The formal and informal lives of slurs: Perceptions of negative group labels in Polish

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The study of slurs, or negative labels directed at members of ethnic, sexual, and other socially disadvantaged groups, is a complex and dynamic topic that has attracted increasing interest in recent years. Not only can formerly neutral terms for members of such groups undergo pejoration, but the perception of social acceptability of such terms may vary widely among users of a language. This instability may be attributed to the observation that slurs derive their offensiveness not from their actual linguistic content, but from their extralinguistic connotations, which are highly subjective and prone to sudden change as a result of social or political developments (cf. Anderson and Lepore 2013, Fasoli et al. 2015).

Although several publications have described the history of Polish-language slurs such as *Murzyn* 'black person' (Łaziński 2007, 2014, Ohia 2013), the topic remains largely understudied, and no systematic sociolinguistic investigations of speaker attitudes and usage have to our knowledge been carried out. The study described here aims to measure the attitudes of Polish speakers of various age groups, genders and levels of education toward a selection of decontextualized slurs as used in two settings, one formal and public, the other informal and private. The slurs chosen for the study include terms which have been present in the Polish language and widely discussed for a long time, e.g. *Murzyn* 'black person' or *Żyd* 'Jew', but also more recent ones connected with hot-button social and political issues, such as *ciapaty* 'South Asian; Middle Easterner, any brown person' and *homoś* 'homosexual'. The acceptability of each term was rated on two 5-point Likert scales, one for each studied context.

The most prominent pattern observed was the extent of style shifting between the two settings: all of the slurs scored higher on the negativity scale in the formal context, indicating a high level of user awareness. Although different degrees of shift across context were observed for different slurs, there is a general trend toward heavily negative marking in both contexts of LGBT-related terms as well as the term *down* (used to refer to individuals with Down syndrome), whereas general slurs for those of perceived low intellect show a greater gap in acceptance between private and public contexts. Aside from shedding light on a heretofore ignored aspect of contemporary Polish sociolinguistics, the results of the present study could be taken into consideration in developing updated guidelines for the use of potentially offensive language among students and teachers of Polish.

References

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