-control" (slide 6 of 19), (*vii*) Ricky Ricardo's character from *I Love Lucy* is stereotyped as "the Latin lover, passionate about music and his wife. He also played the negative side with his fiery personality. He is portrayed as a hot-tempered Latino man. Plus, the angrier Ricky Ricardo got, the more broken and incomprehensible his English became" (slide 7 of 19), (*viii*) Shelly Morrison's character from *Will and Grace* is stereotyped as "an undocumented immigrant, originally from El Salvador" that "spoke English with a very thick accent" and "was briefly married to Jack McFarland, Karen's gay friend, so that she could obtain her green card and avoid deportation" (slide 8 of 19), (*ix*) Amaury Nolasco's character from *Work It* is stereotyped as "a hotheaded ladies' man with no filter" (slide 9 of 19), (*x*) Rosalita the maid from *The Goonies* is stereotyped as someone that "doesn't speak a word of English" and that is "gullible – believing all the crazy statements coming out of a young boy's mouth" (slide 10 of 19), (*xi*) Gabrielle Solis's character from *Desperate Housewives* is stereotyped as a "sexy, conniving Latina vixen" with "tenacity and perseverance" that had originally "come from a low-income family in Mexico" but now "uses her sex appeal to get what she wants, which in this case, was the rich husband and the

so-called perfect life" (slide 12 of 19), (*xii*) George Lopez's character from *George Lopez* is stereotyped as having a Cuban family that is "loud and emotional" (slide 14 of 19), and (*xiii*) Nestor Carbonell's character from *Suddenly Susan* is stereotyped as being a good dancer since "all Latinos can dance" (slide 17 of 19).

In considering the racial slur *nigger* in an earlier analysis of slur expressions, Croom (2013) previously proposed that "by choosing to use the slur *nigger* instead of a neutrally descriptive term such as *African American*, the speaker *prima facie* intends to express (*i*) their endorsement of a (typically but not necessarily *negative*) *attitude* (*ii*) towards the *descriptive properties* possessed by the target of their utterance" and that "the properties that the speaker endorses the expression of a negative attitude towards are properties that have been *associated* with members of a particular racial group" (Croom, 2013, p. 353; cf. Croom 2011, p. 195). Likewise, I propose here that in a similar way for slurs that target Mexican Americans, a speaker *S*'s choice to use the slur *spic* towards their target *H* instead of the neutrally descriptive term *Mexican American* can be understood as *S* expressing their *prima facie* endorsement of a (primarily but not necessarily negative) attitude towards the descriptive attributes that have typically become associated with Mexican Americans and that are now being ascribed to the target *H* through *S*'s use of the slur *spic* towards them in context.

Now that we have considered the role that stereotypes and stereotypical attributes contribute to *S*'s predication of certain content in the application of a slur towards a target *H* in context, as well as how the psychological effects of *stereotype threat* and *stereotype lift* can be initiated through the application of a relevant slur towards its target, the next section will proceed to show how empirical findings concerning slurs and stereotypes for Mexican Americans can be integrated with a family-resemblance conception of category membership to account for basic facts concerning the derogatory use of slurs for Mexican Americans.

5 Family resemblance concepts, category membership, and the pragmatics of slur ascription

In the literature on concepts or categories, there is a distinction between *classical* accounts and *family resemblance* accounts (Rosch & Mervis, 1975). According to classical accounts, "categories are defined by *formal rules* and allow us

to make inferences within *idealized* law governed systems" (Pinker & Price, 1996, p. 332, my emphasis). So the classical account of categories maintains that category membership is determined by the possession of some common, essential, and criterial attribute. However, a substantive challenge for maintaining a classical account for all categories across the board is that scholars remain unable to articulate necessary and sufficient conditions for most that are actually found from natural language (Fodor et al., 1980; Pinker & Price, 1996; Rosch & Mervis, 1975). Alternatively, and in stark contrast with the classical account, the family resemblance account of categories maintains that category membership consists of a relationship in which case "each item has at least one, and probably several, elements in common with one or more other items, but no, or few, elements are common to all items" (Rosch & Mervis, 1975, p. 575; Wittgenstein, 1953).

Pinker and Prince (1999) usefully distinguish family resemblance from classical categories by pointing out several salient ways in which they differ. First, they point out that family resemblance categories differ from classical categories in that the former lack necessary and sufficient conditions for category membership whereas the latter do not. Second, they point out that family resemblance categories differ from classical categories in that the former have graded degrees of category membership whereas the latter do not. Third, Pinker and Prince (1999) point out that family resemblance categories differ from classical categories in that the former can be summarized by an ideal category member or prototype whereas the latter cannot. Fourth, they point out that family resemblance categories differ from classical categories in that the former have category members that tend to have characteristic non-defining attributes whereas the latter do not. Importantly, the family resemblance account avoids the challenge faced by the classical account in that the former does not maintain as the latter does that concepts or categories are *strictly definable* in terms of *necessary and sufficient conditions*. Rather, the family resemblance account maintains that most concepts of natural language are *characterizable* in terms of their *family resemblance relationship*. Indeed, Pinker and Prince (1996) explain that family resemblance concepts are characterizable in terms of "*correlations among features* in sets of *similar memorized exemplars*, and allow us to make inferences about the observable products of history" (Pinker & Price, 1996, p. 353, my emphasis) and Rosch and Mervis (1975) similarly explain that family resemblance "prototypes appear to be just those members of the category that most reflect the redundancy structure of the category as a whole. That is, *categories form to maximize the information rich clusters of attributes in the environment*" (Rosch & Mervis, 1975, p. 602, my emphasis; cf. Rosch et al., 1976). The family resemblance account of concepts or categories is therefore more realistic

than the classical account insofar as it provides an account of concepts that is actually in accord with the *real* rather than *ideal* nature of the human psychological processing of natural language.

So according to this family-resemblance conception, what makes *x* a member of the category BIRD is not some criterial attribute that each and every *x* must have in order to be categorized as a *bird*. For a paradigmatic or prototypical *bird* may *typically* or *for the most part* have bright feathers and sing, but could still be felicitously and informatively categorized as a *bird* even if it did not have bright feathers or sing, provided that the category BIRD is that which is still most strategically apt among other options (for example, ELEPHANT, CHEESEBURGER, and so on) available to that speaker for their current conversational purpose. Accordingly, on the basis of this family resemblance conception Croom (2011) previously proposed that the slur expression *nigger* (identified as **N** below) may be fruitfully understood as a family resemblance rather than classical category consisting in a structured constellation of stereotypical attributes (identified as **A1**–**A10** below) such as the following:

N   (*Nigger*)
A1   *x is African American.*[14]
A2   *x is prone to laziness.*[15]
A3   *x is subservient.*[16]
A4   *x is commonly the recipient of poor treatment.*[17]
A5   *x is athletic and musical.*[18]
A6   *x is sexually liberal or licentious.*[19]
A7   *x is simple-minded.*[20]
A8   *x is emotionally shallow.*[21]
A9   *x is a survivor, tough, or prone to violence.*[22]
A10 *x is loud and excessively noisy.*[23]

Importantly, note that I am *not* suggesting here that attributes **A1**–**A10** should be understood as *fixed* in the precise rank-order provided in the example above, or that *all* of **A1**–**A10** are *always* involved in a *context-independent* manner. In-

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14 Cf. p. 41 from Fredrickson (1971) and p. 12 from Asim (2007).
15 Cf. p. 27 from Asim (2007).
16 Cf. p. 41 from Fredrickson (1971) and p. 12 from Asim (2007).
17 Cf. p. 41 from Fredrickson (1971) and p. 12 from Asim (2007).
18 Cf. p. 128 from Alim, Lee, and Carris (2010).
19 Cf. p. 27 from Asim (2007).
20 Cf. p. 27 from Asim (2007).
21 Cf. p. 27 from Asim (2007).
22 Cf. p. 50 from Anderson (1999) and Rahman (2012).
23 Cf. p. 50 from Anderson (1999).

deed that suggestion would fall in accord with the classical approach and contrary to the very family resemblance approach I advocate here. And as I briefly discussed earlier, the classical approach is an old-fashioned one that has been undermined by a growing body of recent empirical literature on the nature of memory, family resemblance concepts, and sensorimotor cognition (Barsalou, 1999; Barsalou et al., 2003; Borghi, 2004; Barsalou, Breazeal & Smith, 2007; Barsalou, 2008; Barsalou, 2009; Borghi & Riggio, 2009; Borghi et al., 2013; Dove, 2010; Dove, 2014). The alternative then that I propose here is that attributes **A1**–**A10** should be considered as rank-ordered based on the relative degree in which their attribution to *x* is taken as a salient indicator of category membership, and importantly, that this rank-order is *re-organizable* in a *context-dependent* manner. Further, in practice *more* attributes (for example, **A1**–**A15**) *or less* attributes (for example, **A1**–**A2**) could be involved in a given communicative context. The reason that I provide a list of 10 attributes here is merely to be both optimally informative (for listing **A1** alone would fall short of this) and economical (for listing **A1**–**A20** would go beyond this) in our discussion.

My suggestion here is that **A1** (*African American*) would be ranked relatively higher than **A6** (*sexually liberal or licentious*) and accordingly **A1** would be considered a more salient indicator than **A6** that the *x* possessing it is a member of **N** (*nigger*). Note also that although speakers may typically ascribe the slur expression *nigger* to targets attributed the *highest-ranking* (**A1**) as well as the *greatest quantity* (**A1**–**A10**) of attributes in **N**, my family resemblance account argues (contrary to classical accounts) that speakers may still informatively or effectively ascribe that slur to *x* even if that *x* fails to possess the highest-ranking (**A1**) or even the most (**A1**–**A10**) attributes in **N** insofar as that is the most relevant and apt lexical choice for their purpose in a particular communicative context. Importantly, however, in order for the choice of a speaker to refer to *x* as a *nigger* to be considered a strategically *apt* choice for that speaker, it must be assumed (at least for the purpose of that particular conversation) that *x* possesses a *practically sufficient* set of attributes such that **N** is the most *appropriate* or *serviceable* category for the speaker to subsume *x* for their purpose in a particular communicative context. So for example, in the case that a speaker intends to communicate that some *x* that they dislike and consider inferior possesses some subset of **A1**–**A10** from **N**, that speaker may make the strategic choice to use **N** in communication as that which most efficiently and economically predicates the intended attributes of *x* as well as most forcefully expresses a negative attitude towards *x*, at least to the extent that **N** is better for this than other categories that are of epistemic access to that language-user.

So in contrast with other classical accounts of slurs that incorrectly assume that the possession of some *criterial* attribute is *essential* for *x* to be considered a member of **N** (see, for instance, Camp, 2013, p. 338, 342 fn. 16), the alternative account of slurs proposed by Croom (2011, 2013) and expanded upon here maintains (in accord with the family resemblance account) that, for example, although different individuals that are referred to by the slur expression *nigger* are very likely to share different subsets of attributes (for example, **A1**–**A10**) with other individuals also referred to by this slur (due to common knowledge of how this expression is typically used) it must not be the case (for the sake of the felicitous application of that slur) that each and every slurred *x* must share some criterial attribute with every other slurred *x* (cf. Sweetland, 2002, p. 514; Croom, 2011, p. 356; Croom, 2013, p. 199). Rather, what is of importance on this alternative family resemblance account is that the use of a slur by a speaker may be considered a strategically *apt enough* or *optimally relevant* lexical choice for their purposes in a particular communicative context.[24]

I therefore extend the account of slurs proposed by Croom (2011, 2013) by suggesting that the slur expression *spic* (identified as **C** below) can be understood as a family resemblance rather than classical category that consists in a structured constellation of stereotypical attributes (identified as **A*n*** below) such as the following:

C   (*Spic*)
A1   *x is Mexican American.*[25]
A2   *x is a foreign worker or exchange student with a thick non-native accent.*[26]
A3   *x is poor, from a low-income family, or engages in subservient work.*[27]
A4   *x is commonly the recipient of poor treatment.*[28]
A5   *x is very passionate, sexually suave, and family oriented.*[29]
A6   *x is independent, hardworking, and tenacious.*[30]
A7   *x is loud and out of control.*[31]

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24 For further discussion of relevance in communication and cognition cf. Wilson and Sperber (2004) and Sperber and Wilson (1986).
25 For the definition of *spic* cf. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2009).
26 Cf. slides 3, 4, 7, 8, and 10 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).
27 Cf. slides 8, 10, and 12 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a).
28 Cf. Thompson (2013a).
29 Cf. slides 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 14 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).
30 Cf. slides 2, 5, and 12 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a).
31 Cf. slides 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 14 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).

A8   *x is manipulative or involved in illegal activities.*[32]
A9   *x is good at singing and dancing.*[33]
A10 *x is gullible, unintelligent, or naive.*[34]

Attributes **A1–A10** are taken from the common stereotypes of Mexican Americans that were reviewed in section 4 of this article and could be rank-ordered based on the relative degree in which their possession by *x* is taken as a salient indicator of category membership. As discussed in the previous example, the number and relative rankings of these attributes are such that they are sensitive to the conversational context rather than context-invariant carvings on a static cognitive stone. (In other words, lexical knowledge does not consist in the final corrected proof of an accepted publication in the journal of the mind.) So in this case **A1** (*Mexican American*) would be ranked relatively higher than **A6** (*independent, hardworking, and tenacious*) and accordingly **A1** would be considered a more salient indicator than **A6** that the *x* possessing it is a member of **C** (*spic*). Note also that although speakers may typically ascribe the slur expression *spic* to targets possessing the highest-ranking attribute **A1** as well as the greatest quantity of attributes **A1–A10** in **C**, my family resemblance account suggests (contrary to classical accounts) that speakers may still informatively or effectively ascribe that slur to an *x* that fails to possess the highest-ranking attribute **A1** or even the greatest quantity of attributes **A1–A10** in **C** given the appropriate context and communicative purpose. However, here I reemphasize that in order for the choice of a speaker to refer to *x* as a *spic* to be considered a strategically *apt* choice for that speaker, it must be assumed (at least for the purpose of that particular conversation) that *x* possesses a *practically sufficient* set of **A1–A10** from **C** such that **C** is the most *appropriate* or *serviceable* category under which to subsume *x* for the purposes of the current conversation. So in the case that a speaker intends to communicate that some *x* that they dislike and consider inferior possesses some subset of **A1–A10** from **C**, that speaker may make the strategic choice to use **C** in communication as that which most efficiently and economically predicates the intended attributes of *x* and most forcefully expresses a negative

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32 Cf. slides 8, 9, and 12 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007). Note also that slide 9 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) discusses how the Puerto Rican actor Amaury Nolasco "will now live in infamy for his character's "toss-away joke equating Puerto Ricans with drug dealers," leading to a heated social media campaign and demonstrations seeking formal apology by ABC."
33 Cf. slides 3, 7, and 17 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).
34 Cf. slide 10 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).

attitude towards *x*, at least to the extent that **C** is better for this than other categories that are of epistemic access to that language-user.

Now that we have observed how empirical findings concerning slurs and stereotypes for Mexican Americans can be integrated with a family-resemblance conception of category membership to account for basic facts concerning the derogatory use of slurs for Mexican Americans, the next section will show how the present account of slurs can further clarify the process of their appropriation and non-derogatory use.

6 Appropriation and the non-derogatory use of Spanish slurs

Certainly a popular view in the literature on slurs holds that "It's NEVER OK to call ANYONE a 'spic'!" (Gonzalez, 2012). However, it is also important to consider the less popular view expressed by other first-person reports from in-group speakers that slurs are often flexibly employed such that they may also, at least in some restricted contexts, be used *non-derogatorily* to convey affiliation among in-group members. Moreover, recent empirical studies from the social sciences have also shown that slurs are often flexibly employed such that they may also, at least in some restricted contexts, be used non-derogatorily to diminish the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried (cf. Johnson, 2009; Croom, 2011, p. 355; Rahman, 2012; Croom, 2013, p. 200; Galinsky, et al. 2013; Bartlett, et al. 2014; Bianchi, 2014, p. 36; Croom, 2014a, p. 236–239).[35] For instance, comedian Carlos Mencia explained on NPR that he often uses slurs for Mexican Americans non-derogatorily just as Chris Rock often uses slurs for African Americans non-derogatorily (Johnson, 2009).[36] Raul Ruiz, Professor of Chi-

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35 In "As Times are Changing so are Appropriate Ethnic Terms," Duey (2014) also argues that "Over the past 100 years the terms used to describe various ethnicities have changed multiple times. As new generations are born there are changes in how our society describes its minorities [...] In the 1960's, Hispanic and Latino Americans popularized the term "Chicano" during their push for civil rights." The linguist Robin Lakoff has explained that this process is "a generational thing" such that "Younger people don't feel or experience the same barriers between people that older people have been brought up to assume. And that, of course, would be reflected in language" (quoted in Johnson, 2009).

36 Carolos Mencia said: "I use the word beaner on my show a lot. I started to say Hispanic, and people were saying things, like, 'I'm not Hispanic. Hispanic is a word created by the Nixon administration.' Chicano? 'Well, I'm from El Salvador and Chicano means Mexican, but a Mexican that was born here.' How about I use Latino? 'I don't speak Latin. I speak Spanish, and I

cano Studies at Cal State Northridge, similarly explained that the slur "word *mojado* isn't totally a pejorative *in the way Mexicans use it in referring to themselves* [...] It really isn't mean-spirited at all" (quoted in Gerber, 2013, my emphasis), and the activist Arnoldo Torres reported that his "grandfather, for all practical purposes, was a *mojado*. *They call each other mojados* [...] It's about understanding the complexity. Of seven, eight, nine generations of Latinos that have lived in the United States" (quoted in Gerber, 2013, my emphasis). In an article for the *Los Angeles Times* entitled "Slur has a Complex Translation in Latino Community," Gerber (2013) further explains that:

> *When Boyle Heights shop owner Arturo Macias hears fellow Latinos use the Spanish word for "wetback," he doesn't necessarily take offense.* Macias, who crossed illegally into the U.S. through Tijuana two decades ago, has heard the term *mojado* for much of his life and sees it less as an insult than a description of a common immigrant experience. "As a country of immigrants," he says in Spanish, "in one way or another, we're all *mojados*." *Macias is very offended, however, when he hears a white person use it.* (my emphasis)

In "Slurs Often Adopted by Those They Insult," Aldridge (2001) further discusses how "Racial slurs such as "spic," "dago" and "mick" still are considered offensive by many people of Hispanic, Italian and Irish descent" but that "the words also are acceptable slang to many within those ethnic groups" and that the "Use of derogatory words by the defamed group is not unusual" (p. 1). Concerning the slur *pocho* more specifically, Espinoza (1999) explains that:

> For some it is an insult; for others, it is a way of acknowledging the difficulties of being raised in two competing cultures. In the past 10 years, the word "pocho" has been reclaimed by a younger generation of artists like *La Cucaracha* cartoonist Lalo Alcarez, who publishes the satirical *Pocho Magazine*, and the theater group Latins Anonymous. There are also bands, like the East L.A. quartet Los Pochos, which play traditional Mexican corridos; the hardcore punk/ska outfit Voodoo Glow Skulls takes "pochochismo" to another level.

In yet another article for the *Latin Post* entitled "John Leguizamo & Kanye West Use Re-appropriation to Change Perceptions," Thompson (2013b) reports on how Kanye West recently "reclaimed" the Confederate flag by embroidering it on several items from his clothing line and boldly asserting, "I *took* the Confederate flag and *made it my flag*. *It's my flag*. Now what are *you* going to do?" (my emphasis). Thompson (2013b) points out that such acts of appropriation have also occurred before with the slur *nigger* by African Americans, the slur *guido*

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don't even speak Spanish that well.' Um, what about beaner? Nobody? Fine." (quoted in Johnson, 2009).

by Italian Americans, and the slur *gringo* by Anglo-Americans, explaining that "The act of re-appropriating or re-contextualizing, the process by which a group reclaims a term or artifact that disparages that group and then uses it in a different context, is not something new" and that "The key for the transformation of an undermining, racist term is for it to be handled as a tool of empowerment, voided of any previous connotations, and utilized by the offended party. Though, use outside of the community can still be seen as vicious or hateful" (p. 1). Morales (2002) also discussed how comedian John Leguizamo reclaimed the slur *spic* in his second one-man show *Spic-O-Rama*, although admittedly "Many older critics and intellectuals did not understand the revival" (p. 1). Finally, in "The Puerto Rican Community Speaks Out," Vargas et al. (2009) offer a thoughtful discussion concerning their appropriation of the slur *spic* in their program *Spic Up!/Speak Out!* that is worth considering in some detail here:

> the use of the word 'spic' in the title of our spoken word program [...] was conceived as a re-appropriation of the term as a means of empowerment –an approach that already has a history in our own community [...] We hoped that by re-appropriating a word with a painful history for Latinos one could transform the word into a tool of empowerment. This kind of re-appropriation and transformation has been successful in other contexts [...] Chicanos on the West Coast who once resented being called 'pochos' by other Mexicans now use the phrase with pride and humor in the hilarious satiric magazine Pocho, and comedy troupe of the same name [...] Within our own Latino community, the effort to reclaim the term 'spic' also has a long history, both in comedic plays and serious literature. The famed late Boricua poet Pedro Pietri used 'spic' in his acclaimed "Puerto Rican Obituary" – a poem first read in 1969 at a Young Lords rally – to call attention to racism against Puerto Rican immigrants. John Leguizamo's Spic-O-Rama is a comedic play about a Latino family, based on his own childhood. This show has been publicly acclaimed since it launched in 1993. It enjoyed a sold-out run in Chicago before relocating to New York's Westside Theater, where it drew large Latino audiences and won Leguizamo a Drama Desk Award. Poet Urayoán Noel used the word in his 2000 piece, "Spic Tracts," to attack present-day racism. And in 2005, Nuyorican performance artist Chaluisan opened a one-person show, entitled Spic Chic, at the Ibiza nightclub in the Bronx, which later enjoyed a successful run at the Wings Theater in New York City's West Village. Also, acclaimed Mexican-American intellectual Ilan Stavans' recent book, Mr. Spic Goes To Washington, employs humor to make salient points about Latino political engagement and one fictional character's rise from the barrio to the halls of power [...] Today when we use that word, we invoke a new meaning; a new pride.

In addition to these kinds of first-person reports provided by in-group speakers, recent empirical studies from the social sciences have also demonstrated that slurs are often flexibly employed such that they may, at least in some restricted contexts, be used non-derogatorily to convey affiliation among in-group members, or to weaken the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried. For

example, Bartlett et al. (2014) analyzed the language use of social media users from a dataset of collected tweets involving slur expressions (n = 126,975) and investigated the volume as well as the ways that these slurs were used on Twitter. Bartlett et al. (2014) found that the slur *spic* was ranked (in order of prevalence) as the 6th most common slur used on Twitter (Bartlett et al., 2014, p. 6) and "that there are approximately 10,000 uses per day of racist and ethnic slur terms in English (about 1 in every 15,000 tweets)". Bartlett et al. (2014) also found that "Slurs are used in a very wide variety of ways –both offensive and non-offensive," that "There were very few cases that presented an imminent threat of violence, or where individuals directly or indirectly incited offline violent action," and that "Slurs are most commonly used [on Twitter] in a non-offensive, non-abusive manner: to express in-group solidarity or non-derogatory description" (Bartlett et al., 2014, p. 6–7).

Furthermore, in "The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels," Galinsky et al. (2013) conducted ten empirical studies on (re-)appropriation to test its potential effects on speakers and listeners empirically and found that *self-identifying* with slur expressions (rather than *being ascribed* slur expressions by others) can actually *weaken* their stigmatizing force (Galinsky et al., 2013, p. 2020; cf. Galinsky et al., 2003). More specifically, Galinsky et al. (2013) found the following results from their experiments 1 through 10 (E1)–(E10) that may be useful to point out here: (E1) found that "participants in the high-power condition [...] were more likely to label themselves with the derogatory term [such as *spic* or *slut*] than were participants in the low-power condition" (p. 2022), (E2) found that "participants in the group-power condition were more willing to label themselves with a derogatory group label [...] compared with participants in the individual-power condition" (p. 2022–2023), (E3) found that "Participants in the self-label condition recalled feeling more powerful [...] than did those in the other-label condition" (p. 2023), (E4) found that "Self-labeling led observers to view the labeled person as more powerful" (p. 2024), (E5) found that "a stigmatized minority, was seen as more powerful in the self-labeling condition [...] than in the other-label condition" (p. 2024), (E6) found that "self-labeling increased perceptions of the stigmatized group's power" (p. 2024), (E7) found that "self-labeled participants viewed their own power as equivalent to the outgroup member's power," or in other words, that "Self-labeling equalized the perceived power difference between the stigmatized self-labelers and the outgroup individuals in the minds of the self-labelers" (p. 2025–2026), (E8) found that "Self-labeling increased perceptions of the stigmatized group's power over the label, which attenuated the negativity of the label" (p. 2027), (E9) found that "Self-labeling improved the evaluation of a derogatory label relative to other-labeling" (p. 2027), and (E10) found that "Both men and women saw the stigma-

tizing label *bitch* as less negative and supported female empowerment more after witnessing a woman label herself with this term than after witnessing another person label her with it (or after no labeling)" (p. 2027).

In *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*, Goffman (1967) had also previously proposed that conversational participants that are on "familiar terms with one another and need stand on little ceremony" are thereby freed to exchange mock insults in a non-threatening way "as a means of poking fun at social circles where the ritual [insult] is seriously employed" (Goffman, 1967, p. 86).[37] So if two Mexican American interlocutors, for instance, both feel that they share a common history or culture and both understand that neither of them have any intention of offending the other (for example, presumably they are on good terms with each other and have earned mutual trust and respect through repeated friendly interactions), one of the interlocutors may strategically choose to produce an utterance involving the relevant slur in order to foster intimacy and in-group solidarity, under the presumption that *the bond between the interlocutors in this particular case* is strong enough to *neutralize* or *overturn* what derogatory force the slur had *originally communicated* (cf. Croom, 2013, p. 191, 194; Pfister, 2010, p. 1278). So at least in in-group contexts like these, a Spanish slur such as *spic* or *wetback* may be used as a *norm reversed variant* of the original derogatory use since it occurs here between *similar* interlocutors in a *non-confrontational* context instead of between *dissimilar* interlocutors in a *confrontational* context (cf. Croom, 2013) or as a form of *mock impoliteness* since it is presumably understood here as intentionally non-offensive (cf. Culpeper, 1996). Such non-derogatory uses are presumably made possible by the fact that in-group racial members typically share in many of the same discriminatory problems and face many of the same discriminatory prejudices and stereotypes, which might serve as a means for like speakers to foster a sense of solidarity, namely, by being *in* on *this in-group use* of the slur. In creating a sense of solidarity through in-group uses of slurs, the use of which is typically restricted to *only* in-group members, speakers are thereby afforded an additional linguistic technique for signaling to each other that they are not alone and that others like them share in their pains, perspectives, and history of prejudices. According to Brown and Levinson (1978) this is how "we get conventionalized (ritualized) insults as a mechanism for stressing solidarity" (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 229; Sally, 2003, p. 1237) and as a matter of fact, 54% of respondents in an Associated Press-MTV study involving 1,355 participants "think it's OK to use

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37 For further discussion on *face* and *facework* based on sociopragmatic studies of Spanish cf. Flores, 2012; see also Arundale, 2012; Haugh, 2012; Lopez, 2014.

them [slurs] within their own circle of friends, because [as one respondent reports] "I know we don't mean it"" (Cass & Agiesta, 2011; Greene, 2011).

So in at least these kinds of close relationships between in-group speakers, such colloquial conversational participants may often (but not always) assume that they will encounter minimal danger from face threats during their conversational interaction (again, such an assumption is often earned through trust, respect, and repeated interaction between friends or in-group members, and perhaps the trusted testimony of others also). Importantly, it is by virtue of this mutual understanding that the employment of mock insults or slurs are rendered a safe way for building rapport or facilitating social intimacy between interlocutors. It should also be noted that if one interlocutor is *too polite* to another, the former may actually *insult* the latter by implying that the social distance or relative power between them is greater than the latter believes or wishes for it to be (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Croom, 2011, p. 350). If someone you would like to consider a "close friend" is overly insistent on addressing you formally with honorifics and the like, then they may be strategically doing this in an attempt to signal their perception of the larger social distance that divides you two. Thus by working in the opposite direction and instead speaking loosely or in accord with counter-culture norms, an in-group speaker's use of the relevant slur may be understood to operate "as a positively polite stressing of in-group knowledge and commonality of attitudes" (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 28).

With this in mind let us again turn to consider how the slur expression *spic* (identified as **C** below) can be understood as a family resemblance rather than classical category that consists in a structured constellation of stereotypical attributes (identified as **A*n*** below) such as the following:

C (*Spic*)
A1 *x is Mexican American*.[38]
A2 *x is a foreign worker or exchange student with a thick non-native accent*.[39]
A3 *x is from a low-income family and engages in subservient work*.[40]
A4 *x is commonly the recipient of poor treatment*.[41]
A5 *x is very passionate, sexually suave, and family oriented*.[42]

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38 For the definition of *spic* cf. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2009).
39 Cf. slides 3, 4, 7, 8, and 10 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).
40 Cf. slides 8, 10, and 12 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a).
41 Cf. Thompson (2013a).
42 Cf. slides 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 14 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).

   A6 *x is independent, hardworking, and tenacious.*[43]
   A7 *x is loud and out of control.*[44]
   A8 *x is manipulative or involved in illegal activities.*[45]
   A9 *x is good at singing and dancing.*[46]
   A10 *x is gullible or naive.*[47]

What is being proposed here is that if, for instance, an in-group Mexican American speaker S is intending to communicate that they are sufficiently similar to some hearer H insofar as S and H are both attributed **A1, A4,** and possibly others (such as **A5** and **A6,** or **A9**), and if S and H know each other well-enough or have established enough common ground to understand that S does not dislike on consider themselves superior to H and does not intend to communicate that H possesses most of the other (typically negative) attributes belonging to **C,** then *S as an in-group speaker* might strategically choose to employ **C** as the category that most efficiently and economically predicates the intended (shared) attributes of H, such as **A1** (*Mexican American*), **A4** (*commonly the recipient of poor treatment*), and possibly others – such as **A5** (*passionate, sexually suave, and family oriented*), **A6** (*independent, hardworking, and tenacious*), or **A9** (*good at singing and dancing*) – at least to the extent that **C** is better for this than other categories that are of epistemic access to that language-user.

    Finally, it is important to point out that although speakers can often use slurs in various and somewhat flexible ways, there are indeed practical strategies and constraints involved in guiding both the use and interpretation of slurs. Croom (2013) for one has suggested that several salient markers that aid in the interpretation of slurs as being used non-derogatorily rather than derogatorily include sameness of target features (for example, members of the same racial in-group using the relevant racial slur between each other, such as Mexican Americans using the racial slur *spic* or *wetback* between each other, and so on) as well as sameness of communicative medium and style (for example, members both communicate in the same language and speech style, such as Spanish, and so on). However, further discussion of other strategies and constraints involved in guiding both the use and interpretation of slurs must be reserved for another occasion.

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43 Cf. slides 2, 5, and 12 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a).
44 Cf. slides 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 14 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).
45 Cf. slides 8, 9, and 12 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).
46 Cf. slides 3, 7, and 17 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).
47 Cf. slide 10 from *The Huffington Post* (2012a) and p. 467 from Vera and Feagin (2007).

7 Conclusion

Although prior scholarship on slurs has uncovered several important facts concerning their meaning and use –including that slurs are potentially offensive, are felicitously applied towards some targets yet not others, and are often flexibly used not only derogatorily to convey offense towards out-group members but also non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members– no account of slurs that typically target Mexican-Americans had previously been proposed. Accordingly, my aim in this article was to offer the first systematic and empirically, socio-culturally informed analysis of these that accounts for both their derogatory and appropriative use. Importantly, this article reviewed over a dozen Spanish stereotypes and slurs and further explained how the descriptive attributes involved in a stereotype associated with a slur can contribute to the predication of certain content in the application of that slur toward its target in context. This article further explained how the psychological effects of *stereotype threat* and *stereotype lift* could be initiated through the application of a relevant slur towards its target in context as well.

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Bionotes

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