Asian slurs and stereotypes in the USA
A context-sensitive account of derogation and appropriation

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Slurs such as *chink* and *gook* are linguistic expressions that are primarily used to derogate certain group members for their descriptive attributes (such as their ethnicity) and are often considered the most offensive of expressions. Recent work on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs has illuminated several important facts regarding their meaning and use – including that slurs are commonly understood to felicitously apply towards some targets yet not others, that slurs are among the most potentially offensive expressions afforded by natural language, and that slurs are often flexibly employed and of potential use, not only derogatorily to convey offense towards out-group members, but also non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members or to diminish the derogatory force that the slur is typically understood to carry. Nonetheless, prior scholarship has unfortunately restricted itself primarily to considerations of slurs that typically target members of other groups. Since no account of slurs for Asian Americans has so far been proposed, the aim of this article is therefore to provide the first systematic and empirically informed analysis of slurs for Asian Americans that accounts for both their derogatory and appropriative (non-derogatory) use.

Keywords: slurs, pragmatics, appropriation, stereotypes, derogatory force, ethnic groups

1. Introduction

Slurs such as *chink* and *gook* are linguistic expressions that are primarily used to derogate certain group members for their descriptive attributes (such as their ethnicity) and such expressions are often considered to be the most offensive of all natural language expressions. Reisigl and Wodak (2001) write that "The simplest and most elementary form of linguistic and rhetorical discrimination is that of
identifying persons or groups of persons linguistically by naming them derogatorily, debasingly or vituperatively” and that “Single anthroponymic terms like the German ‘Neger’ and ‘Nigger’, ‘Zigeuner’, ‘Jüd', ‘Kanake’ and ‘Tscheusch’ (Austrian German) are sufficient to perform racist or ethnicist slurs on their own, as they connotatively convey disparaging, insulting meanings, without any other attributive qualification” (2001: 45). Since slurs are perhaps best known for their ability to strike offense, prior scholarship on slurs has focused largely on the projection behavior of their derogatory force across various linguistic contexts (Hom 2008, 2010; Potts et al. 2009; McCready 2010). Yet the potential offensiveness of slurs is not only demonstrated from considerations of their projection behavior across various linguistic contexts, but is further evidenced by the fact that their use has often been implicated in verbal threats, physical violence, and hate-motivated homicide. Indeed, it is much more plausible that our common knowledge of slur use and offensiveness derives from our hearing or reading about such real life uses of slurs and their consequences from the media, other first-person reports, or even one’s own personal experiences, instead of from a more academic study of dictionary definitions. One basic fact about slurs is (as stated above) that they are often considered to be the most offensive of all natural language expressions.

Even if all slurs may be offensive due to their being commonly used and understood as slurs, it is nonetheless apparent that not all slurs regularly apply to all targets indiscriminately. Instead, 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” (Croom 2014: 228). So it is by virtue of the fact that slurs are commonly used and understood to felicitously apply towards some targets, yet not others, that language users are able to systematically distinguish between relatively broader categories of slurs (e.g., the racial slur chink as opposed to the sexual slur bitch), as well as between relatively narrower categories of slurs (e.g., the racial slur chink from the racial slur wetback) within those broader categories. In fact, there are actually a wide variety of slurs in natural language that target groups members on the basis of different attributes, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and others (Croom 2008; Beaton & Washington 2014; Jackson 2014; O’Dea et al. 2014; Saucier et al. 2014). So another basic fact about slurs is that they are commonly used and understood to felicitously apply towards some targets yet not others.

Most prior work has assumed that the use of slurs is always derogatory or offensive – for instance, regarding slurs more generally, Hedger (2013) argues that “Slurs express contempt regardless of the attitude or particular use of the speaker” (p. 229); and, regarding slurs for Asian Americans more specifically, Roberts (2014) writes that “always the usage of the word “chink” is offensive”
(p.6). Nonetheless it is important to remain cognizant of the empirical facts from first-person reports from in-group speakers, as well as of recent studies from the social sciences that demonstrate 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 is typically understood to convey. In “Educators Find that Teens Use Ethnic Slurs Affectionately,” for instance, Johnson (2009) explained how many teens and entertainers, among others, “are doing what linguists call “melioration” – reclaiming a word meant to sting by removing its barb”; similarly, Bianchi (2014) explicated how “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). Conley (2010) likewise maintains that “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), while Richard (2008) similarly asserted that “Slurs can be used without displaying contempt or causing hurt. This happens, for example, when a slur is appropriated by its targets” (p.12). Hence another basic fact about slurs is that they are often flexibly employed and of potential use, not only derogatorily to convey offense towards out-group members, but also non-derogatorily to convey affiliation with in-group members or to diminish the derogatory force that the slur is typically understood to convey.

Whereas previous research has illuminated several important facts regarding their meaning and use, prior scholarship has nonetheless unfortunately restricted itself primarily to considerations of slurs that typically target members of other groups. Since no account of slurs for Asian Americans has so far been proposed, the aim of this article is therefore to provide the first systematic and empirically informed analysis of slurs for Asian Americans that accounts for both the derogatory and appropriative (non-derogatory) uses of such expressions.

But before we carefully consider face threatening acts and the paradigmatic derogatory use of slurs in Section 3, stereotypes and stereotypical attributes in Section 4, family resemblance concepts and category membership in Section 5, and the appropriation of slurs in Section 6, let us briefly (in Section 2) turn to review common slurs for Asian Americans.

2. Asian American slurs

Although there are in fact a substantive variety of slurs for Asian Americans that would be useful to consider here, no account of such slurs has so far been proposed. Some common slurs used to target Asian Americans include (i) the slur
flip, which is considered a “pejorative [term or expression] for “Filipino,”” (ii) the slur hapa, which “comes from the Hawaiian phrase hapa haole (pronounced “hah-puh how-lee”) meaning “half white/ foreigner” and is now used to target “anyone whose heritage is white plus another racial or ethnic group, but especially Asians and Pacific Islanders,” (iii) the slur jap, which has been considered “the most frequently used racist epithet for the Japanese,” (iv) the slur locust, which “represents many Hong Kong citizens’ disdain for, and discrimination against, a menacing [Chinese] Other […] a not-so-subtle mark of inferiority that increasingly separates them (Chinese) from us (Hongkongers),” (v) the slur paki, which is “a slur, referring to Pakistanis,” that is also “sometimes used in Britain as an epithet against all South Asians,” (vi) the slur slant, which is “a derogatory slang phrase for people of Asian descent,” (vii) the slur slope, which is an “abusive” expression directed at “an oriental person; more recently in particular, Vietnamese,” (viii) the slur china doll, which is an expression that “demeans women of Chinese or Asian heritage because it implies submission, sometimes of a sexual nature,” (ix) the slur chinaman, which is “a slur, often applied to anyone of Asian heritage,” (x) the slur ching-chong, which is “a slur, similar to Chink,” and (xi) the slur dragon lady, which “demeans women of Chinese or Asian heritage because it implies […] sexual dominance” (Espiritu 2003; Asian American Journalist Association 2012; Film 2012; CBS 2013; Donahue 2013; Barker 2014; McIlwain 2014).

Two other slurs for Asian Americans that have been more popularly discussed recently are (xii) gook and (xiii) chink. Stapleton (2001) reports that the slur “gook” is commonly understood as “offensive slang,” “used as a disparaging term for a person of East Asian descent” (p. 30), while Cummings (2010) explains in The Korean War: A History that “Americans used the term “gook” to refer to all Koreans, North and South, but especially North Koreans; “chink” distinguished the Chinese” (p. 80). Regarding the slur chink, the Philadelphia Bar Association (2014) explains that it “originated in the 19th Century as a racial slur against people of Chinese descent”, yet “is now widely used throughout the United States as a racial slur against people of Asian descent.” In fact, Richburg (2008) reports that “the term “chink” is every bit as racist and hurtful to Asian Americans as the n-word is to African Americans – so much so that some have taken to calling it “the c-word;”” and Congresswoman Judy Chu popularly stated on MSNBC that “the ‘c’ word is for Asian-Americans like the ‘n’ word is for African- Americans” (Murray 2012; Stapleton 2001; American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2000; Martin 2006; Park 2012; Asian American Journalist Association 2012; Main- man 2012).

There are many cases demonstrating the offensiveness of slurs. For example, a Hooters restaurant in Queens, New York, was sued for identifying Kisuk Cha, a Korean American customer, as “Chinx” on her receipt (Park 2012; Lee 2013).
A CVS pharmacy in Egg Harbor City, New York, was sued (for $1,000,000) for identifying Hyun Lee, a Korean American customer, as “Ching Chong” on her receipt (CBS 2013), and an employee from Papa John’s in Harlem, New York, was fired for identifying Minhee Cho, a Korean-American customer, as “lady chinky eyes” on her receipt (Hibbard 2012; Park 2012; Williams 2012). Anthony Federico, an editor for ESPN, was also fired for using the slur chink in a headline story about the New York Knicks (Fei 2012; Murray 2012), and Max Bretos, an anchor for ESPN, was suspended for 30 days for using the slur chink in a discussion about the basketball player Jeremy Lin on ESPN-NY (Yakas 2012). Additionally, the BBC was sued (for £1,000,000) for airing an episode of Top Gear in which Jeremy Clarkson used the slur slope against Asian Americans (London 2014) and the concrete company Pace Services was sued for identifying one of their Asian American employees with the slur jap (among other discriminatory acts, see Thompson 2014). Finally, the restaurant Chink’s Steaks in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was forced to change its name due to “the racially-charged history of the word “Chink” and the hate crimes and bullying which have accompanied its use” (Philadelphia Bar Association 2014).

Arguably, part of the reason that slurs for Asian Americans are often considered so offensive is because such slurs have often been implicated in verbal threats, physical violence, and even hate-motivated homicide. According to the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights (2009) 2.5% of all reported hate crimes (188 out of 7,624) were committed against Asian Americans in 2007 (p. 29), and according to the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, between 2010 and 2012 the federal government brought 3,288 cases on behalf of Asian Americans that faced discrimination in the workplace (Thompson 2004). Tsuwen Law, recipient of the 2009 Presidential Award from the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association for his work on civil rights, has further explained that uses of the slur chink were “a very common aspect of anti-Asian violence” (Richburg 2008); several recent examples that support his claim include (i) the fact that Luyen Nguyen was targeted with the slur gook and subsequently beaten to death in Coral Springs, Florida, on 5 August 1992 (Kelley 1992), (ii) the fact that Thanh Mai was targeted with the slur gook and subsequently hit in the face so hard that he died 5 days later from severe head trauma (Morewitz 2008), (iii) the fact that two Asian American students from Franklin and Marshall College were targeted with racial slurs and assaulted near campus (Murse 2013), (iv) the fact that Danny Chen, a private in the U.S. Army, was targeted with the slurs chink, gook, and dragon lady, and physically abused in the weeks leading to his suicide (BBC 2011; Chu 2012; Hajela 2012), and (vi) the fact that Asian American students have previously reported being beaten, threatened, and called ethnic slurs by other young people (Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights 2009). Malaspina
(2008) offers another example showing that the use of slurs for Asian Americans is often implicated in verbal threats and physical violence:

Shouting racial slurs, two white men attacked four Chinese American college students driving in a car in Queens, New York, one night in August 2006. Horrified neighbors shouted at them to stop as the men hurled racial slurs and then beat the victims, injuring them. The two men were arrested that night. Charges against them were elevated to a hate crime because of the racial epithets. A hate crime, first defined in the early 1980s, is motivated by prejudice against certain groups of people. Later, one of the victims told reporters, “They called me a stupid gook. They said it over and over again […] They did it because I am Asian.” The incident received intense attention from the press and politicians. Queens district attorney Richard A. Brown called it “a throwback to a dark time and place in American history and […] an affront to civilized society.” (Malaspina 2008:13)

In consideration of cases like these, Fitten (1993) has argued that slurs such as gook and chink should be considered “fighting words,” since they have often been used to initiate violence and carry out hate crimes, and Jeshion (2013) has similarly suggested 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” (237).

After considering 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 Asian Americans in particular, are often considered to be the most offensive of all natural language expressions. The next section will address the reasons 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

A sensitive understanding of the conditions for applying linguistic expressions commonly employed in one’s society is of paramount importance for successful communication and interaction with others in that society; language users typically learn the norms governing the differential use of various expressions during their socialization into a linguistic community (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984; Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez 2002). Previous work has suggested, for instance, that primarily descriptive expressions such as male and Asian American are generally used and understood to be most apt for neutrally picking out or describing public items of the shared (inter-subjective or objective) world; that primarily expressive expressions such as fuck and damn are commonly used and understood to
be most apt for expressing one's own heightened emotional state; and that slur expressions such as *chink* and *gook* are commonly used and understood to be most apt for targeting certain members on the basis of descriptive attributes (such as their ethnicity) in order to deprecate, disassociate from, or (in cases of appropriation) affiliate with them. For instance, Croom (2013) considers the application-conditions of various slurs, focusing especially on slurs for African Americans, females, and homosexuals, and proposed 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 *chink*, and thereby ascribing the category C 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 C. Importantly, Brown and Levinson (1978) proposed that a speaker S who conveys through his use of language that he is of higher social status or more powerful than the 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 [the social distance between S and H] or P [the relative power between S and H]" (p.228). Consistent 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 speakers might choose to strategically indicate, through their use of derogatory language more generally, and of slurs such as *chink* or *gook* more specifically, that they are more powerful or of a higher social status than their targets. Further substantiating this point, Croom (2014b) conducted a critical review of recent empirical data from linguistics, sociology, and psychology on racial slurs and stereotypes, arguing from these findings that:

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 one's life chances, then
it follows that the application of a slur towards a target can resultantly affect the latter’s life chances.

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), the derogatory use of slurs like chink or gook can actually harm the individuals that they attack, as well as constrain the range of action-possibilities that they can exercise in society. So a speaker S that derogates an Asian American target H on the basis of a presumed possession of negative attributes stereotypically attributed to Asian Americans through S’s ascription of the slur chink towards H, might thereby effectively work to support and contribute to a history of derogatory acts that actually harm the social identity of Asian Americans, as well as increase the difference in asymmetrical power relations among S and H more specifically and their respective groups more generally.

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

4. Slurs, typical targets, and stereotypical attributes

The linguistic expression ‘stereotype’ comes from the ancient Greek words stereós for ‘firm’ and típos ‘impression’; Bicchieri and Muldoon (2014) have more recently characterized a stereotype as “the prototypical description of what members of a given category are (or are believed to be). It is a cluster of physical, mental and psychological characteristics attributed to a ‘typical’ member of a given group” (pp.19–20). As an example, Bicchieri and Muldoon suggest that:

the category “Asian student” is associated with a cluster of behaviors, personality traits and values. We often think of Asian students as respectful, diligent, disciplined, and especially good with technical subjects. When thinking of an Asian student solely in terms of her group membership, we attribute her the stereotypical characteristics associated with her group, so she becomes interchangeable with other group members. (2014:19–20)

Mills (2009) further argued that “generalizations about impoliteness at a cultural level are frequently underpinned by stereotypical and ideological knowledge” (p.1047), so it is perhaps unsurprising that prior scholarship has often appealed to stereotypes and stereotypical attributes to explain facts pertaining to the mean-
ing and use of slurs. Jeshion (2013) reviewed at least four reasons for why stereotypes have been considered important for understanding the linguistic behavior of slurs (p.314). First, occasions of slur-use towards those that they target often and almost effortlessly bring to mind salient stereotypes of the target qua their membership in the relevant group. Second, slur-use is often harmful to the targets’ self-conception and self-evaluation in ways that pertain to them qua their group membership, and one could plausibly explain this by appealing to the stereotypes of the targets qua their membership in the relevant group. Third, slur expressions are more strongly offensive than other more generally pejorative expressions – the expressions jerk and asshole, for instance, are considered general pejoratives rather than slurs by Hay (2013) – and one could plausibly explain this by pointing out that while slur expressions presumably appeal to stereotypes of the target qua their membership in the relevant group, other more generally pejorative expressions do not; hence slur expressions are usually capable of offending targets on a much more specific or personal level, when compared to generally pejorative expressions (Croom 2014a). And fourth, the fact that slur expressions are more strongly prohibited than are other pejorative expressions could plausibly be due to their presumably being capable of offending targets on a much more specific or personal level than are generally pejorative expressions (on the basis of the third point just considered); accordingly, it might seem reasonable to impose relatively stronger prohibitions on uses of slur expressions than of generally pejorative expressions (Anderson & Lepore 2013). Consequently, it has been proposed in the literature that the derogatory content of slur expressions may be accounted for by drawing upon stereotypical attributes of the group members that those slurs are typically used to target (Croom 2011, 2013, 2014c; Cupkovic 2014).

Concerning common stereotypes applied to Asian Americans more specifically, while the Asian American Journalist Association (2012) reported that Asian Americans were commonly “portrayed as sexy and evil,” “mysterious,” “exotic,” “inscrutable,” “lacking leadership potential,” prone to “submission,” “a departure from a white norm,” a “model minority,” “genius,” knowledgeable in “martial-arts,” and having “slanted” eyes, the stereotypes for Asian Americans reported by Richburg (2008) included “the perception that Asian Americans are, for the most part, affluent, educated and well assimilated, and should therefore have no complaints”, as they are the ‘model minority’. Thompson (2014) similarly reports that Asian Americans are commonly considered “very bright,” “quiet,” “hardworking,” a “model minority,” “the country’s most highly educated racial group,” but “lack[ing] social skills; and [facing] some discrimination because of accents,” being “passive, poor communicators, techies or not “real” Americans,” and “kids who were pressured to go to medical school or study engineering.” Additionally, the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights (2009) reported that Asian Americans
were commonly stereotyped as “high-achieving students who rarely fight back” (p. 29), while Abad-Santos (2013) reported that Asian Americans were commonly stereotyped as “sneaky villains who posed like nice Asians but turned out to be evil,” and Davis (2011) reported that the Asian American was commonly stereotyped as being “a good victim – awkward, clumsy, nervous.” Furthermore, Reyes-Ortiz (2011) reported that Asian Americans were commonly stereotyped as “feminine and homosexual,” and “unable to speak English clearly or to understand anything ‘American’.” Chow (2013) reported that Asian Americans were commonly stereotyped as being “bad drivers,” “ninjas,” that they “know kung fu” and “are good at all the ‘hard’ things, especially things that include math, technology or coordination,” and Way et al. (2013) reported that the Asian Americans is commonly stereotyped as being “a victim of bullying, a ‘nerd’ or ‘geek,’ or someone who is perceived as ‘uncool’” (p. 423). Tan (2012) has also discussed how Asian Americans have previously been stereotyped as “‘heathens without souls,’ a race lacking unity and incapable of strength and fight to demand justice and deserve honour,” with Thompson (2014) suggesting that this kind of “‘perpetual foreigner’ stereotype is reinforced by pop culture, where for decades Asians were relegated to kung fu caricatures and antisocial geeks.” Accordingly, such negative stereotypes for Asian Americans persist in social consciousness at least partly because of the negative stereotypes that continue to be attributed to Asians in the popular media – such as the movies *Olympus Has Fallen* and *Red Dawn* – with negative stereotypes of Asians being so strongly portrayed in *Red Dawn*, for instance, that viewers responded to the movie by posting messages like the following on social media: “Watching red dawn […] Movie is fire!!! f*ck the chinks tryna take ova the world” and “I wish Red Dawn would happen in real life so I could shoot those chinks coming in by parachute” (Yang 2012).

Additionally, Ruble and Zhang (2013) conducted an empirical study to investigate the stereotypes that Americans hold of Chinese international students. They did this by first having one set of American students (*n* = 100) provide a list of traits that they would attribute to a typical Chinese student, and subsequently having another set of American students (*n* = 146) report the percentage of Chinese students that they thought possessed each of these traits. From their data, Ruble and Zhang report finding five primary stereotypes for Chinese students: (i) that they are “smart, good at math and science, intelligent, studious, different, and hardworking” (2013: 208); (ii) that they are “kind, friendly, nice, and polite” (ibid.); (iii) that they are “bad at speaking English, only friends with other Chinese students, not well assimilated to US culture, and socially awkward” (ibid.: 209); (iv) that they are “quiet, shy, a loner, and not very social” (ibid.); and (v) that they are “oblivious, loud, intrusive on personal space (such as crowding the sidewalk or cafeteria), conceited, annoying, strange, and never speak English” (ibid.).
Previously, in considering the racial slur *nigger* as an example in his analysis of slurs, Croom (2013) has proposed that "by choosing to use the slur *nigger* instead of a neutrally descriptive term such as *African American*, the speaker prima facie intends to express (i) their endorsement of a (typically but not necessarily negative) *attitude* (ii) towards the *descriptive properties* possessed by the target of their utterance," and that "the properties that the speaker endorses the expression of a negative attitude towards are properties that have been associated with members of a particular racial group" (p. 353). This point similarly applies to slurs that typically target Asian Americans. That is to say, a speaker S’s choice to use e.g. the slur *chink* towards a target H instead of the comparatively neutral descriptive term *Asian American* can be understood as S expressing a prima facie endorsement of a (primarily but not necessarily negative) attitude towards the descriptive properties or attributes that have typically become associated with Asian Americans and that are now being ascribed to the target H.

Now that we have considered the role that stereotypes and stereotypical attributes play in a speaker’s predication of certain content in the application of a slur towards a target hearer in context, the next section will show how empirical findings concerning slurs and stereotypes for Asian Americans can be integrated with a family-resemblance conception of category membership, so as to account for some basic facts concerning the derogatory use of slurs for Asian Americans.

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

The classical view of categories is that category membership is determined by the possession of some common, essential, criterial property or attribute (Rosch & Mervis 1975). Pinker and Prince (1996) for instance have explained that "classical categories are defined by formal rules and allow us to make inferences within idealized law-governed systems" (p. 332). Yet scholars have generally been unable to adequately articulate necessary and sufficient conditions for describing and using most natural language concepts (Fodor, Garrett, Walker & Parkes 1980; Pinker & Prince 1996). Indeed, an increasingly popular view in current scholarship is that most concepts of natural language correspond, not to classical categories, but instead to prototype or family resemblance categories. A "family resemblance relationship," Rosch and Mervis (1975) suggested, consists of a relationship among items in a category where “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” (p. 575; compare Wittgenstein 1953). Pinker and Prince (1996) further explain that "family resemblance categories are generalizations of patterns
of property correlations within a set of memorized exemplars” (p. 325); they differ from classical categories in a number of ways, in that: (i) family resemblance categories lack necessary and sufficient conditions for membership; (ii) family resemblance categories have graded degrees of membership; (iii) family resemblance categories often display a family resemblance structure; (iv) good members of family resemblance categories tend to have characteristic non-defining attributes; (v) a family resemblance category can be summarized by an ideal member or prototype, which is sometimes but not always an actual exemplar of the category; and (vi) there are sometimes unclear cases for family resemblance categories – that is, cases where it is unclear whether an item belongs or does not belong to the category under consideration (Pinker and Prince 1996:308). Rosch and Mervis (1975) further explain that “the more prototypical a category member, the more attributes it has in common with other members of the category and the less attributes it has in common with contrasting categories. Thus, prototypes appear to be just those members of the category which 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” (p.602).

For instance, what (on a family-resemblance conception of category membership) makes some individual x a member of the category OWL is not some criterial property or attribute that each and every x must have in order to be considered an owl. As Pinker and Prince (1996) explain, “family resemblance categories are defined by correlations among features in sets of similar memorized exemplars, and allow us to make inferences about the observable products of history” (p.353). For instance, a paradigmatic or prototypical owl may be a nocturnal bird that is solitary and hunts fish, but surely a speaker can still felicitously and informatively refer to an individual x as an owl even if x is not solitary or does not hunt fish, provided that the category OWL is that which is strategically most apt among the lexical choices available for the speaker’s conversational purpose. Likewise, in contrast with traditional accounts of slurs whereby the possession of some criterial property or attribute was assumed to be essential for an individual to be considered a member of the category C, the alternative account of slurs proposed by Croom (2011, 2013) and expanded upon in the present paper, maintains that although different individuals that e.g. are referred to by the slur expression chink are very likely to share different subsets of attributes with other individuals also referred to by this slur expression (which I propose is due to common knowledge of how this expression is often publicly employed by speakers, rather than being due to some property intrinsically possessed by targets), a felicitous application of that slur does not require that each and every slurred individual must share some criterial property or attribute with every other slurred individual (Sweetland 2002; Croom 2011, 2013). What is instead of primary importance on this alternative account is
that the use of a slur by a speaker in context may be considered a strategically apt enough, or optimally relevant, choice for that speaker, given his or her communicative purpose.

Accordingly, the slur expression chink (identified as C below) can be understood as a family resemblance (rather than a classical) category that consists in a structured constellation of stereotypical attributes (identified as a_i below) such as the following:

\[ C \ (\text{Chink}) \]
\[ a_1 \ x \text{ is Chinese American.} \]
\[ a_2 \ x \text{ is uncool.} \]
\[ a_3 \ x \text{ is studious, overachieving, or a workaholic.} \]
\[ a_4 \ x \text{ is commonly the recipient of poor treatment.} \]
\[ a_5 \ x \text{ is smart, good at math, or an evil genius.} \]
\[ a_6 \ x \text{ is skilled in martial arts and self-defense.} \]
\[ a_7 \ x \text{ has slanted eyes.} \]
\[ a_8 \ x \text{ is respectful, kind, submissive, or rarely fights back.} \]
\[ a_9 \ x \text{ is exotic, novel, inscrutable, or deviant.} \]
\[ a_{10} \ x \text{ only socializes with other Asians.} \]

Attributes a_1–a_{10} are taken from the common stereotypes of Asian Americans that were reviewed in Section 4 above, and could be rank-ordered based on the relative degree to which their possession by an individual x is taken as a salient indicator of category membership, with the relative rankings being re-adjustable or renegotiated in accord with relevant changes in communicative context. For instance 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 x possessing it is a member of the category C. My suggestion here is not that the attributes a_1–a_{10} should be understood as fixed in the precise rank-order provided in the example above, or that all of a_1–a_{10} are always involved in a context-independent manner. Rather, my suggestion is that attributes a_1–a_{10} should be considered as rank-ordered based on the relative degree to which their attribution to x is taken as a salient indicator of category membership, and importantly, that this rank-order is open to reorganization in a context-dependent manner. In practice, more attributes (for example, a_1–a_{20}) or fewer attributes (for example, a_1–a_5, or even a_1 alone) could be involved in a given communicative context. The list of 10 attributes provided here simply is meant to be both optimally informative for the present discussion (listing a_1 alone would fall short), and economical (listing a_1–a_{20} would go beyond); accordingly, a_1 would be ranked relatively higher than a_6 and a_1 would be considered a more
salient indicator than, say, $a_x$ that the individual $x$ possessing it is a member of the category $C$.

Although speakers may typically ascribe the slur expression *chink* to targets possessing the highest-ranking attribute ($a_1$) as well as the most attributes ($a_{10}$) listed in $C$, 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 ($a_{10}$) in $C$, given the appropriate context and communicative purpose. However, it is important to note that insofar as the choice of a speaker to refer to a target individual $x$ as a *chink* is to be considered a strategically *apt* choice for that speaker, it must be assumed (at least for the purpose of the conversation) that $x$ possesses a *practically sufficient* set of attributes from $a_{10}$ such that $C$ is the most *appropriate* or *serviceable* category under which to subsume $x$ for the purposes of the current conversation. If, for instance, a speaker intends to communicate that some $x$ that they dislike and consider inferior possesses some subset of the attributes $a_{10}$ from $C$, then that speaker may make the strategic choice to employ $C$ as the category that most efficiently and economically predicates the intended attributes of targets like $x$ and most forcefully expresses a negative attitude towards them, at least to the extent that $C$ is *better for this than other categories* in the lexical inventory available to that speaker.

Now that we have observed how empirical findings concerning slurs and stereotypes for Asian Americans can be integrated with a family-resemblance conception of category membership to account for basic facts concerning the derogatory use of slurs for Asian 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 Asian slurs

Most prior work has assumed that the use of slurs is *always* derogatory or offensive. For instance, regarding slurs more generally, Hedger (2013) argued that “slurs express contempt regardless of the attitude or particular use of the speaker” (p.229); more specifically, and regarding slurs for Asian Americans, Roberts (2014) writes that “always the usage of the word “chink” is offensive” (p.6). Shat-tuck (2009) similarly suggested that “certain words can be hurtful regardless of the context,” including the slurs “chinaman,” “chink,” “gook,” “jap,” and “slant-eyed” (in *Salon* 2010). Yet it is nevertheless important to remain cognizant of the empirical evidence from first-person reports from in-group speakers, as well as from recent studies in the social sciences demonstrating that slurs are often flexibly employed, to the effect that slurs may also (at least in some restricted contexts)
be used non-derogatorily to convey affiliation among in-group members, while diminishing the derogatory force that the slur is typically understood to carry. Croom (2013) for one has suggested 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).

Consider for example the fact that Simon Tam, the manager and bass player of the 80s (Asian-American based) dance rock band known as The Slants, reports that using the slur in the name of the band was a point of pride, that “he wanted to take it [the name] back for all Asian Americans and own it” (Guillermo 2011). Also, with respect to the slur hapa, which is typically used to target Asians and Pacific Islanders that are 'half white,' the Asian American Journalist Association (2012) explains that:

> Once considered derogatory, hapa comes from the Hawaiian phrase hapa haole (pronounced hah-puh how-lee) meaning 'half white/ foreigner.' It now describes anyone whose heritage is white plus another racial or ethnic group, but especially Asians and Pacific Islanders. The term is now considered by many to be one of positive self-identification.

Another slur for Asian Americans that has been appropriated is chink, and indeed, the Chinese American pop singer Wang Lee Hom has aimed at appropriating the slur in at least two of his successful albums, including Shangri-la (2004) and Heroes of Earth (2005). As Wang Lee Hom explained his aim of appropriating the slur chink:

> Derived from the historically derogatory racial slur “chink,” used to put-down Chinese people, “chinked-out” repossesses the word, turns its negative connotations upside-down, and uses them as material to fuel the new sound of this music. The term describes an effort to create a sound that is international, and at the same time, Chinese. In this album, I decided to implement some of China's most precious and untapped resources, the music of its “shao shu min zu” or ethnic minorities, concentrating on the regions of Yunan, Shangri-la, Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia. This is NOT one of those “world music” CD's. It's an R&B/hip-hop album that creates a new vibe the whole world can identify as being Chinese.

(quoted in Wang 2012:11-12)

Reporting on the music of Wang Lee Hom, Grace Wang (2012) writes that "while 'chink' fixes one in a static position of inferiority and marginalization in the US national context, being 'chinked out' – reformulated as a verb and practice – enacts a process of transformation to strength, pride, and 'cool' on the Chinese international stage" (p.12). Hsu (2012) has similarly suggested that “Chinese-pop
superstar Wang Lee Hom has tried to make chink edgy and cool, referring to his music as ‘chinked out’ and encouraging the use of chink in place of ‘nigga’ (p.xx); similarly, Lee (2012) explains how Wang’s “unique blend of Sinophone pop and audacious attempt to reclaim the racial slur ‘chink’ is influenced by his experiences growing up in Rochester, New York” (p.18). Indeed, Teetor (2013) reports that not only has the slur chink been appropriated by Asian Americans for non-derogatory purposes; additionally, the slur guido has been appropriated by Italian 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. Consistent with such reports, amateur boxer Louis LaMorte from the Gramercy Gym in Manhattan has also reported 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). As Thompson (2013) explains, “the act of re-appropriating or re-contextualizing, the process by which a group reclaims a term or artifact that disparages that group and then uses it in a different context, is not something new” and “the key for the transformation of, and undermining, a racist term is for it to be handled as a tool of empowerment, voided of any previous connotations, and utilized by the offended party.” (p.xx)

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 diminish the derogatory force that the slur is understood to carry. For instance, Galinsky et al. (2013) conducted ten empirical studies on the appropriation of slurs to test its potential effects on speakers and listeners empirically, and found that self-identifying with slurs can actually weaken their stigmatizing force. More specifically, Galinsky et al. (2013) found from experiments (numbered 1 through 10) that (E1) “participants in the high-power condition […] were more likely to label themselves with the derogatory term [such as chink or gook] than were participants in the low-power condition,” (E2) “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,” (E3) “Participants in the self-label condition recalled feeling more powerful […] than did those in the other-label condition,” (E4) “Self-labeling led observers to view
the labeled person as more powerful" (2024), (E5) “a stigmatized minority, was seen as more powerful in the self-labeling condition [...] than in the other-label condition,” (E6) “self-labeling increased perceptions of the stigmatized group’s power,” (E7) “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,” (E8) “Self-labeling increased perceptions of the stigmatized group’s power over the label, which attenuated the negativity of the label,” (E9) “Self-labeling improved the evaluation of a derogatory label relative to other-labeling,” and (E10) “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)” (pp. 2022–2027).

In another study, Bartlett et al. (2014) analyzed the language of social media users from a dataset of collected tweets involving slurs (n = 126,975) and investigated the volume of the slurs’ as well as the ways they were used on Twitter. 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” (pp. 5–7).

As Goffman (1967) previously proposed, 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). For example, if two Asian American interlocutors feel that they share a common history or culture, and both understand that neither of them have any intention of offending the other, one of them may strategically choose to produce a slur in order to foster intimacy and in-group solidarity, both interlocutors knowing that their bond is strong enough to neutralize or overturn whatever derogatory force the slur had originally carried. 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 chink or gook can be used as a form of “mock impoliteness” since it is understood as intentionally non-offensive (Culpeper 1996). Presumably this is 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; for like speakers, being in on this in-group use of the slur serves to
foster a sense of solidarity. By creating a sense of solidarity through in-group uses of slurs – the use of which is typically restricted to group members – speakers are afforded an additional linguistic technique for signaling that they are not alone, and that others like themselves 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); according to Brown and Levinson (1978), 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 reported that they “think it’s OK to use them [the slurs] within their own circle of friends”, because (as one respondent reports) “I know we don’t mean it” (Cass & Agiesta 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 this mutual understanding that has rendered mock insults or slurs a safe way for building rapport or facilitating social intimacy between interlocutors. It should also be noted that if one interlocutor is too polite, he or she may actually insult the other by implying that the social distance or relative power between them is greater than the addressee believes, or wishes for it to be. In other words, if people you would like to consider ‘close friends’ persist in calling you Sir or Malam, they may be strategically doing this in an attempt to signal their perception of a larger social distance between them and yourselves; conversely, by working in the opposite direction, speaking loosely or in accord with counter-culture norms, an in-group speaker’s use of a relevant slur may be understood “as a positively polite stressing of in-group knowledge and commonality of attitudes” (Brown & Levinson 1978: 28).

So if, for instance, an in-group Asian American speaker S intends to communicate his or her being sufficiently similar to some hearer H inasmuch as they both possess attributes (a₁), (a₃), and possibly others from category C above, such as (a₅) and (a₇) or (a₈), 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 C, then S as an in-group speaker might strategically choose to employ C as the category that most efficiently and economically predicates the intended (shared) attributes of H, such as (a₁) Chinese American, (a₇) commonly the recipient of poor treatment, and possibly others, such as (a₅) smart or good at math, (a₆) skilled in martial arts and self-defense, or (a₈) exotic or novel, at least to
the extent that C is better for *this* than are other categories available in the speaker’s lexicon.

Importantly, notice that although speakers can often use slurs in various and somewhat flexible ways, there do seem to be strategies and constraints that guide the apt use and interpretation of slurs. Croom (2013) for one has suggested that among the salient markers that aid the interpretation of slur uses as non-derogatory rather than derogatory, there is both the sameness of target attributes (members of the same racial in-group using racial slurs within the group, like when Chinese Americans use the racial slur *chink* to address each other), and sameness of communicative medium and style (when group members communicate in the same language and speech style, such as Chinese). However, further discussion of the other strategies and constraints involved in guiding the apt use and interpretation of slurs must be reserved for another occasion.

7. Conclusion

Although recent work on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs has illuminated several important facts regarding their meaning and use, much prior scholarship has unfortunately restricted itself primarily to considerations of slurs that typically target members of other groups. Since no account of slurs for Asian Americans had so far been proposed in the extant literature, the aim of this article was therefore to offer a first systematic and empirically informed analysis of slurs for Asian Americans that accounts for both their derogatory and appropriative (non-derogatory) use.

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