

SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION

BRIEF

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STSM title: Reclamation in the public sphere

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Research interest:

The purpose of my STSM was to advance the work that I've been developing in the last year with Dan López de Sa at the University of Barcelona about the reclamation of derogatory epithets. Our investigation raised issues that are relevant to the understanding of a norm of public argument. Within APPLY CA17132's WG2, I focused on what we call Norm of Equality (cf. Mendelberg 2017, Saul 2018), roughly the norm according to which public speech and arguments should not erode equality. Among the discursive machinery that has the potential to erode the ideal of equality, we find hate speech. For this reason, derogatory epithets are typically banned in public forums. While standard uses of slurs are generally censored, this does not clearly hold for reclaimed slurs, which constitute in fact a great opportunity to fight the toxic power of slurs (for some empirical evidence, see Galinsky et al. 2013). While according to some authors (Bianchi 2014), the reclamation of slurs should not be censored, others authors (Herbert 2015) underline that if reclamation fails, it may contribute to the very discrimination it aims to fight: in other words, it may erode the norm of equality. In order to establish whether reclamation erodes the norm of equality when it fails, we need to be clear about what it means for reclamation to fail.

STSM Summary:

During my STSM, we advanced a draft of our paper on the success and failures of reclamation. Here is a summary of our results.

Reclamation is usually taken to be the phenomenon wherein speakers (typically ingroups) employ slurs “non-derogatorily” in order to express pride, foster camaraderie, express solidarity, and subvert extant structures of discrimination (see

e.g. Tirrell 1999; Brontsema 2004; Bianchi 2014; Croom 2014; Ritchie 2017; Anderson 2018; Jeshion 2020).

Some scholars have raised concerns against reclamation and pointed to the idea that it may fail in such a way that, if used in the public forum, it would erode the norm of equality (Herbert 2015).

In our paper, we have argued that the debate on reclamation would benefit from distinguishing two main dimensions in which reclamation can be successful, and thus two dimensions with respect to which reclamation can fail. Success can be spelt out in terms of felicity, insofar as a certain use of a slur is a move within the linguistic practice indisputably exemplified by the familiar paradigmatic examples, or in terms of accomplishment, insofar as it achieves the typical goals.

In the first part of the paper we characterize these notions and in the second part we illustrate the significance of the distinction, as fruitful machinery to articulate very different kinds of issues and concerns about the successes of reclamation.

The distinction we put forward is a useful tool to understand the claim that, if reclamation fails, it then erodes the norm of equality. In particular, we claim that if attempts to reclaim slurs fail at the level of felicity, they may count as hate speech, thus indeed eroding such a norm. If, on the other hand, reclamation fails at the level of accomplishment, it won't automatically violate the norm according to which public speech and arguments should not erode equality. Since we define accomplishment as relative to various goals associated with reclamation, reclamation can fail at the level of accomplishment (because, say, it fails to subvert existing structure of discrimination, even though it does succeed in expressing pride and solidarity) without thereby violating the norm of equality.

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