Slurs and stereotypes for Italian Americans:
A context-sensitive account of derogation and appropriation

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Abstract

Recent research on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs has offered insight into several important facts concerning their meaning and use. However, prior work has unfortunately been restricted primarily to considerations of slurs that typically target females, homosexuals, and African Americans. This is problematic because such a narrowly focused attention to slurs in prior work has left theorizing of how slurs generally function relatively uninformed by facts of actual language use. As a result, theoretical accounts of slurs that have so far been proposed have largely failed to accurately reflect actual usage, account for the empirical findings about slurs and general pejoratives from the social sciences, and offer any informative predictions to help guide future research. At this time more empirically oriented homework on the variety of ways that different slurs have been used in different cases would be helpful for theorists to consider so that they can proceed to develop more nuanced and empirically informed theories about slurs, their usage, and their effects. Accordingly, since no account of slurs for Italian Americans has so far been offered, this article provides a systematic and empirically informed analysis of slurs for Italian Americans that accounts for both their derogatory and appropriative use. Further, this article demonstrates that the family resemblance account of slurs maintained here has major advantages over previous accounts insofar as it is flexible yet robust enough to accommodate both the derogatory and appropriative use of slurs, can explain many of the psychological effects that slurs actually have on both their users and targets, and is more in accord with the real rather than ideal nature of our organic human psychology.

1. Introduction

Slurs such as *guido*, *gook*, *wop*, and *whore* are linguistic expressions that are primarily used and understood to derogate certain group members on the basis of their descriptive features (such as their race-based or sex-based description) and expressions of this kind have been considered by many to pack some of the nastiest punches natural language has to offer. In "Expressivism and the Offensiveness of Slurs," for example, Jeshion (2013b) asks, "What explains slurs' deep offensiveness, their capacity to derogate, to dehumanize?" (p. 308) and so prior work on slurs has unsurprisingly focused largely on the projection behavior of their derogatory force across various linguistic contexts, including those involving questions, negations, disjunctions, conditionals, modal operators, event quantifications,

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presuppositions, and indirect reports (Croom, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2014a; Hom, 2008, 2010, 2012; Potts et al., 2009; McCready, 2010; Hedger, 2013; Hom and May, 2013; Whiting, 2013; Cepollaro, 2015). Yet the potential offensiveness of slurs is not only evidenced from considerations of their projection behavior across various linguistic contexts, but is further demonstrated by the fact that their use has often been implicated in derogatory acts, verbal threats, physical violence, and hate-motivated homicide (Fitten, 1993; Hoover, 2007; Shattuck, 2009; Nappi, 2010; Guerriero, 2013; Beswick, 2014; Jackson, 2014). So one basic fact about slurs is that they are among the most potentially offensive linguistic expressions afforded by natural language.[1]

Even if all slurs may be offensive due to their being commonly used and understood as slurs, it is nonetheless clear that not all slurs felicitously apply to all targets indiscriminately. Instead, as Croom (2014a) points out, the "application of a particular slur in context does not occur at random, but instead based on considerations of their systematic differential application-conditions, which concern descriptive features of targets such as their racial or sexual identity" (p. 228; see also Croom, 2015b,c). Evidently then, it is because slurs are commonly used and understood to felicitously apply toward some targets yet not others that language users are able to systematically distinguish between relatively *broader* categories of slurs (such as the racial slur *guido* from the sexual slur *whore*) and how speakers are able to systematically distinguish between relatively *narrower* categories of slurs (such as the racial slur *guido* from the racial slur *gook*) within those broader categories (p. 228). In fact, Anderson and Lepore (2013a) have pointed out that there are actually a wide variety of slurs in natural language "that target groups on the basis of race ('nigger'), nationality ('kraut'), religion ('kike'), gender ('bitch'), sexual orientation ('fag'), immigrant status ('wetback') and sundry other demographics" (p. 25). So another basic fact about slurs is that they are commonly used and understood to felicitously apply toward some targets yet not others.

Although some writers such as Arthur Piccolo have expressed the view that "the very term Guido is so offensive that it ought never to be uttered, much less studied and discussed, by an Italian American, not even a scholar trained to analyze social facts" (quoted in Viscusi, 2010; see also Hedger, 2013, p. 229),[2] other first-person reports from in-group speakers, along with recent empirical studies from the social sciences, have now demonstrated 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, or to diminish the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried (Hom, 2008; Richard, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Croom, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014a; Bianchi, 2014). For instance, Bianchi (2014) writes in "Slurs and Appropriation" 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" (p. 37). Johnson (2009) also explains in "Educators Find that Teens Use Ethnic Slurs Affectionately," that many teens and entertainers, among others, "are doing what linguists call "melioration" – reclaiming a word meant to sting by removing its barb." As Conley (2010) further points out in *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult*, "most of these [slur] terms can be used ironically or even as terms not of abuse but of endearment – depending, of course, on the situation or scenario" (p. 21). So another basic fact about slurs is that they are often flexibly employed and of potential use, not only derogatorily to convey offense toward out-group members, but also non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members, or to diminish the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried.

Although recent work on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs has offered insight into several important facts concerning their meaning and use – including that slurs are commonly used and understood to felicitously apply toward some targets yet not others, that slurs are among the most potentially offensive linguistic expressions afforded by natural language, and that slurs are often flexibly employed and of potential use, not only derogatorily to convey offense toward out-group members, but also non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members, or to diminish the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried – previous research has unfortunately been restricted primarily to considerations of slurs that typically target females, homosexuals, and African Americans. One reason why this is problematic is because such a narrowly focused attention to slurs in prior research has left prior theorizing of how they *generally* function relatively uninformed by facts of actual language use. Consequently, theoretical accounts of slurs that have so far been proposed have largely failed to accurately reflect actual usage, account for the empirical findings about slurs and general pejoratives from the social sciences, and offer any informative predictions to help guide future research. At this time more empirically oriented homework on the variety of ways that different slurs have been used in different cases would be helpful for theorists so that they can proceed to develop more nuanced and empirically informed theories about slurs, their usage, and their effects. Accordingly, since no account of slurs for Italian Americans has so far been offered, the purpose of this article is therefore to provide a systematic and empirically informed analysis of slurs for Italian Americans that accounts for both their derogatory and appropriative use.

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[1] For other recent empirical work exploring the offensiveness of slurs and general pejoratives see also Jay and Jay (2015), O'Dea et al. (2014), and Saucier et al. (2014).

[2] Hedger (2013) has for instance argued that "Slurs express contempt regardless of the attitude or particular use of the speaker" (p. 229).

But before we carefully consider face threatening acts and the paradigmatic derogatory use of slurs in Section 3, stereotypes and stereotypical features 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 common slurs for Italian Americans.

2. Italian slurs

Although no general account of slurs for Italian Americans has so far been proposed, there are in fact a wide variety of such slurs that would be useful for us to consider. For example, common slurs that have been used to target Italian Americans include (a) *dago*,[3] (b) *eyetie*,[4] (c) *greaser* or *greaseball*,[4] (d) *guido*,[5] (e) *guinea*, *ginnie*, or *ghinney*,[6] (f) *hunkie* or *hunky*,[7] and (g) *wop* or *whap*.[8] Concerning the slur *guinea* in particular, John Marino from the National Italian American Foundation claimed that it is ''a pejorative term, which reinforces a negative image and harmful stereotype of an entire ethnic group,'' Rosanna Imbriano from the Center for Italian and Italian American Culture claimed that it ''portrays Italians in a negative light,'' and Lewis (2011) from the Department of History at Stanford University claimed that it is ''the most vile racial slur that can be used against an Italian-American'' (McKay, 2011). The perceived offensiveness of the slur *guinea* is demonstrated, for instance, by the fact that Italian Americans have campaigned to have it removed from place-names in New York since as late as the 1960s (Roediger, 2005, p. 40) and the fact that Alfred Catalanotto, an Italian American owner of the Central Market Grill and the Central Market Chill in New York City, was targeted with the slur ''guinea bastard'' and further discriminated against by being unfairly denied a renewal lease for his restaurants by MTA executive Nancy Marshall (Cohen, 2009).

Another popular slur for Italian Americans is *guido*, which de Stefano (2008) has characterized as ''a pejorative slang term for a young, lower class or working class, Italian-American,'' with Conley (2010) further explaining that ''the primary intent behind use of such terms is to belittle'' some (Italian American) group member and maintain the presumed ''superiority of the one using them to the one against whom they are used, who are implicitly identified as belonging to an inferior class of beings'' (p. 21). Arthur Piccolo has even suggested that ''the very term Guido is so offensive that it ought never to be uttered, much less studied and discussed, by an Italian American, not even a scholar trained to analyze social facts'' (quoted in Viscusi, 2010). The expression *greaser* is another popular slur that CUNY professor of sociology Tricarico (2010) described as applying to ''Italian Americans with stereotypically dark and ''oily'' complexions,'' and which Roediger (2005) has colorfully identified as a ''bar-room brawl word'' or a ''racialized ''fighting word'''' (p. 42). Concerning the slur *dago*, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2000) explains that it is commonly understood and ''used as a disparaging term for an Italian, Spaniard, or Portuguese'' person, and the *Random House Dictionary* (2010) further notes that ''This term is a slur and should be avoided. It is used with disparaging intent and is perceived as highly insulting.'' Dinnerstein and Reimers (2013) for example have explained in *Ethnic Americans* how Italian Americans targeted with the slur *dago* by ''old-stock Americans'' were often considered ''the Chinese of Europe'' who are ''just as bad as the Negroes'' (p. 62; see also Barone, 2001, p. 143). Seiler (2014) also proposed that the slur *dago* is ''an irredeemable ethnic slur on Italian-Americans,'' Shattuck (2009) proposed that the slur *dago* ''can be hurtful regardless of the context,'' and Jones (2013) further proposed that language users should remove the slur *dago* from their vocabularies, effectively ''toss[ing] it in the trash heap along with other now offensive – but once widely used – monikers'' (Shattuck, 2009).[9]

The perceived offensiveness of slurs for Italian Americans is demonstrated, for instance, by the fact that the New York Racing Association forced the *Wandering Dago* food truck to remove itself from the grounds of the Saratoga Race Course because of its potentially offensive name (Seiler, 2014) as well as the fact that the state Office of General Services rejected an application from the *Wandering Dago* food truck to sell barbecue supplies on the Empire State Plaza because of its potentially offensive name (Seiler, 2014). The Office of General Services argued that allowing the *Wandering Dago* to set up shop on the plaza could place the state at risk of suits alleging that it allows a hostile workplace environment due to the appearance of the slur *dago* (Seiler, 2014). Indeed, uses of slurs have often been implicated in verbal threats,

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[3] See also p. 40 in Roediger (2005), p. 19 in Conley (2010), Monteiro (2014), and Seiler (2014).
[4] See also p. 20 in Conley (2010).
[5] See also de Stefano (2008) and Monteiro (2014).
[6] See also p. 29 in Alba (2009), p. 39 in Roediger (2005), p. 121 in Adler (2008), p. 19 in Conley (2010), and Monteiro (2014).
[7] See also p. 29 in Alba (2009), p. 39 and 43 in Roediger (2005).
[8] See also p. 42 in Roediger (2005), p. 121 in Adler (2008), p. 19 in Conley (2010), and Monteiro (2014).
[9] Shattuck (2009) claims that ''There are, however, certain words which can be hurtful regardless of the context. These are words which many of us say on a regular basis. To paraphrase Jeff Foxworthy, if you've ever said any of the following words [. . .] beaner, brownie, chinaman, cheese-eating surrender monkey, chink, cholo, coon, cracker, cripple, cunt-eyed, dago, darkie, dyke, faggot, fairy, flip, frenchie, ginger, gin jockey, gook, greaser, homo, honky, hymie, injun, jap, jewish american princess, jungle bunny, jigaboo, kike, mammy, nigger, oreo, pancake face, pikey, polack, porch monkey, queer, raghead, redneck, redskin, retard, ruskie, sasquatch, slanteyed, sodomite, spearchucker, spic, tar baby, towel head, tranny, wetback, whitey, or white trash [. . .] then you might be offending someone'' (see also Croom, 2008, pp. 44–45).

physical violence, and hate-motivated homicide (Fitten, 1993; Hoover, 2007; Shattuck, 2009; Nappi, 2010; Guerriero, 2013; Beswick, 2014). For instance, Sheldon Canova, an Italian miner from Dominion Coal Company, reports that fights were often initiated at work through the use of slurs, mentioning one example where he fought someone for calling him a ''chicken-head eatin' dago'' (Beswick, 2014). Henry Garofano, a member of the national Order Sons of Italy in America, also reported that ''From 15 years of age, I was in fights, because of the discrimination and being called wops'' (Nappi, 2010). In describing his boxing experiences at Gramercy Gym in Manhattan in the 1950s, Louis LaMorte likewise reports that ''I also had Italian American boxing friends who did get into fistfights if someone they did not know real well, called them *wop*, *dago* or *guinea* – it all depended on the relationship and how it was being used'' (Guerriero, 2013). Consequently, Ronald Fitten (1993) has argued that slurs like *guido* and *wop* should be considered ''fighting words'' since they have often been used to initiate violence and carry out hate crimes, and Jeshion (2013b) 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; see also Hall, 2006, p. 136; Davis, 2001; Enger, 2014; Gratereaux, 2012; LaGumina, 1973; Luconi, 2001).

After considering in this section the various ways that the use of slurs has often been implicated in verbal threats, physical violence, and hate-motivated homicide, it should be clearer now why slurs more generally, as well as for Italian Americans more particularly, have been considered by many to pack some of the nastiest punches natural language has to offer. 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.

3. Face threatening acts and the paradigmatic derogatory use of slurs

One's knowledge of the application-conditions for the expressions common among their fellow language users is of paramount importance for their successful communication and interaction with others, and speakers typically learn the norms governing the differential use of various expressions during their socialization into a linguistic community (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984; Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez, 2002). Prior work in the linguistics literature has suggested, for instance, that paradigmatic descriptive expressions such as *male* and *Italian American* are primarily used and understood to be most apt for neutrally picking out public items of the shared (inter-subjective or objective) world, that paradigmatic expressive expressions such as *fuck* and *ouch* are primarily used and understood to be most apt for expressing one's own heightened emotional state, and that paradigmatic slur expressions such as *guido* and *wop* are primarily used and understood to be most apt for targeting certain members on the basis of descriptive features (such as their race or sex) in order to deprecate or disassociate (or in cases of appropriation, affiliate) with them on this basis (Croom 2011, pp. 345–349; 2013, p. 183).[10] Concerning the application-conditions of slurs more specifically, Croom (2013) proposed in ''How to Do Things with Slurs'' that:

> As speakers we have strong expectations that uses of slurring terms such as *nigger* will correlate with the speaker's being in a heightened derogatory state with respect to some features of their target (or wishing to create that impression). In turn, we use it only when we are in such a state (or wish to create that impression). The total effect of these assumptions is that a slurring term such as *nigger* is a *prima facie reliable* signal of derogation on the basis of target features. Knowing its use conditions largely involves being attuned to this information. (p. 183)

So in referring to a person with an expression like *guido*, and thereby ascribing the category *G* 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 *G* (Samra-Fredericks, 2010; Croom, 2011). Importantly, Brown and Levinson (1978) proposed that a speaker *S* that conveys through their use of language that they are of higher social status or more powerful than their hearer *H* is thereby engaging in talk that ''is risky, but 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*]'' (p. 228; see also Croom, 2001, 2013, 2014c, fn. 18).[11] In accord with this proposal, Anderson (1999) has suggested that shows of deference from others can make one feel more self-confident and secure (p. 75) so this might serve as one reason for why a speaker *S* might choose to strategically indicate through their use of derogatory language more generally, and slurs such as *guido* or *wop* more specifically, that they are more powerful or of a higher social status than their target *H*. Further substantiating this point, Croom (2014c) conducted a critical review of recent empirical evidence from linguistics, sociology, and psychology on racial slurs and stereotypes, arguing from these findings that:

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[10] Jay (2009) has further pointed out that prohibitions on taboo words are often reinforced during child-rearing practices.

[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'' (p. 79; Sifianou, 2012, p. 1557).

insofar as through the application of a slur towards a target an associated negative stereotype can threaten that target by (a) increasing how much 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 affect ones life chances, then it follows that the application of a slur towards a target can resultantly affect their life chances. (Section 3 in Croom, 2014c)

There is therefore good reason to believe that since our social identities are in part determined by the way members of society perceive us and consequently interact with us (Goffman, 1967; Brown and Levinson, 1978) the derogatory use of slurs like *guido* or *wop* can *actually* harm the individuals that they attack and constrain the range of action-possibilities that they can exercise in society. So a speaker *S* that derogates an Italian American target *H* on the basis of their presumed possession of negative features stereotypically attributed to Italian Americans through *S*'s ascription of the slur *guido* toward *H*, might thereby effectively work to support and contribute to a history of derogatory acts that actually harm the social identity of Italian Americans, increase the difference in asymmetrical power relations among *S* and *H* more specifically, and even increase the difference in asymmetrical power relations among their respective groups more generally (Croom, 2011).

Now that we have considered how the derogatory use of slurs like *guido* and *wop* 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 features contribute to *S*'s predication of certain content in the application of a slur toward a target *H* in context.

4. Slurs, typical targets, and stereotypical features

Traditionally, semantics concerns the meaning of linguistic expressions ("lexical or sentence meaning") whereas pragmatics concerns what speakers mean in using those expressions ("speaker's meaning") (Camp, 2012, 2013; Hedger, 2013). So in discussing the semantics of slurs I am discussing the conventional meaning-potential of these linguistic expressions without the further specification of contextual details whereas when I am discussing the pragmatics of slurs I am discussing what different speakers mean in using those expressions in various contexts (for further discussion of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics, and how these influence each other, see Croom, 2015a). In previous empirical as well as theoretical work, several scholars have appealed to stereotypes and stereotypical features to explain facts pertaining to the meaning and use of slurs (Embrick and Henricks, 2013, 2015; Jeshion, 2013a). For example, Jeshion (2013a) has explored at least four reasons for why stereotypes are important to consider for understanding the semantics and pragmatics of slurs (p. 314). First, occasions of slur-use toward those that they target often and almost effortlessly bring to mind stereotypes of the target qua their membership in the relevant group. Second, occasions of slur-use toward those that they target are often extraordinarily harmful to their self-conception and sense of self-worth in ways that pertain to them qua their group membership, and one could plausibly explain this by appealing to stereotypes of the target qua their membership in the relevant group. Third, slur expressions are more strongly offensive than other more 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 generally pejorative expressions do not, the class of slur expressions are usually capable of offending targets on a much more specific or personal level than other more generally pejorative expressions (Croom, 2014a, p. 235).[12] And fourth, slur expressions are more strongly prohibited than other more 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 generally pejorative expressions (on the basis of the third point just considered), it might accordingly seem reasonable to impose relatively stronger prohibitions on slur expressions than other more generally pejorative expressions (Anderson and Lepore, 2013a,b; for further discussion of the distinction between slurs and other more generally pejorative expressions see also Blakemore, 2014; Croom, 2014a).[13] Consequently, it has 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 (Croom, 2011, 2014b; Miscevic, 2011; Cupkovic, 2014).

Concerning stereotypes applied to Italian Americans more specifically, Serafini (2010) reports that they have been popularly portrayed on television as being "amusing, entertaining, fun to be with, unique and very charismatic," "resourceful," "dramatic," and that their music and fashion "culture [. . .] is popular everywhere." In "Guidos on MTV," Tricarico (2010) also discusses how *guidos* have been popularly stereotyped on television and mentions the following as

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[12] For further discussion of the target aptness and lexical aptness of slurs see also p. 235 in Croom (2014a).
[13] For further discussion of slurs and prohibition see also Anderson and Lepore (2013a,b).

common: (*i*) that they are "upstart Italian Americans" that "struggle for recognition and respect" with a "collective ethnic memory of poverty, stunted formal education, dirty labor and worse," (*ii*) that they come from the "working-class, where beauty is all on the surface," (*iii*) that they exude a "tough-guy sex appeal" or "Stylized masculinity" with their characteristic "slicked-backed hair and sleeveless undershirts and themes like masculine aggression," (*iv*) that they are immersed in "The intense sensuality of club culture" and sensitive to "fashion trends like sculpted eyebrows and even dancing," often being associated with "fist-pumping and house music," (*v*) that they are "cool and preserve [a] privileged insider status as in Hip Hop" due to "a style that has street culture roots – the element of urban authenticity that sells Black youth culture in the suburbs," (*vi*) that their social lives usually consist in coping with their "traditional family morality in awkward juxtaposition to the hook-up culture," (*vii*) that they are often involved in "brawling and licentious sex," "conspicuous vulgar consumption," and "moral and criminal deviance," and (*viii*) that a *guidette* is often stereotyped as the "club hottie," or "loud and proud Italian" embodying "youth, beauty, and flash" (Tricarico, 2010).[14]

Certainly some of the most popular stereotypes of *guidos* currently come from the characters of *Jersey Shore*, who have been collectively described by Serafini (2010) as "a bunch of tattooed, chain-smoking, unsophisticated Italian-Americans with heavy hold necklaces visible from their open shirts." In *Guido: An Italian-American Youth Style*, Viscusi (2010) further characterizes the main figures from *Jersey Shore* in the following way: *JWoww* is a "23-year-old club promoter whose 21st birthday present to herself was a breast augmentation, whose effects she dresses to emphasize" – *Mike* "*The Situation*" *Sorrentino* is a muscular "assistant manager of a fitness center in Staten Island" that also "works in a t-shirt shop where he sells thongs that bear, across the crotch, the legend "I Love the Situation,"" – *Pauly D* is a club DJ that "owns a tanning bed" and "spends 25 minutes a day applying gel to his hair to produce an effect that girls will want to touch," – *Snooki* is a "21-year-old from Marlboro, New York, [that] has her own tanning bed" and "Wears her hair in a pouf reminiscent of the hairdresser styles of the late fifties and early sixties" (quoted in Viscusi, 2010).[15] Troyani (2013) similarly studied the characters of *Jersey Shore* and reports on how the characters themselves understood their social identities as *guidos* and *guidettes*: *Mike* "*The Situation*" *Sorrentino* maintains that a *guido* is "a good-looking, smooth, well-dressed Italian," – *Pauly D* maintains that a *guido* is "a lifestyle" that revolves primarily around "family, friends, tanning, [and] gel," – *Ronnie Ortiz-Magro* maintains that a *guido* is "a guy that always looks prettier than his girlfriend," – *Sammi* "*Sweetheart*" *Giancola* maintains that a *guidette* is "somebody who knows how to club it up, takes really good care of themselves, has pretty hair, cakes on makeup, tan skin, wears the hottest heels – pretty much, they know how to own it and rock it" (Troyani, 2013, p. 3; Jersey, 2009).

In considering the racial slur *nigger* as an example in his 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*) toward the *descriptive properties* possessed by the target of their utterance" and that "the properties that the speaker endorses the expression of a negative attitude toward are properties that have been associated with members of a particular racial group" (p. 353; see also Croom, 2011, p. 195). Similarly then for slurs that target Italian Americans, a speaker *S*'s choice to use the slur *guido* toward their target *H* instead of the neutrally descriptive term *Italian American* can be understood as *S* expressing their prima facie endorsement of a (primarily but not necessarily negative) attitude toward the descriptive properties or attributes that have typically become associated with Italian Americans and that are now being ascribed to their target *H*.

Now that we have considered the role that stereotypes and stereotypical features contribute to *S*'s predication of certain content in the application of a slur toward a target *H* in context, the next section will show how empirical findings concerning slurs and stereotypes for Italian Americans can be integrated with a family-resemblance conception of category membership to account for basic facts concerning the derogatory use of slurs for Italian Americans.

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

A distinction is commonly drawn in the literature on concepts or categories between classical accounts and family resemblance accounts (Rosch and Mervis, 1975). Classical accounts maintain that "categories are *defined* by *formal rules* and allow us to make inferences *within idealized* law governed systems" (Pinker and Prince, 1996, p. 332, my emphasis) and membership in a category is determined by the possession of some common, essential, and criterial attribute. However, a significant problem for maintaining a classical account for all categories is that scholars have been unable to articulate necessary and sufficient conditions for most that are actually found from natural language (Fodor et al., 1980; Pinker and

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[14] As Bozzone (2004) explains in *Embodying the Italian-American*, "the definition of a filmic Guido is as follows: he is a pre-marriage male; he is from a blue collar socio-economic family, or a gangster family; he is vain and often very good looking; he is street smart; his dress is meticulously coordinated; he is over-sexualized – both in his objectified beauty and predatory aggression; he is Catholic; he is urban; and, of course, he is Italian-American [...] The result is a stereotypic portrayal that is at times negative and at other times beautifully romanticized" (p. 25).

[15] Snooki once appeared on the *Wendy Williams Show* and mentioned that "'guidos' and 'guidettes' are good-looking people that, you know, like to make a scene and be center of attention and just take care of themselves" (quoted in Viscusi, 2010).

Prince, 1996; Rosch and Mervis, 1975). It is further clear from the extant literature on expressive expressions that this point applies *a fortiori* to slurs (see for instance Potts et al., 2009; Weissbrod, 2014).

In 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 and Mervis, 1975, p. 575; Wittgenstein, 1953). In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (1953) wrote that a ''family resemblance'' relationship was one in which there was ''a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail'' (§66) and Wennerberg (1967) further argued in ''The Concept of Family Resemblance in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy'' that ''Wittgenstein introduced this concept [of family resemblance] in order to attack the traditional doctrine that all the entities which fall under a given term must have some set of properties or features in common, the presence of which makes it correct to subsume an entity under this term'' (p. 107). In accord with these insights, Pinker and Prince (1996) have usefully distinguished family resemblance from classical categories by pointing out several salient ways in which they differ. First, 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, 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. Third, 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. Fourth, family resemblance categories differ from classical categories in that the former have graded degrees of category membership whereas the latter do not. Importantly, the family resemblance account avoids a major problem with 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'' (p. 353) and Rosch and Mervis (1975) additionally 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 and Mervis, 1975, p. 602, my emphasis; see also Rosch et al., 1976). A major advantage to adopting a family resemblance account then is that it offers an account of concepts that is actually in accord with the *real* rather than *ideal* nature of human psychology.

According to the family resemblance account, what makes *x* a member of the category GAMES is not some essentially criterial attribute that each and every *x* must have in order to be categorized as a *game* (Wittgenstein, 1953, §66). For a paradigmatic or prototypical game may typically or for the most part involve *competition* and *multiple players*, but could still be felicitously and informatively categorized as *a game* even if it did not involve competition or multiple players, provided that the category GAMES is that which is still most apt among other options (for example, PANDAS, TIMBRE, and so on) available to that speaker for their cognitive or communicative purpose. Croom (2011) accordingly proposed in ''Slurs'' that the slur expression *nigger* (identified as **N** below) could be usefully understood as a *family resemblance* (*rather than classical*) *category* consisting in a structured constellation or network of *stereotypical attributes* (identified as a_1-a_{10} below) such as the following:

N   (*Nigger*)
a_1 *x is African American.*[16]
a_2 *x is prone to laziness.*[17]
a_3 *x is subservient.*[16]
a_4 *x is commonly the recipient of poor treatment.*[16]
a_5 *x is athletic or musical.*[18]
a_6 *x is sexually liberal or licentious.*[17]
a_7 *x is simple-minded.*[17]
a_8 *x is emotionally shallow.*[17]
a_9 *x is a survivor, tough, or prone to violence.*[19]
a_{10} *x is loud or excessively noisy.*[20]

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[16] See also p. 41 from Fredrickson (1971) and p. 12 from Asim (2007).
[17] See also p. 27 from Asim (2007).
[18] See also p. 128 from Alim et al. (2010).
[19] See also p. 50 from Anderson (1999) and Rahman (2012).
[20] See also p. 50 from Anderson (1999).

It is important to point out here that attributes a_1–a_{10} should *not* be understood as *fixed* in a precise rank-order, such as the one offered as an example above, or that *all* of a_1–a_{10} are *always* involved in a *context-independent* manner. Indeed, that suggestion falls more in line with the classical account to concepts and contrary to the very family resemblance account I maintain here. Further, a growing body of recent empirical work on human memory, family resemblance concepts, and sensorimotor cognition has increasingly supported a family resemblance over classical account of natural language concepts (Barsalou, 1999, 2008, 2009; Barsalou et al., 2003, 2007; Borghi, 2004; Borghi and Riggio, 2009; Borghi et al., 2013; Dove, 2010, 2014). The account maintained here then is that attributes a_1–a_{10} 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. It is also important to note that in practice more attributes (for example, a_1–a_{15}) or less attributes (for example, a_1–a_2, or even a_1 alone) could be involved in a given communicative context. The reason that I offer a list of 10 attributes in the examples here is to be as optimally informative (for listing a_1 alone would fall short of this) yet economical (for listing a_1–a_{20} would go beyond this) as possible in the present discussion.

My account maintains that a_1 (*African American*) would be ranked relatively higher than a_6 (*sexually liberal or licentious*) and accordingly a_1 would be considered a more salient indicator than a_6 that the *x* it is being ascribed to is a member of **N** (*nigger*). Note also that although speakers may typically ascribe the slur expression *nigger* to targets attributed the highest-ranking (a_1) as well as the greatest quantity (a_1–a_{10}) 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 (a_1) or even the most (a_1–a_{10}) attributes in **N** insofar as that is the most relevant and apt lexical option for their communicative purpose. Importantly, however, in order for the choice to refer to *x* as a *nigger* to be considered a linguistically apt one for that speaker, it must be assumed (at least for the purpose of that particular communicative context) that *x* possesses a practically sufficient set of attributes such that **N** is the most apt or serviceable category for the speaker to subsume *x* for their particular communicative purpose. 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 a_1-a_{10} from **N**, that speaker may choose to use **N** in communication as that which most efficiently and economically predicates the intended attributes of *x* and most forcefully expresses a negative attitude toward *x*, at least to the extent that **N** is better for this than other categories that are within that language-user's lexical inventory.

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**, the alternative account of slurs outlined here maintains that, e. g., although different individuals that are referred to by the slur expression *nigger* are very likely to share different subsets of attributes (for example, a_1–a_{10}) with other individuals also referred to by this slur (due to common knowledge of how this expression is typically used) it need not necessarily be the case (for the sake of the felicitous application of that slur) that each and every slurred *x* must share some criterial or essential attribute with every other slurred *x* (for further discussion of interesting cases see also Sweetland, 2002, p. 514; Croom, 2011, p. 356; 2015a). Rather, what is of importance on my account is that the use of a slur by a speaker may be considered an apt enough or optimally relevant lexical option – one that is better than others – for their purposes in a particular communicative context.[21]

My account of slurs is a general one so that it not only applies to targets that are typically African-American but also applies equally well to slurs of other kinds that typically target others, including Italian-Americans. One of the virtues of the present account of slurs is that it is consistent with recent research on popular stereotypes for Italian Americans provided by Troyani (2013) as well as her rejection of "essentialist assumptions of Guido culture," or more specifically, "the idea that an essential Italian-American culture exists prior to its representation" (pp. 2–5). As Troyani (2013) has suggested, "Guidos and Guidettes are *not necessarily* Italian American," but instead many "seemingly Italian-American Guido and Guidette characteristics and behaviors" "may also be *achieved rather than inherited* by Italian Americans" (p. 4, my emphasis).[22] So here my suggestion is that the slur expression *guido* (identified as **G** below) can be understood as a family resemblance (rather than classical) category that consists in a structured network of stereotypical attributes (identified as a_n below) such as the following:

G　(*Guido*)
a_1　*x is Italian American.*[23]
a_2　*x is poor or uneducated.*[24]

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[21] For further discussion of relevance in communication and cognition see also Wilson and Sperber (2004) and Sperber and Wilson (1986).
[22] Troyani (2013) argued, for instance, that "a circumstantialist approach [to studying slurs and stereotypes] is necessary to illustrate ways in which the program debunks essentialist assumptions of Guido culture" (p. 2) and that "the putting on of Italian-American identities on Jersey Shore subverts the idea that an essential Italian-American culture exists prior to its representation" (p. 5).
[23] See also Bozzone (2004), Brooks (2009), Gardaphe (2010a,b), Serafini (2010), Tamburri (2010), Tricarico (2010), and Troyani (2013).
[24] See also Bozzone (2004), Brooks (2009), De Seno (2010), and Tricarico (2010).

a_3 *x is a foreigner that may not have the proper legal paperwork required.*[25]
a_4 *x is commonly the recipient of poor treatment.*[26]
a_5 *x is fashionable, sexually suave, promiscuous, or into club culture.*[27]
a_6 *x is masculine, resourceful, aggressive,or authentic.*[28]
a_7 *x is loud or out of control.*[29]
a_8 *x is manipulative or involved in illegal activities.*[30]
a_9 *x is from a big or traditional family.*[31]
a_{10} *x is a manual laborer that typically works on automobiles or other machinery.*[32]

Notice that another advantage of my methodology here is that rather than simply speculating *a priori* about possible attributes of *G*s, the attributes a_1–a_{10} that I have included above are derived from the common stereotypes of Italian Americans that were reviewed in section 4 of this article (Bozzone, 2004; Brooks, 2009; Jersey, 2009; Shattuck, 2009; De Seno, 2010; Gardaphe, 2010a,b; Johnson, 2010; Montalto and Montalto, 2010; Nappi, 2010; Serafini, 2010; Tamburri, 2010; Tricarico, 2010; Viscusi, 2010; Curti, 2013; Guerriero, 2013; Troyani, 2013; Beswick, 2014). The attributes a_1–a_{10} are not all necessary and their rank-order is not fixed on my account, but is instead based on the relative degree in which their possession by an individual *x* is taken as a salient indicator of category membership, with the relative rankings of these being re-adjustable or renegotiated in accord with relevant changes in context. For example a_1 would be ranked relatively higher than a_6 and accordingly a_1 would be considered a more salient indicator than a_6 that the individual it is being ascribed to is a member of the category **G**. Note also that although speakers may typically ascribe the slur expression *guido* to targets possessing the highest-ranking attribute (a_1) as well as the most attributes (a_1–a_{10}) in **G**, speakers may still informatively or effectively ascribe that slur to someone that fails to possess the highest-ranking attribute (a_1) or even the most attributes (a_1–a_{10}) in **G** given the appropriate context and communicative purpose (Croom, 2011, p. 356; 2013, pp. 196–199). However, it is important to note that insofar as the choice to refer to a target individual *as a guido* is to be considered an *apt* one for that speaker, it must be assumed (at least for the purpose of that particular communicative context) that the target individual possesses a *practically sufficient* set of attributes from a_1–a_{10} such that **G** is the most *appropriate* or *serviceable* category under which to subsume that target for their particular communicative purpose. If, for instance, a speaker intends to communicate that some target that they dislike and consider inferior possesses some subset of the attributes a_1–a_{10} from **G**, then that speaker may chose to use **G** as the category that most efficiently and economically predicates the intended attributes of their target and most forcefully expresses a negative attitude toward them, at least to the extent that **G** 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 Italian Americans can be integrated with a family-resemblance conception of category membership to account for basic facts concerning the derogatory use of slurs for Italian 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 Italian slurs

Although it is important to acknowledge the popular view expressed by authors such as Arthur Piccolo that "the very term Guido is so offensive that it ought never to be uttered, much less studied and discussed, by an Italian American, not even a scholar trained to analyze social facts" (quoted in Viscusi, 2010) it is also important to acknowledge the less popular view expressed by other first-person reports from in-group speakers, along with recent empirical studies from the social sciences, that have now demonstrated that slurs are often flexibly employed such that they may also (at least in some restricted contexts) be used non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members, or to weaken the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried (Hom, 2008; Croom, 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2015a; Bianchi, 2014;

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[25] See also Brooks (2009) and Tricarico (2010).
[26] See also Brooks (2009), Shattuck (2009), Nappi (2010), Tricarico (2010), Guerriero (2013), and Beswick (2014).
[27] See also Bozzone (2004), Brooks (2009), Serafini (2010), and Tricarico (2010).
[28] See also Bozzone (2004), Johnson (2010), Montalto and Montalto (2010) and Tricarico (2010).
[29] See also Bozzone (2004), De Seno (2010) and Tricarico (2010).
[30] See also Bozzone (2004), De Seno (2010), Tricarico (2010), and Curti (2013).
[31] See also Bozzone (2004), Tricarico (2010), Viscusi (2010), and Troyani (2013).
[32] See also Bozzone (2004) and Tricarico (2010).

Beaton and Washington, 2014).[33] ''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,'' Thompson (2013) explains, and ''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.'' As a matter of fact, Teetor (2013) further reports that, not only has the slur *guido* been appropriated by Italian Americans for non-derogatory purposes, but that in addition to this, the slur *chink* has been appropriated by Chinese Americans, the slur *heeb* has been appropriated by Jewish Americans, the slur *mick* has been appropriated by Irish Americans, the slur *nigger* has been appropriated by African Americans, the slur *paki* has been appropriated by Pakistani Americans, the slur *redneck* has been appropriated by political conservatives and rural Southerners, the slur *white trash* has been appropriated by lower-class Caucasians, the slur *mutt* has been appropriated by people of mixed race, the slur *dyke* has been appropriated by female homosexuals, and the slur *faggot* has been appropriated by male homosexuals.

This reclaimed or *appropriated* ''Use of derogatory words by the defamed group is not unusual,'' Aldridge (2001) explains in ''Slurs Often Adopted by Those They Insult,'' and although ''Racial slurs such as ''spic,'' ''dago'' and ''mick'' still are considered offensive by many people of Hispanic, Italian and Irish descent [. . .] the words also are acceptable slang to many *within* those ethnic groups'' (my emphasis; see also Croom, 2011, 2013, 2014a). Troyani (2013) for one has pointed out that ''While the term ''Guido'' has long been considered an ethnic slur against urban working-class Italian Americans in the Northeastern United States, the generationally pejorative word has been embraced by many younger Americans of Italian heritage'' (p. 1). Cohen (2010) has also pointed out that although ''Some Italian-Americans consider ''guido'' to be a slur and have vehemently protested [. . .] the use of the term [. . .] others, mostly younger Italian-Americans, use it affectionately to refer to a particular life style,'' and in such cases, as Tamburri (2010) has suggested, some Italian Americans ''have taken on what is widely considered negative nomenclature and adopted it as their moniker.'' In fact, the playwright Mario Fratti has even expressed the view that ''the name *Guido* is a symbol of *sophistication*. It is a badge of *honor* in Italy'' (my emphasis; see also Cohen, 2010).

In considering other slurs for Italian Americans, Roediger (2005) has noted of the slur *guinea* that ''New York City Italian American youths influenced by hip-hop have attempted a fascinating rehabilitation of ''guinea,'' using it proudly, mimicking the attempt in rap music and African American slang to rehabilitate ''nigger''' (p. 40) and Tricarico (2010) has further discussed how the slurs *guinea*, *wop*, and *guido* were often appropriated by in-group Italian Americans through ''Rhetorical strategies [that] manipulated symbols of ''inferior status and outsiderness'' into badges of ethnic authenticity,'' and that in this way, a slur that is primarily *for* Italian Americans *and used between* Italian Americans like ''Guido becomes a symbolic *reversal* like ''nigga'' that distils a quintessential ethnicity and [its] usage warrants a careful determination of *insider* status'' (my emphasis, see also Croom, 2013, pp. 191–194; 2014a, p. 237).[34] In agreement with this point regarding the non-derogatory use of slurs, amateur boxer Louis LaMorte from the Gramercy Gym in Manhattan reports that ''I always heard boxers in the gym refer to each other by their racial or ethnic nicknames, and we had no problem identifying with these names unless it was someone we did not like or used the word to disrespect us'' (Guerriero, 2013).[35]

In addition to the aforementioned first-person reports from 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 with in-group members, or to weaken the derogatory force that the slur had originally carried. For instance, in ''The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels,'' Galinsky and colleagues (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 identified by others* with these expressions – can actually *weaken* their stigmatizing force (p. 2020; see also Galinsky et al., 2003). More specifically, Galinsky et al. (2013)

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[33] 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 1960s, 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). Roediger (2005) similarly points out how ''some lexicographers have argued that ''with time'' the term [*guinea*] became ''less derogatory'' and less bitter'' (p. 39).
[34] Croom (2013) suggests that speakers may be capable of ''subverting derogation through linguistic appropriation such that between in-group speakers the slur is used as a norm reversed variant of the original derogatory use, and thus understood between in-group speakers as intended non-derogatorily'' (p. 191).
[35] Fred Gardaphe, a professor of Italian American Studies at Queens College, suggests that people unfamiliar with (or alternatively, simply unwilling to acknowledge) factual cases concerning the appropriation of slur expressions often misunderstand this non-derogatory use of *guido* due to their ''irony deficiency'' (Brooks, 2009). Brooks (2009) for instance explains that there is ''a long history of exaggerated characterizations in Italian culture.''

found the following results from their experiments 1 through 10 (E1)–(E10) that may be useful to consider 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'' (pp. 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 out-group member's power,'' or in other words, that ''Self-labeling equalized the perceived power difference between the stigmatized self-labelers and the out-group 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 stigmatizing 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).

Moreover, Bartlett and colleagues (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 slurs were used on Twitter (pp. 5–6). Bartlett et al. (2014) found ''that there are approximately 10,000 uses per day of racist and ethnic slur terms in English (about 1 in every 15,000 tweets),'' 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'' (p. 6–7).

Goffman (1967) had also previously proposed in *Interaction Ritual* 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'' (p. 86). So for example, if two Italian American interlocutors both feel that they share a common history or culture and both understand that neither of them have any intention of offending the other (e.g., they both presume to be on good terms with each other), one of the interlocutors may strategically choose to produce an utterance involving the relevant slur in order to foster intimacy and in-group solidarity, knowing that the bond between interlocutors in this case is strong enough to *neutralize* or *overturn* what derogatory force the slur had originally carried (Croom, 2013). Pfister (2010) likewise writes that ''what may seem to be impolite at a (superficial) level of what is said, may nevertheless be polite at a (deeper) level of what is implicated'' (p. 1278). So at least in such in-group contexts, a slur such as *guido* or *wop* can be used as a form of ''mock impoliteness'' since it is understood as intentionally non-offensive (Culpeper, 1996). This is 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, 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. As Sally (2003) has suggested, speakers may engage in this kind of ''risky speech'' in order ''to reinforce their solidarity and rapport [by] us[ing] common ground not so much for translation as for security and assurance'' (p. 1237) and Brown and Levinson (1978) have further proposed that this is how ''we get conventionalized (ritualized) insults as a mechanism for stressing solidarity'' (p. 229). As it turns out, 54% of respondents in an Associated Press-MTV study involving 1,355 participants ''think it's OK to use them [slurs] within their own circle of friends, because [as one respondent reports] ''I know we don't mean it'''' (Cass and Agiesta, 2011; Greene, 2011).

Evidently then, in close relationships or in relationships between those that are closely alike, conversational participants may assume that they will encounter minimal danger from face threats during their conversational interaction (presumably this assumption is often earned through trust and repeated interaction between friends or in-group members). 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 and Levinson, 1978; Croom, 2011). If someone you would like to consider a ''close friend'' is hard-pressed on calling you *Sir* or *Ma'am*, 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 and Levinson, 1978, p. 28; Croom, 2011, 2013).

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

G   (*Guido*)
a_1 *x is Italian American.*[23]
a_2 *x is poor or uneducated.*[24]
a_3 *x is a foreigner that may not have the proper legal paperwork required.*[25]
a_4 *x is commonly the recipient of poor treatment.*[26]
a_5 *x is fashionable, sexually suave, promiscuous, or into club culture.*[27]
a_6 *x is masculine, resourceful, aggressive,or authentic.*[28]
a_7 *x is loud or out of control.*[29]
a_8 *x is manipulative or involved in illegal activities.*[30]
a_9 *x is from a big or traditional family.*[31]
a_{10} *x is a manual laborer that typically works on automobiles or other machinery.*[32]

What I submit here is that if, for instance, an in-group Italian American speaker *S* is intending to communicate that they are sufficiently similar to some hearer *H* insofar as *S* and *H* both possess attributes (a_1), (a_4), and possibly others (such as (a_5) and (a_6), or (a_9)), and if *S* and *H* know each other well-enough or have established enough common ground to understand that *S* does not dislike *H* and does not intend to communicate that *H* possesses most of the other (typically negative) attributes belonging to **G**, then *S as an in-group speaker* might strategically choose to employ **G** as the category that most efficiently and economically predicates the intended (shared) attributes of *H*, such as (a_1) *Italian American*, (a_4) *commonly the recipient of poor treatment*, and possibly others (such as (a_5) *fashionable, sexually suave, or into club culture*, (a_6) *masculine, aggressive, or authentic*, or (a_9) *from a big or traditional family*), at least to the extent that **G** *is better for this than other categories* available in that language-user's lexical inventory.

Importantly, notice that although speakers can often use slurs in various and somewhat flexible ways, there do seem to be strategies and constraints involved in guiding both the apt 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 (e.g., members of the same racial in-group using the relevant racial slur between each other, such as Italian Americans using the racial slur *guido* or *wop* between each other, etc.) as well as sameness of communicative medium and style (e.g., members both communicate in the same language and speech style, such as Italian, etc.). However, further discussion of other strategies and constraints involved in guiding both the use and interpretation of slurs must be reserved for some other time.

7. Conclusion

Recent research on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs has offered insight into several important facts concerning their meaning and use – including that slurs are commonly used and understood to felicitously apply toward some targets yet not others, that slurs are among the most potentially offensive linguistic expressions afforded by natural language, and that slurs are often flexibly employed and of potential use, not only derogatorily to convey offense toward 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 carried. However, prior research has unfortunately been restricted primarily to considerations of slurs that typically target females, homosexuals, and African Americans. This is problematic because such a narrowly focused attention to slurs in prior work has left prior theorizing of how slurs *generally* function relatively uninformed by facts of actual language use. As a result, theoretical accounts of slurs that have so far been proposed have largely failed to accurately reflect actual usage, account for the empirical findings about slurs and general pejoratives from the social sciences, and offer any informative predictions to help guide future research. At this time more empirically oriented homework on the variety of ways that different slurs have been used in different cases would be helpful for theorists to consider so that they can proceed to develop more nuanced and empirically informed theories about slurs, their usage, and their effects. Accordingly, since no account of slurs for Italian Americans had so far been offered, this article provided a systematic and empirically informed analysis of slurs for Italian Americans that accounts for both their derogatory and appropriative use.

Toward this end, this article first reviewed common slurs for Italian Americans in Section 2 and then considered face threatening acts and the paradigmatic derogatory use of slurs in Section 3, stereotypes and stereotypical features in Section 4, family resemblance concepts and category membership in Section 5, and finally, the appropriation of slurs in Section 6. It was shown that the family resemblance account of slurs maintained here has major advantages over classical accounts insofar as it is flexible yet robust enough to accommodate both the derogatory and appropriative use of slurs, and is more in accord with the *real* rather than *ideal* nature of our organic human psychology. It was further shown

that an appeal to stereotypes helps explain many of the psychological effects that slurs actually have on both their users and targets. Since these features of slurs are among the most recognizable and have been primarily responsible for drawing so much attention to slurs in the first place, being able to account for these features is a major advantage of my work on slurs that remains missing from others. For at least these reasons it should be clear that the account of slurs outlined here is an explanatorily powerful one for how slurs in general function.

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