

You can't say that! A Semantic and Historical
Analysis of *Nigger* and *Nigga*

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Abstract

Slurs like *nigger* or *bitch* are a source of contention for many linguists and non-linguists alike. Most people can identify their offensiveness, yet there is little consensus on what makes them so. Do they carry an offensive meaning endemic to themselves? Or are they just inappropriate to be spoken aloud, and a sign of a lack of etiquette? *Nigger* seems to be especially insulting, being euphemized in all public media as “the N-word.” Still, we see an interesting phenomenon with *nigger* in which it has been reclaimed as the positive word *nigga* for in-group usage amongst African Americans (Rahman 148). It functions as a marker of solidarity that has roots in being mutual members of the same diaspora. My theory is two-fold. First, I assert that slurs are offensive because of the provocative content contained within their meanings rather than simply being a breach of etiquette when used (Hom 10). I then suggest that there is an identifiable semantic change in slurs like *nigger* that support a semantic reading over a pragmatic one. To that end, I suggest that there are two distinct uses of the word *nigger*: the racist slur *nigger* and the reclaimed term of endearment *nigga* (which is spelled and pronounced differently), and that the two are different words with dissimilar meanings (Rahman 143; Croom

11). Both originated from a divergence from an earlier use of *nigger* used as a neutral term to describe Blacks during slavery (Rahman 142).

Introduction

This study seeks to support a semantic theory of slurs as well as establish a distinction between *nigger* and *nigga*. Semantic explanations of slurs typically prioritize their semantic representation while neglecting their histories. Similarly, historical accounts mention the sociological phenomena associated with *nigga* and *nigger* without formal explanation of their semantic representations. I hope to unite both approaches to gain a more holistic understanding of the meaning of both words as well as their shared origins.

In Section I, I argue for a semantic understanding of slurs rather than one of pragmatism. I assert that they behave similarly to performatives and can slur because they contain both descriptive and expressive content. In Section II, I propose a history of *nigga*'s usage. I suggest a theory of lexical semantic change that *nigger* follows, from its neutral use to pejorative until it diverges to form *nigga*. I then explain much of the modern significance of *nigga*.

Within this study, I make use of offensive terminology like racial slurs, pejoratives, and expletive words. Though I do so without intending to offend or referring to any person, much of this language is able to offend without needing referents. It would be possible to use a variable (Ex: Juana is an S) in the space of slurs each time they are mentioned (Hedger 74), or other euphemisms such as the 'N-word,' but in doing so, we lose the elicited response to the word *nigger* and other slurs that makes this research interesting. Thus, I will refrain from using the term 'N-word' from here onwards.

Section I: Semantics of Slurs

Speech Act Theory

Language is not just descriptive; some language can be regarded as action, changing the way that the world operates. Take the following example: John is a teenager living with his mother. When John says the following to his mother,

1. "I promise to make my bed in the morning."

He is not making a statement to which we can ascribe a truth value. While we can say it is true that John promised to make his bed in the morning, we cannot say that John's uttered statement is true or false. What we can say is that John has committed himself to his promise and has changed something about the relationship between him and his mother (Austin 8).

Speech act theory describes this phenomenon. The theory states that some phrases, when they are said, behave just as other actions do. That is, to say a phrase that qualifies as a speech act changes reality as much as any tangible action does (Austin 5).

2. "Please shut the door behind you."
3. John shut the door behind him.

Sentence 2 qualifies as an action just as much as sentence 3 does. Utterances like 2, called performatives, necessitate an interaction between individuals, and the proper context for their use. There must be an available doorway that the hearer has passed through or will pass through and a door attached to that doorway. In another instance, only a clergy person or a public servant can *declare* a couple married. If I were to try to declare a couple married, it would be useless.

There are three aspects of performatives: The literal or surface meaning it carries (locution), the content the speaker intends on communicating, or the 'real' meaning (illocution), and the interpretation of the listener (perlocution) (Kriedler 181). Said differently, locution is what was said, illocution is what was meant or what changes the dynamic between the speaker and hearer, and perlocution is the result of the speech. A speech act is most effective when the illocution and

perlocution are identical. That is, when the intention of the speaker is obvious to the listener, communication is successful. Let us return to sentence 1. A likely context might be that John has not made his bed in a few days, and his mother needs to know that this time he is serious, and will accomplish his goal in the morning. It is an effective speech act because it carries each of these properties. The locution is what is said, the promise to take care of the bed the following morning. The illocution is that the speaker wants the listener to know that he is serious about making the bed. The perlocutionary act could be that the mother believes the promise, and knows she can hold him to his word, and even administer consequences if the promise is not fulfilled.

There are five general categories of speech acts: Representatives (asserting or concluding), directives (requesting or demanding), commissives (promises or offers), expressives (apologizing or welcoming) and declarations (marrying or christening) (Searle 10). Most of these speech acts come in the form of phrases or statements.

4. We find the defendant guilty.

5. I'm so sorry.

Sentences 4 and 5 are examples of such performatives. They are performatives because of several factors, such as the use of the first person and the present tense. So, we see that a performative is usually denoted as such because of how the different elements in a phrase interact. This is not always the case. Sometimes words like *damn* and *bastard* (categorized as expressives) can behave like performatives (Potts 1).

6. That bastard Jimmy owes me money.

Sentences like 6 affect the world in a way comparable to many of the declarative sentence speech acts. It is an unambiguous utterance that has a literal meaning, that Jimmy, owes the speaker money. Jimmy also happens to be a bastard (locution). It expresses that expresses a clear

attitude of the speaker (illocution), namely that he does not like Jimmy and is likely not using *bastard* as a commentary on the marital status of Jimmy's parents, which would be the literal meaning of the word *bastard*. He is likely using it to communicate to the listener how much he dislikes Jimmy. Following sentence 6, the listener would be sure how the speaker wants them to feel about Jimmy, that they should see the kind of person that Jimmy is and respond accordingly (perlocution). Though they are different in form, these one-word expressives have all the requirements of performatives and “when uttered, an immediate and powerful impact on the context. They are performative, often destructively so” (Potts, 2007).

Are slurs performative in the same way expressives are? On the surface, they depend heavily on context and on an interaction between speakers and listeners, but the illocution and perlocution are opaque. It is not always clear what a speaker intends to communicate, which makes the listener's interpretation difficult to predict. Listeners tend to hear nigger completely offensively, though the speakers might intend on using it endearingly. While slurs share features with expressives, they do not have all of them.

Slurs

A slur is defined generally as any “insulting or disparaging remark or innuendo” (“slur”). This includes words like those mentioned in 7.

7. asshole, bitch, kike, nigger, idiot, fucker, pig, whore, slut, chink, spick, snake, dick, filth, coon

The definition includes pejoratives based on individual character. That is, when someone calls another person an *asshole*, they are not thinking of a group of people to which the person belongs. They clearly have a series of qualities in mind that the person exhibits in behavior, and

see *asshole* as an appropriate identifier. The qualities associated with *asshole* might vary, but not to a great degree.

Slurs are used differently. For a word like *chink*, the group already exists (Chinese people) and there is no need for any kind of behavior for a person to be referred to as a *chink*. Since there are no clear behavioral patterns, the context for using *chink* is not consistent, and the meanings it carries are not always clear. For the purposes of my study, I will use the word 'slurs' to refer to those concerning ethnic groups (like *nigger* or *kike*).

Slurs are also not all offensive in the same way. They vary greatly in their offensive character between social groups (that is, *cracker* is not as offensive as *chink*) as well as within groups (*nigger* is more offensive than *coon*). The spectrum of offensiveness is affected by the degree of offensiveness of the different meanings attributed to the words.

Thus, there is little consensus on what typifies a slur or what causes them to be offensive. There are two common theories of their offense. The semantic theory states that slurs hold offensive content as part of their meaning while the pragmatic theory assumes that slurs are offensive simply because they are taboo words that should not be used. So, in breaking the taboo, people offend those around them.

The semantic theory states that slurs carry offensive meaning (Hom 1). That is, slurs are offensive because they denote offensive qualities to the group to which they refer. When someone uses the word *kike*, they ascribe any number of negative qualities to the meaning of the word that cause those to whom it commonly refers (*Jews*, the neutral counterpart) to become offended. Under this theory, *Jew* has a different meaning than *kike*, though the referent is the same.

Semantics studies the meanings of words, phrases and sentences. We can only say a sentence has meaning if it has truth conditions. That is, if we can tell whether a statement is true or false,

then it has semantic content. Consider sentence 8. It can only be true if and only if Jill is in fact a woman, and only if she has been educated. If Jill is a man, we can say that the sentence is false. If we understand the truth conditions of 8, then we can evaluate the truth conditions of sentences like 9 or 10. We need not measure Jill's height to see if she is tall because we already know the sentence to be false because (she is a woman). The same is true of 10, where the statement directly contradicts the one made in 8.

8. Jill is an educated woman.

9. Jill is a tall man.

10. Jill can't be a woman.

This understanding of semantic representation of words is complicated in the use of slurs. Even when speakers do not intend on offending with their use of a slur, any use can provide offense, whether it is negated, used in a question or a conditional statement.

11. Ken is a nigger.

12. Ken is not a nigger.

13. Is Ken a nigger?

Sentences 11 and 12 are equally offensive even though they should hold opposing meanings. Sentence 13 is still offensive even in its questioning. It seems that it is not the meaning of the word *nigger* that is offensive, at least not based on how we've defined meaning. This current theory of semantics is insufficient for describing how slurs carry offense. The other theory, the pragmatic one, states that the offense is only in the utterance of the word, rather than in its meaning (Sennet and Copp 1103). That is, the word is taboo, and should not be said. Those who use the word offend others because they break this implicit rule banning its use. This is consistent with the fact that people often use slurs like *nigger* without meaning to offend. They

ascribe no offensive meaning to the word, but can offend those around them because they break the social contract that prohibits the word's usage.

Still, the pragmatic theory also fails to sufficiently explain all the ways in which slurs behave. If slurs can affect the semantic representation of another word, it seems logical that they have their own semantic content. This theory assumes that *nigger* holds no semantic content, but is simply context dependent and offensive. Yet this is inconsistent with the ability slurs have in compounding with other words and change their meaning.

14. Nigger-stick (police baton)

Nigger-work (tedious, belittling tasks)

Nigger-luck (undeserved luck)

Nigger-rich (characterizes someone who spend money unwisely)

In example 14, all the words compounded with *nigger* gain new meaning, all of which are offensive. The meanings in each are similar (all refer to being lazy, worthless, foolish, etc. in some way). Neither theory seems capable of explaining the behavior of slurs, but I suggest that the semantic theory of slurs can better account for the ways slurs are used, but seems to need expansion in its explanation of semantic representation.

Kaplan introduces a duality within semantic representation that is helpful for explaining slurs' offensive function: that of descriptive semantic content and expressive semantic content (qtd. in Hedger 76). Descriptive content, that which is typically studied in semantics, is present in sentences like 8, where we can make a claim on truth values, as the speaker is commenting on the nature of the world. Expressive content communicates a certain attitude, usually of the speaker in saying them. Interjections like *oops* or *wow* hold semantic content (we can intuit what speakers mean when they say them), but do not have truth values to determine. When

interjections are uttered, we cannot say that they are true or false. They simply express the attitude of the speaker in that moment. Consider the use of *damned* in sentences 15 and 16.

15. That damned David is a clever man.

16. That David is a clever man.

Both statements have evaluable truth conditions, and provide the same descriptive information, namely that David is a man, and he is clever. They differ only in the use of *damned*, which adds no descriptive content. It is not obvious how we might determine the veracity of his being damned or not, at least not in the way the speaker means. The use of the word merely expresses the attitude that our speaker has for David, one that is in some way negative. This is a slur of expressive content only, with no descriptive content added to the sentence. Now, consider sentences 17 and 18.

17. David is an idiot.

18. David is a person who makes unwise decisions.

Upon reading 17, we would almost certainly believe that 18 could be true, if not definitely so. The two sentences seem synonymous, and contribute similar meanings. Hence, idiot seems to provide some descriptive content. Still, 17 provides content that is not entailed by 18.

To understand the difference between 17 and 18, we must employ Gricean theories of implicatures. Implicatures are the “suggestions” of an utterance, what is not necessarily true based on what is said, but is not unreasonable to assume (44). Grice postulated the *Cooperative Principle*, which states that in conversation, people contribute required and sufficient information for the conversation to be productive and informative for both parties (43). He posits four maxims that determine how people engage in cooperative conversation: manner, relevance, quantity, and quality. The relevant maxim being violated in 18 is the maxim of manner, which

says that one must be clear, brief, and orderly while conversing. Normally a speaker would avoid being overly verbose. If they are still being cooperative, we can assume that they wanted to convey the content of 17 without the content of 19.

19. I don't like David.

The utterance in 17 seems to entail (or at least implicate) 19, while 18 and 19 have no such relationship. Though 17 and 18 have almost identical meaning, the use of *idiot* also seems to carry expressive content that 19 articulates descriptively. We have learned something about David, but we have also gained knowledge about the speaker because of his choice of words.

I posit that slurs contain both expressive and descriptive content. Expressive content seems pragmatic, but the difference is that the meaning provided by expressive content is directly embedded into a slur. They are used on some level to describe a reality about the world, yet ascribe an attitude inherent in their meaning that cannot be evaluated by truth conditions, making them difficult to parse or understand in use. Horn explains this in theory of Combinatorial Externalism (16). It assumes that a slur's derogatory nature is composed entirely of its semantic representation (pragmatics is not very relevant or useful). The meaning is not just dependent on the intentions of the speaker using them, but also the meaning ascribed by those who commonly use it. So, a racial slur holds the meaning the speaker intends (which could be derogatory or not), but it necessarily holds other meanings as well, and so using the slur makes it near impossible to escape these meanings.

Consider 20 and 21:

20. Jackie Chan is Chinese.

21. Jackie Chan is Latino .

Sentence 20 is clearly a true statement, and saying the negation would be clearly asserting a falsehood. Much of the world knows that Jackie Chan was born in China, and it is a commonly accepted fact. Sentence 21, for that reason is clearly false; to the knowledge of the public, Jackie Chan has no Latin American Heritage, and so he cannot be Latino. The two are like sentences 22 and 23, respectively, yet they are evaluated very differently.

22. Jackie Chan is a chink.

23. Jackie Chan is a spic.

Sentences 22 makes some sense as an identifier for Jackie Chan in the same way that 23 is clearly a misplaced identifier. The word *chink* is often used to refer to anyone with East Asian origins, so it has some parseable meaning in this context, as does *spic*, which refers to those with Latin American Origin. Still, most people would be equally loath to use both sentences, and refuse to evaluate their truthfulness. Because of the other expressive meanings attached to the use of the ethnic slurs, using them does not only communicate the truth about Jackie Chan's origin, but also a negative attitude the speaker has concerning Jackie Chan. One might assume that, if someone were to utter 22, they would not only believe Jackie Chan to East Asian (which is true), they might also think that he speaks English poorly, performs well in math and science, and does not belong in the United States. Hedger asserts that our refusal to evaluate the use of these ethnic slurs is because we are not provided with enough descriptive content to understand anything about the referent of the slur (78). They do not provide details about the referents to which we can assign truth values. I disagree and suggest that we have the opposite problem – there is too much information added, some of which is undesirable and untrue, and we would rather not use a word like *chink* or *spic* because of the extra expressive content it provides.

He makes the statement that slurs are completely different statements from their neutral counterparts. They do not share any meaning and cannot be evaluated as such. When someone says sentence 20, they are saying something completely different from sentence 22. The referent is not the same and we cannot see any overlap in the sentences. His logic though, is that we do not see overlap because we refuse to. “Since we are not racist, we would feel extremely uncomfortable assenting to the truth of” a slur word (78). Slurs are so offensive and morally corrupt, and as such language speakers would confirm the truth of 20 and deny 21, while denouncing the person who uttered 22 and 23 for their improper use of language. Still, even if people refuse to acknowledge any truthfulness in a statement, the utterance is no truer nor falsier.

Hom states that a slurs derogatory meaning necessarily contains that of its neutral counterpart (Hom 17). He assumes the following, which Pullum paraphrases: if we call someone a slur, then we say that the person

24. “is an N, and ought to be subject to discriminative practices because of having stereotypical properties in consequence of being an N” [quotation abstracted for clarity] (Pullum13).

The analysis makes two propositions. One is the descriptive content, or the value of N, our neutral counterpart term. The rest of the analysis is the expressive content. This example borrowed from (Pullum 13) for the word *dyke* explains his thoughts.

25. Sarah is a dyke.

The sentence means that

26. Sarah is a “[lesbian], and deserving of contempt and being banned from working with children, etc., because of being grossly immoral, because of being a lesbian.”

Here, our descriptive content is that Sarah is a lesbian, while the social commentary is the expressive content. This example highlights well the difficulty of divorcing the expressive and descriptive content of a slur, and why they are so difficult to parse. Hom's analysis predicts that in using the word *dyke* to refer to someone, we say that they have all the qualities that his analysis gives us, which many would not intend even in using the word. Equally problematic is the negation in sentence 27, also from Pullum,

27. Obama is not a chink.

which means:

28. "Obama does not instantiate the property 'being Chinese and therefore deserving of discriminatory practices because they have bad properties in virtue of being Chinese' (13).

The definition of chink here indicates that 27 should not be offensive because of its negation. But Pullum suggests that the use of chink is an offense that is not ameliorated by negation (Pullum 13; Sennet and Copp 1102). He thinks the issue is including the demeaning qualities in the definition of the word, and suggests providing metadata for each slur word that contains the offensive meaning. That is, the derogatory meanings of the words, or their expressive content, are provided as information about the word rather than part of the definitions itself. He provides several example definitions (17).

29. **Dyke:** *Semantics:* lesbian. *Metadata:* slang, generally disparaging or offensive.

30. **Vixen:** (n) *Semantics:* quarrelsome or ill-tempered woman. *Metadata:* offensive.

31. **Slut:** (n) *Semantics:* sexually promiscuous person. *Metadata:* Usually offensive.

32. **Nigger:** *Semantics:* black person, especially with negroid racial characteristics.

Metadata: highly charged, offensive and contemptuous; characteristically used by racists

and associated with oppression, though nonetheless used jokingly without offense within some African-American and Afro-Caribbean communities, sometimes metaphorically extended to members of other socially, economically or politically deprived groups; avoided in nearly all print sources.

The last definition in 32 is the one of most of interest to me. It is also the longest definition that Pullum provides, and by far the most complex. It is here that he makes some mention of the reclamation of the word as it is used by Blacks as an in-group non-derogatory identifier. But the metadata looks too complex to understand both the offensive and reclaimed use as the same word. I posit that the two words (that is, the derogatory word and reclaimed one) exists as separate lexical entries and should be treated as such.

Speakers and listeners often have a difficult time conversing using slurs like *nigger*, a process muddled by the fact that slurs can change in their meaning and hence, their offensiveness.

Section II: History of *Nigger/Nigga*

Lexical Semantic Change

Lexical semantic change (LSC) is the process by which words that are already in existence change their meaning and are added to the lexicon of a group of people (Fromkin and Rodman and Hyams). This is different from words being formed through compounding (*note + book* becomes *notebook*, and takes on a meaning that is the sum of its two parts: a book that is used for notetaking), the addition of derivational morphology (when the adjective *thick* gains the derivational morpheme *-ness*, it becomes *thickness*, a noun with the same general meaning as *thick* with an amended part of speech caused by the derivation) or back-formation (a word

formed from an existing word, usually from the removal of an affix. This occurred with the adjective *lazy*, a word from which the noun *laze* was formed).

Words can change meaning through 3 general processes: broadening, narrowing, or shifting. Broadening occurs when a word retains its original meaning while adopting new meanings. Consider the definition and use of the word holiday (“holiday, n.” *OED*).

33. Holiday (n): earlier haliday (c. 1200), from Old English haligdæg "holy day, consecrated day, religious anniversary"; Sabbath

Goo to chirche faste and kepe your halydayes. [Go to church, fast, and keep your holidays] (1481).

34. Holiday (n): A day on which ordinary occupations (of an individual or a community) are suspended; a day of exemption or cessation from work; a day of festivity, recreation, or amusement. (In early use, not separable from sense 1)

Doo you not know that it is hollyday, a day to daunce in, and make mery at the ale house (1577)?

The assumption licensed by the first definition is that if it was a holy day, one would take the day off. It now can refer to all unique, non-weekend days we do not have to work nor go to school.

The process of narrowing has the opposite effect; it is when words lose some of their meaning to become more specific, as *meat* did “meat, n.” *OED*):

35. Meat (n): Food, as nourishment for people and fodder for animals; *esp.* solid food, as opposed to *drink*.

Meat is then set down to them on a flat plate, consisting of crumbled bread and oatmeal (1844).

36. Meat (n): The flesh of animals used as food, esp. excluding fish and sometimes poultry, and usually in contrast to the bones and other inedible parts;

Wild ass and antelope meat are also brought in for sale (1881).

Meat once referred to all food, now it just refers to animal flesh. Shifting occurs when words take on completely new meaning while abandoning their old meaning.

37. Silly (adj): Worthy, good. Also: pious, holy; Fortunate

Ther had bene great confluences of people at a chappell..thrie Saturdayes befor Lambas and thrie efter called the six silie Saturdayes (1650).

38. Silly (adj): Of a person: lacking in judgement or common sense; foolish, thoughtless, empty-headed; characterized by ridiculous or frivolous behavior.

Her soul is silly, but her body's wise (1728).

Silly once meant 'happy', and is now synonymous with 'foolish' in most uses ("silly, adj." OED). It is this third category of LSC that the appropriation of *nigger* is most like, and the kind of LSC I will study to understand how *nigger* has changed meaning.

One example of lexical semantic change comparable to that of *nigger* is found in the word *nice* ("nigger (adj.)" Harper; "nice, adj." OED). I track several iterations of the word meaning change here (The centuries denote first instances of the word meaning):

39. Of a person: foolish, silly, simple; ignorant. *Obs* (1300s).

40. Shy, reluctant, or unwilling in regard *of* or *to*. Also with *in* or infinitive. *Obs* (1500s).

41. Particular, strict, or careful with regard to a specific point or thing. *Obs* (Late 1500s).

42. Of a topic of conversation, mode of conduct, etc.: in good taste, appropriate, proper. *Usu.* in negative contexts (Early 1800s).

When it originated in the 1300s, it meant something akin to ‘silly’ or ‘absurd’, and was used to belittle. Century to century, the meaning began shifting from ‘ridiculous’ to ‘delicate’, then ‘meticulous’ until the mid 1800s, when it settled on ‘pleasant’ or ‘kind’, the meaning closest to the one we use today. It is not obvious why the word underwent such change yet has been stagnant for the last 2 centuries, but the process of change is somewhat mirrored in the change of *nigger*.

As Hollman notes, “The key is to realise that while the development as a whole is very drastic, the individual steps are not” (Hollmann 530). It is especially difficult to see how a word like *nice* can become ameliorated so drastically without seeing the intermediate steps that lead to the change in semantics meaning. None of the individual steps are themselves very drastic, but the overall change we see is a large one. The same could be said of *nigger* and its change over the last few centuries.

The semantic change in *nigger* is unique, though, in that the original meaning does not fall out of use as the new endearment becomes common. With words like *nice*, their changing meanings gain prominence as past meanings become obsolete. Uses of *nigger* now can still have a fully offensive meaning, and is probably more offensive now than it has ever been, while the reclaimed, inoffensive *nigga* is still in full production in certain contexts (namely, communities comprising of Black Americans).

Hollman notes that this is often complicated by the presence of language-internal and language-external factors (531). Changes to other terms in the lexicon lead to internal changes. For instance, if a word becomes obsolete, another word might broaden to refer to the same referents. Similarly, if a new word is borrowed from another language or starts being used to

refer to new referents, then another word can narrow in meaning and usage. These are the kinds of factors we have seen that lead to LSC.

Contrarily, things external to languages, like culture and change in geography greatly affect the likelihood of language changing. We also see that with the usage of *nigger*.

Neutral *nigger* to offensive *nigger*

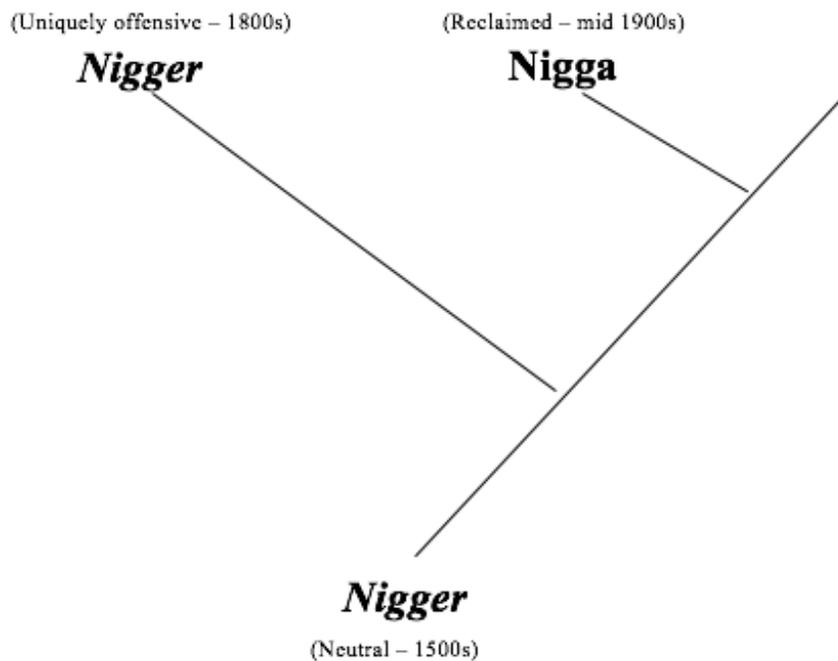


Image 1: 'Evolutionary' tree of *nigger*: Here I note the change *nigger* has over time from left to right. At the top are present uses of the word (both offensive *nigger* and *nigga*) and at the bottom is the common ancestor, the 'extinct' neutral *nigger*.

Nigger is likely a late 1500's English derivative of the French word *nigre*, used to refer to dark-skinned people from regions of Africa and Southern Asia. Though it was patronizing when used, there was no overt hostility expressed in its early uses. Loan-words borrowed from other languages tend to start off with little emotional or social attachment (the word *very* used to mean true or real, an objective meaning, and now means extremely, often a subjective modifier) (Hollmann 533). Nigeria and Niger were named by the British because people in those regions were Black. The term was often deemed a neutral one, and sometimes even a positive expression ("nigger, n. and adj." *OED*).

43. The King and People [of 'Serro Leona'] Niggers, simple and harmless (1608).

44. The Massagetes bordering vpon the Indians, and the Nigers of Aethiop [Sp. *los negros en Ethiopia*], bearing witness (1577).

Even so, when language is adopted to recognize the 'other', it is likely that it will become a negative term eventually in its use. Once the slave trade began, the derogatory nature of *nigger* became more apparent, and the word became synonymous with 'slave' (Harper "nigger (n.)"; ("nigger, n. and adj." *OED*) Still, the term held no obvious contempt for its referents; slaves were property and considered sub-human, but they were viewed with little hostility. A *nigger* was a useful worker, and seldom held in contempt. Only when slaves became free did the word begin its divorced from Black identities (Harper "nigger (n.)"). *Nigger* could no longer mean 'slave', so a new meaning was necessary.

Nigger's derogation followed the institutionalization of stereotypes about Blacks. Words that refer to lower-class citizens have a higher propensity to become pejorative. As Ta-Nehisi Coates says, "Race is the child of racism, not the father." (Coates 7). The sentiment of African-slave

inferiority bled into the lexical items used to refer to them. Their global lowliness was already commonly held as true, and the word *nigger* shifted in meaning to fit the role. Hosea Easton, a free Black in 1837 sees *nigger* as “an opprobrious term, employed to impose contempt upon Blacks as an inferior race” (qtd. in Rahman 143).

This change does not happen independent of societal changes. Allen, Linguistics professor at Monash University, notes the following:

Ethnic slurs appear in response to social and economic conflict during historical periods of rapid social change. The coinage of most slurs may be associated with great events in our social history, particularly waves of immigration, urbanization, war and its aftermath, depressions, and massive migrations of labor (qtd. in Rahman 143).

With the increased number of slaves finding freedom and migrating across the United States, asserting their personhood upon a culture that once denied its existence, *nigger* began proliferating flagrantly. Instead of referring to Blacks who were slaves, it seems to take on a meaning of Blacks who *should* be slaves. It served as a reminder for all that Blacks were still inferior despite the freedom they began to experience in the late 19th century.

Following the Civil War, the tamer alternative *colored* became available, and then in the 1960s after the Civil Rights Movement, *Black* makes its appearance. These new words quickly became widespread (seen in in the adoption of *colored* by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and *Black* in the Black Entertainment Television). The presence of alternatives made *nigger* uniquely offensive in that if one chose to use it, it was an intentional offense. Calling it “the N-word” represents this social change; Since the phenomena associated with its use became socially unacceptable (namely slavery), the word itself followed suit and became a fully offensive term.

While many offensive words fall out of use as their referents become more integrated into society, the use of *nigger* gained prominence as the otherization of Blacks in America continued to be highlighted and defined. It, along with other racist terms, was used to reinforce caricatures of stupidity, laziness and worthlessness. *Nigger* has been compounded with other words to bring a more holistic vilification to Blacks in America (refer to example 14), referring to other people and inanimate objects.

Even non-Black people were called *niggers* in order to denigrate them similarly (“*nigger*, n. and adj.” *OED*).

45. Abe Lincoln..goddam you..you are nothing but a goddam Black nigger (1861).

46. ‘Don't be a nigger,’ he would say to me over and over. ‘Niggers lie and lie’ (1942).

This use features a pragmatic understanding of *nigger*, that it is offensive because it is used even though social convention or etiquette demands its prohibition.

Still, pragmatics would assume that *nigger* and its non-offensive alternatives do not differ in meaning, but only in the appropriateness of their use. This theory makes sense for predicting the difference in use between saying someone is *between jobs* vs calling them *unemployed*. The two utterances mean the same thing, but the blow is lessened with the use of the euphemism in place of the direct statement. This does not explain why words with the same meaning and little difference in form, like *nigga* vs. *Black*, *colored*, or *N-word* would elicit such varied responses. Because of the proliferated use of the alternatives (while with the example about the unemployment, both terms are used regularly), we can assume that speakers intuit a drastic difference between *nigga* and its alternatives. Subsequently, we cannot assume why speakers are using different terms aside from the words having different meanings themselves, further implying a semantic distinction with the words instead of simply a pragmatic one.

Reclamation: Offensive *nigger* to *nigga*

The earliest recorded use of *nigger* by Blacks is during the 19th century after the civil war (“*nigger*, n. and adj.” *OED*). There is some speculation that there were earlier uses amongst slaves, though because of their sub-human status, there was negligible interest in recording their lexicon prior to their becoming free. Even the records of the use of the word we do have might not have “accurately captured its phonological characteristics” (Rahman 144). Since few slave narratives containing *nigger* were recorded, there is little assurance of its early use. Still, it seems almost certain that once slaves began to learn English, they would have adopted some use of *nigger*. Though they once had self-referential terms in their native languages to refer to group identity, those were used to refer to tribal or kingdom affiliation. This sense of a “Pan-African” identity was one created in response to European colonialism; none of these groups of people saw themselves as united in the way Europeans did when they stole them from their homelands to plant them into captivity (Britannica).

This difference among slaves would have been highlighted in several ways, the most salient likely being language. Many of these slaves spoke languages that were similar in some respects, but were unintelligible to one another (Falola & Fleming 126). Their forced homogenization, Gomez states, would have forced slaves to use their newly common tongue, English, “to communicate with Africans of dissimilar background” (qtd. in Rahman 144). Thus, *nigger*, in some form began its use in the new African communities of slaves.

This form likely retained some features from their previous languages. Rahman posits that the linguistic features of several West African Languages would have been maintained in the adoption of English (specifically r-lessness word-finally). This is uncertain and difficult to validate, as few early sources of slave speech denote *nigger* as *nigga*, if any do. Yet early uses of

nigger by slaves does show similar sentiments to that of the current use of *nigga*. Their English learning was not simply an act of obedience or assimilation, but one of defiance to the culture subordinating them. Africans, though seemingly ubiquitous in their adoption of *nigger*, did not appear to view themselves as solely subordinate and inferior. The abundance of slave revolts and personal narratives from slaves highlight the worth with which they viewed themselves. It highlights their desire and “will to survive” (qtd. in Rahman 146). Take this excerpt of a popular song slaves would sing to warn runaways of nearby patrollers.

As I was goin cross de field

A black snake bit me on my heel

Run nigger run, de Patrol catch you

Run nigger run, tis almos day (Rahman 146).

Though possibly appropriated mockingly by white slave masters (“12 Years a Slave”), the song (and the presence of *nigger*) does display the characteristics of a survivor, one that is deeply rooted in the narrative of being a slave. This new narrative was from an “antisociety” that was forming of its own volition apart from the decree of slavemasters. As Morgan writes, these “antisocieties typically emerge when those who dominate individuals require that the subjugated display an attitude that reaffirms the dominator/dominated relationship—in the presence of others—by verbal or physical confirmation (e.g. bowing heads . . .)” (qtd. in Rahman 146). The forced inferior identity was one that slaves seemed to reject openly, and the use of the *nigger* highlighted that.

A great benefit of this use of *nigger* is that it was inaccessible for slavemasters. It would not have been obvious to slavemasters that the word they used to demean was being reclaimed as

an act of insolence right before their eyes. It serves as a sort of code that seems to foreshadow the use of *nigga* in African American English today.

Nigger sees a clear euphemizing later during the Civil Rights era as well, becoming a term of endearment amongst Black Americans. We see early examples of its use in literature, used by Blacks to refer to other Blacks fondly (“nigger, n. and adj.” *OED*). It is during this time we begin to see an orthographic change from *nigger* to *nigga*, as the spelling of the reclaimed term changed to reflect its already present semantic distinction from the slur.

47. This is my main nigger, my number one nigger, and anybody who fucks wit him, it's just as well as if they'd came and fucked wit me (1965).

48. Obie, I *got* to be with you, you know that. You know you're my nigger, man (1960).

Reclamation of derogatory terms is not uncommon. In the last year, the term *Nasty Woman* underwent a similar change in meaning, albeit a much faster one. A term coined by Donald Trump during his final presidential debate with Hillary Clinton, *Nasty Woman* was initially met with outrage by much of the world until women began claiming it as a rallying cry for Hillary Clinton. The term that had once been disparaging was now endearing and an honor to have as a title.

Much of change in *nigga*'s use has been through its proliferation in Hip-Hop music and other pop culture. It takes on new meaning, including ‘brother’ or ‘friend’, which will be explained further. When used in these contexts, it is likely that the history of *nigger*'s offense will not be considered.

Contemporary import of *nigga*

The phonological differences between *nigga* and *nigger* are significant. As Rahman notes, “There are regional variations in general frequency of /r/ absence in AAE (138), but the r-less

form *nigga* seems constant across regions.” The origins are likely a result of free Black migration in the decades following the Civil War when r-lessness word finally was a feature of southern phonology, but when freed slaves migrated north en masse, the number of Southern Blacks in the north far outstripped that of northern born slaves of the north, thereby making r-lessness a Black feature (In Motion: The African American Migration Experience). Though r-lessness began to vary regionally, *nigga*’s constancy in pronunciation suggests a lexicalization of the term.

There is ongoing debate of the use of *nigga* in and out of Black communities. Many Blacks want to see the word banned and held to the same level of social taboo as nigger has been. They maintain that there is only a single contemporary use of the word *nigger*, and that the use of *nigga* in Black communities serves to oppress in the same way as the more commonly agreed racist *nigger* (Rahman 141). They claim that is a vestige of slave mentality they would rather abandon. Still, many African-Americans seem conscious of a distinction between the two uses. Comedian Eddie Griffin sees the difference as obvious, noting that the media has criticized Black Americans’ use of *nigga*, but he says “[they] git it mixed up. We don’t say ‘nig-ger.’ We say ‘*nigga*.’ That’s two different words” (qtd. in Rahman 138).

Comedian and political commentator Larry Wilmore agrees. He said the following at the 2016 White House Correspondents Dinner: “Yo Barry, you did it, my nigga” (Complex News). Though a homage well received by the President, the remark angered many notable reviews of the even. Piers Morgan pens Wilmore directly in a blog post days later:

*Larry, you’re not a “n***er” and nor is Barack Obama. You are two incredibly talented, hugely successful black men who have reached the absolute pinnacles of your respective fields. That is something to stand tall and proud about, not demean by using a word that*

reminds everyone of the most sickening insult ever spoken against blacks who were abused, beaten and killed by white slave owners.

Wilmore, clearly patronized by Morgan's commentary, responds by reaffirming the distinction between *nigga* and *nigger* (or *n****er* as Morgan prefers), telling Morgan he "did not properly conjugate [nigger]" (Complex News). The British journalist is blind to *nigger's* ability "to take back [] power" (Complex News).

Morgan is not alone in his rejection of *nigga*; The use of *nigga* is complicated more when considering intergenerational uses within groups of Blacks. Many of those in opposition to the word appear to be older adults, those for whom the word is a particularly sensitive reminder of when *nigger* was openly allowed as a word of degradation and offense. For them, it serves not just as a reminder of the slavery of their heritage, but the civil rights battles of their childhood and young adult lives. To kill the word is to move on towards liberation.

This is not clear to younger people who liberally employ the word. One of the interviewees in Rahman's study says this of the younger generation of blacks in the U.S.:

You see, the people who say they're offended are the older adults. Young kids don't understand what the big deal is about the word. They know it's about black people and slavery, but they're like 'that's over' (161).

Much of the comedy and music using *nigga* seems to be addressed to them as well. Having grown up in the era of reclamation of the word, they retain little of the oppressive context of their predecessors. Because of the efforts before them to rescue *nigger* from its derogatory usage, the word no longer has the sting it might have had 40 years ago. Gender theorist Judith Butler says "there is no purifying language of its traumatic residue and no way to work through trauma except through the arduous effort it takes to direct the course of its repetition" (qtd. in Rahman

160) Said differently, Rapper Ice Cube believes that “[t]he more you use a word, the more it takes the sting out of what the word really means to the rest of the world. It defuses it” (qtd. in Rahman 160). *Nigga* has lost its power for many Black American because of their giving it a new context, one that is empowering for them.

The word is not just incidental to African American Communities, it is essential. Other terms that refer to ethnic group identity lack the ability to convey the specific social meaning of *nigga*. *Nigga* shares its descriptive content with many other referents for Blacks. The illocution or metadata, as earlier defined, is where it differs. This use signifies a sense of empowerment which is a major distinction from the illocution of the word nigger, the offensive racist form (Rahman 153). It directly highlights the history of Blacks as slaves, like the racist iterations of the word, but it does so redemptively. It marks African Americans specifically as survivors, and even conquerors, of slavery. Furthermore, saying *nigga* does not just identify a referent, it also places the speaker in relationship to the referent. Since it is only used within groups as an identifier, it can serve the role of assuring solidarity. In that, it is empowering rather than disarming. It helps to promote a mutual feeling of empowerment and survival. Rahman notes specific uses of *nigga* in her study.

Pop Culture Data on *Nigga*

Rahman’s research looked at the use of *nigga* in contemporary contexts, namely using data from Black comedians. Comedy transcripts are a consistent and effective corpus source to utilize because comedians need to be an “authority that derives from cultural knowledge and verbal acuity” (149). After watching and transcribing eighth hours of comedy performances from nine Black American comedians, she highlighted terms that refer to ethnic identity and ranked their

frequency (Shown below). She noted 362 such instances and *nigga* was overwhelmingly the most frequent term used, generating 254 uses.

Table 1. Terms of Address and Reference That Convey Ethnic Meaning in Comedic Data

Term	Frequency
<i>Brother, sister</i>	17
<i>Black</i>	53
<i>Girl</i>	10
<i>Nigga</i>	254
<i>Other</i>	28

Nigga holds several functions, and seems to be a more useful referent than many of the others.

Through a few interviews as well, she compiled a list of meanings that *nigga* is uniquely able to express. One of these is solidarity; though already expressed as a term to unify those who are part of the African Diaspora and maintain solidarity there, it also represents solidarity with current injustices, like that of mass incarceration (152). Implicit in its use is also the sense of survival that all people can embody on virtue of being Black.

There do seem to be limitations on the use of *nigga*. It is more often used by men to address other men (Rahman 157). Alternatives like *brother* or *cat* are often used when there is a need for reverence for the addressed audience. These alternatives still hold Blacks as referents, but have different nuances to their meanings. One being an avoidance of the potential offense of *nigga* in this context. One interviewee discloses that “if you use the word inappropriately, [black people will] get mad at you. Just like when a white person uses it” (157). Here we see a commonality between *nigga* and *nigger*; They both elicit visceral emotional responses. Something in the metadata of *nigga* makes it tasteless at times. While it is not clear if the offense for the disrespectful use of *nigga* by Blacks is different from the use by whites in all contexts, it is apparent that the vulgar and offensive charge is difficult to remove completely.

For this reason, *nigga* has contemptuous potential when used by Blacks, though this is still distinct from the alternative *nigger* that is used as a racial slur. This use refers to a Black person who has fallen below some standard of behavior that other Blacks hold for him. This is dissimilar to the racist *nigger*. While *nigger* defames based on a lack of worth endemic to being Black, this use of *nigga* is like *asshole* or *bastard*, and comments on the observed behavior or character of the addressed Black person, though the racialized content is maintained.

Nigga also finds its use in Hip-Hop in the later part of the twentieth century. This use seems to be an assertion of agency or independence. It sets up Blacks “as subjects rather than objects” who hold control over their own lives apart from anyone else (Rahman 159). It says that Blacks can be resourceful, successful and socially aware. Comedian Freeze Love employs this use self-referentially, saying “When I say ‘*nigga*,’ I’m talkin’ about having game,” game being the ability to assert control and coolness, often in romantic settings (qtd. in Rahman 160).

As Rahman notes, “Members of the hip-hop generation share values that differ from those of their elders; rather than looking to traditional African American institutions such as family and church for direction, they often reject the establishment and these institutions, relying on themselves and their peers” (151). This is captured well in Rahman’s comedy study, and I mirrored her study using 10 popular rap songs from famous artists over the last 20 years, shown below:

Artist	Song	Year
Kanye West	Black Skinhead	2013
Jay-Z and Kanye West	Niggas in Paris	2011
Jay Z	Dirt off Your Shoulder	2003
Kanye West ft. Jamie Foxx	Gold Digger	2005

Nas	N.Y. State of Mind	1994
Common	I Used to Love H.E.R.	1994
The Notorious B.I.G.	Juicy	1994
2Pac	Hit 'Em Up	1996
J. Cole	No Role Modelz	2014
Kendrick Lamar	m.A.A.d city	2012

Total number of words in corpus of songs: 7284

Number of words used that are potential referents for Black men: 154

Number of times Nigga is used (with variation: niggaz, niggas, nigga, etc.): 94

The data shows that 61% of the referents in the songs is the word nigga. The next most common referent was motherfucker (21 occurrences) at 14%. The rest of the referents made up less than 10% each, showing the same thing that the comedy study did, nigga is a commonly used referent for Blacks. The uses vary; in “Hit ‘em up”, 2Pac, a West Coast rapper, asserts his fidelity to rappers of Death Row Records and subsequently disparages the East Coast Bad Boy Entertainment (Tupac Shakur). His uses of *nigga* are reflective of that. “Y’all niggas ain’t even on my level” is a prime example of his mocking use of *nigga*.

This varies greatly with Kanye West’s “Niggas in Paris.” With the only iteration of the title in the song, Kanye raps “Got my niggas in Paris and they goin’ gorillas” (Jay Z and Kanye West). He assumes a solidarity with his “niggas” in Paris; Kanye says himself that he is “where art meets commercial. The sweet spot between the hood and Hollywood” (XXL Magazine)

He also plays off the use of gorillas, as “monkey” and “ape” were often used to disparage African Americans based on physical distinctions (like the use of *nigger*). This reclamation shows a pride Kanye has in his Blackness despite his bourgeois environment. While 2Pac seeks to distance himself from a specific set of African Americans with his use of nigga, Kanye and

Jay Z employ it in their lyrics for the sake of solidarity. Still, both uses are licensed and palatable for the public, as the songs have spent time at the top of the Billboard Charts. Even in the disparaging use, we see again that it is distinct from the use of *nigger*.

Conclusion

Slurs contain their own meaningful content. Though inseparable from their neutral counterparts, they are their own class of words with semantic representation. This understanding of slurs helps us track their change in use over time, specifically in the change of *nigger*. *Nigger* and *nigga* are distinct lexical items with a singular neutral root. They are also both different from other racial referents for Black in that no other terms touch the genesis of African American identity; though there are other less axiologically charged alternatives, they cannot redeem the broken history of Blacks in America in the same way.

Hence, *nigga* is likely to continue its current use. Other terms are either licensed by society (and hence, give non-Blacks access to its use) or are too recent in their addition to the lexicon to be as functional as *nigga* in prompting the reminiscence of strength intrinsic to being survivors of the African Diaspora.

Nigga also represents a denunciation of the dominant authorities surrounding African Americans. The validity of their African-American-ness is not sanctioned by the government or institutions around them. Rather, they are self-actualized and can refer to themselves independent of powers around them. The use of *nigga* here elicits the remembrance of that attribute of African American Identity. Comedian Kat Williams advocates for this use of *nigga* in saying “[niggas] is an American success story... That’s why I keep sayin’ the word *nigga*. Cause I want him to remember what the fuck he came from” (qtd. in Rahman 151). The use of *nigga* is not

crass and abusive as is often purported. For many Black Americans, it is a remembrance of strength in adversity, and a claim to legitimacy and independence.

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