

Whether Use/Mention Is a Valid Distinction in Addressing the Problem of N-Word and The Possibility of Hidden Implicature

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the issue of the n-word, investigating whether there is a justified, proper scenario under which the taboo word can be uttered. Given the word's negative impact on people's psychological health, there is a loud call to prohibit it from appearing in TV shows, podcasts, radios, newspapers, and all forms of media. The word should simply never be uttered by anyone who is non-black, under all circumstances and contexts. Based on this situation, thinkers such as Kevin Cokley and John McWhorter try to analyse the problem and give their own theories in explaining and addressing the issue. Their arguments are presented in this paper. McWhorter's use/mention distinction will be the centre of discussion. The distinction is specified and analysed in the argumentation section to examine whether it is a valid standard in addressing the issue. Opinions of other thinkers and objections to the use/mention distinction are also critically evaluated. The analysis and evaluation of the opinions refute the possibility that there is an implicature in the mention of n-word, which further illustrate the validity of the use/mention distinction. The paper ends by concluding that the use/mention distinction is a valid standard in addressing the issue of the n-word and it is unreasonable to think there are implicatures in the mention of n-word.

Keywords: N-Word, Use/mention distinction, language and harm.

1. Introduction

Since the abolition of slavery in the United States, the following few centuries were marked by African American's struggles to fight against discrimination towards the black race at every level. Through their struggles, African Americans gained basic rights such as proper citizenship and universal suffrage. In the context of the 21st century, they are now working towards a further uplift of the social status of the black race, striving for equality between black and white. An important milestone in the process, as they believe, is the complete prohibition of the utterance of derogatory slurs, represented by the n-word, by any non-black people. The utterance of the n-word, in the eyes of those who wish it to be prohibited, is the most direct and obvious expression of the demeaning of black people.

This essay will begin by introducing the history of the n-word, trying to explain its development from originally a Latin and a Spanish word to a neutral term referring to the Africans, which ultimately changed into a racial slur. After introducing the historical process, the danger of derogatory slurs will be analysed, focusing specifically on the n-word. Next, the author will present John McWhorter's argument in his article, "The New N-Word Standard Isn't Progress", published in the New York Times. In the exposition of his argument, the use/mention distinction which McWhorter emphasises in his article will be specified. After that the author responds to the article by arguing in favour of McWhorter's claim. In supporting his claim, analysis will be presented to further clarify and defend the distinction between use and mention of the n-word. Some relevant scholars' opinions and possible objections will also be critically discussed. At the end of the argumentation, the author will defend McWhorter's argument and conclude that the use/mention distinction is valid and there is no hidden implicature in mention of the n-word.

2. Danger of the N-Word

Before heading to the discussion of the danger of n-word, it is necessary to know the history of the word. Essential questions are: what is it? Where it came from? How does its implication and people's

attitude change over time? The origin of n-word is controversial but most likely from the Latin word for black, “niger”. Latin speakers used this word, or more often “aethiops”, a word borrowed from Greek which meant “burnt face”, to refer to Africans, mostly Ethiopians at that time. Up until this point, “niger” referred to Africans simply by their comparatively dark skin, which bared no insulting implications at all. The word got into English more directly from the Spaniards’ utterance of “niger” and “negro” during the Exploration Age, when marine navigations were thriving and flourishing among European empires. These words were applied to Africans, again by pointing to their conspicuous feature of having darker skin colour. The n-word was the way how an Englishman would say “negro”, although it sounds more like the Latin word “niger” rather than its Spanish origin “negro”. Englishmen began to refer to Africans by the n-word, but with no abusive meaning at his point. In a long period from the 16th century, when the n-word first appeared in English writing, to the 19th and 20th centuries, when its use prevailed in literary works and TV shows, the n-word was used casually and frequently. Especially in the 19th and 20th century, the n-word expresses pure contempt for black people, comparing them to a kind of amusing animal. The word became very insulting and even to the point of unsayable during the 20th century, when black figures in authority decided that black Americans should be treated with dignity and respect, especially after their service and contributions during World War I. This was the time when the n-word turned from neutral to impolite. Many black Americans would prefer “coloured” or “negro”, but the n-word was not yet profane. The word started to become profane at the end of the 20th century, and it became an outright taboo at roughly the same time, at the start of the 21st century. Racism began to be openly criticised and targeted in that period. The shift in sensibility rendered slurs, especially the n-word, new profanity [1]. Since then, the n-word has become the most prominent symbol of racism. The emerging taboo on the n-word and other slurs reveal increasing respect for “subgroup” people. Although African Americans sometimes call each other by the n-word or its adoptions, such as “nigga”, in an affectionate way to show their contempt for this word or intimacy to each other, calling the n-word by people outside of the subgroup, especially the white, will still be considered a serious offense.

The previous paragraph focuses on the transition of the n-word from a neutral word to a derogatory slur. The n-word, when used nowadays, elicits strong emotions and violent response from African Americans. Now the question is: why does the n-word have such a destructive impact on people’s self-esteem? In his article “the Psychological Impact of Racist Slurs”, Kevin Cokley examines the consequences of the weaponisation of the n-word from a psychological perspective. Cokley notices that the n-word, especially when spoken by a white person, can easily provoke physical retaliations from African American people, regardless of how peaceful or well-educated they are. Cokley has not clearly defined in his article how the n-word is weaponised. But from his argument it is clear that the n-word, and other racial slurs alike, is used as a verbal weapon in attacking the African Americans from a racial basis. The purpose is to humiliate the group as a whole, regardless of their achievements, hard work, or position in life. It is a humiliating label stuck on everybody in the group, including future generations. As Malcolm X once pointed out, no matter how highly educated a black person is, no matter if he is a B.A., B.S, master, or a Ph.D., in the eyes of the racists, he is nothing but a [n-word]. He is hopeless to gain any respect or dignity because of his race, even with those great achievements [2]. Cokley believes this is the way in which the n-word has been “weaponised” as to “inflict the most psychological damage against Black people” [3]. This might be one of the best explanations to answer why racial slurs such as the n-word have the power to provoke the strongest emotion in African Americans. Linguists also generalised several decisive features of slurs. According to Davis and McCready, the criteria for discerning slur are thus:

- (1) An expression *e* is a slur if:
 - (i) *e* semantically invokes a complex which can be used to derogate a particular group.
 - (ii) The derogation of that group functions to subordinate them within some structure of power relations supported by an actualized flawed ideology.
 - (iii) The group is one defined by an intrinsic property (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, abled-ness) [4].

Notice that the n-word fits into all criteria, that it is a complex term used to derogate the African American group as a whole. It subordinates them to a low position in social structure, as shown in Malcolm X's remark, which is supported by old beliefs formed in the colonial age. The slur serves to define the African American group by the intrinsic property of race, which is unchangeable by their achievements, talents, or efforts.

However, even given the destructive psychological impact of the n-word, many thinkers suggest that the n-word should not be unsayable, or strictly forbidden to be mentioned at all. They indicate that there is an essential distinction between the use and mention of a word. People should not be punished or criticised by simply referring to the word itself.

3. Use and Mention Distinction

In his article "The New N-Word Standard Isn't Progress", McWhorter points out that the appearing of the n-word at all, especially when it is uttered or mentioned by a white person, irritates people and comes to them as offensive no matter in what occasion or for what purpose is the word used. People seem to concern very little about the distinction between when the slur is used to insult someone or when it is mentioned in a dismissive tone simply for mockery. The seriousness of the matter—mentioning the n-word—is equal, as for many, regardless of the purpose or circumstance for which the word is spoken. To prove the existence of such a common trend, McWhorter puts several real-life examples in his article. One is about Joe Rogan, a podcaster, comedian, commentator, and former host of "Fear Factor", who was severely criticised and even had to apologise in public for saying n-word in his shows, even though in most cases he says the word in a casual, mocking, or even dismissive tone. The uttering of the n-word in private conversations is also censored. Chris Charbonneau, former C.E.O. of a Planned Parenthood regional affiliate in Seattle, lost her job for recounting her conversation with a donor who accidentally let the n-word slip her mouth. Charbonneau got told off by two staffers for saying the n-word, albeit she merely quoted it from someone else and openly expressed her dismissal of the word.

McWhorter argues that there is a distinction between using the n-word for insulting and merely mentioning it for the purpose of mockery or dismissal, as represented by the two examples. Of course, the attempt to use the n-word as a lexical weapon to demean or insult others is uncompromisingly wrong, as McWhorter clearly states. However, he claims that people should not be reasonably insulted by the n-word when it is merely mentioned and not deployed as an insult, or else it will be a 'pretence of delicacy'. People are not actually offended by this hollow, mere mention of the word. Instead, they pretend to be insulted in order to stop people from mentioning the word at all. This pretence of delicacy is meaningless, according to McWhorter, as it neither works to improve jurisprudential justice, nor does it ameliorate the situation for black at every level.

Here, McWhorter introduces a difference in the "use" and "mention" of a word. Both actions involve reference, verbally or in utterance, to the n-word. Using the word concerns with the usual meaning of the word, which is to refer to black people in a flatly scornful manner. Yet, the mention of the n-word is tokening it to refer to itself. It has nothing to do with the meaning of the word.

Therefore, McWhorter argues that this distinction between the use and mention of the n-word shall be clear. There is nothing wrong with people getting serious and provoked when the n-word is used. However, it is equally important for them to be calm, tolerant, and reasonable when the n-word is merely mentioned and not used in the way that it is condemned to be used [5].

4. Argumentation

The distinction between using a word and merely mentioning it is important. The use of the n-word implicitly refers to its meaning, which presents the darkness in the past to people who have already overcome it and tries to stigmatise those who were proven innocent. This is surely worthy of condemnation. Nonetheless, the mention of it should not be regarded as an insult. In situations when

people mention the n-word instead of using it, they do not relate the word to any historical context or refer to black people by the group of 'human cargo' that was sold and bought in the sinful Atlantic slave trade. Instead, people who mention the n-word are only referring to the word by itself, without any further implications or contexts. The word is often mentioned for harmless purposes, such as mocking the discrimination towards black people, which bears no content or implications that can possibly hurt anyone. People's rage over the mentioning of the word is, hence, unreasonable.

Furthermore, it seems that every reason for punishing the utterance of the n-word is related to the use of it. People experience anger and humiliation when called by the n-word. To protect people from being traumatised by the racial discrimination and humiliation behind the slur, nobody should say the word at all, and all mention of the word should be avoided. Nevertheless, this is, in McWhorter's view, probably not the best solution to the n-word problem. Instead of pretending, or really, to be hurt by the mention of the n-word, people should overcome the feeling of being humiliated or traumatised by the sheer mention of a word. The mention of n-word, no matter by black people or white people or people of other races, is nothing more than referring to the word itself. In cases of mentioning, the word has no meaning. As a result, the negative feeling people have when encountering the n-word is unreasonable. It is not sensible to get angry at the articulation of a word that has no meaning but only the reference to itself.

The use/mention distinction is not the only linguistic standard for derogatory slurs. Josef Fruehwald, for example, argues that talking about a word or a phrase is also expressive and performative. An expressive is a word or phrase that serves to convey a certain attitude about things that are talked about [6]. It is also performative because it contains strong emotional content that will impact the audience. Thinkers like Fruehwald believe that, because the emotion and historical use of those performatives is part of the word's meaning no matter which context or tone the word is said, the effect is the same and the use/mention distinction does not apply [7]. In this way, African Americans are still traumatised by people of other races saying the n-word even when they are just mentioning the word. Here arises an important difference between "being offended" and "being traumatised". McWhorter argues in his article that African Americans should stop to be offended by the mention of n-word which is a mere reference to the word. While Fruehwald notices that, whether people are justifiably offended by the n-word is not the matter, some people get angry at the utterance of the n-word because they are reasonably traumatised by it, as shown and supported by linguistic and psychological analysis. But this is just too harsh and unfair for those who simply mention the word and are considered racists. It is even, sounds to me, close to what McWhorter calls hypersensitivity. However, linguistics Ph.D. Caitlin Green comments that it is not because there are hidden implicatures in those mentions of the n-word which are believed to be justified. She applies the Gricean model in analysing of the situation. The Gricean model goes back to H.P. Grice. The model takes place under the precondition that people engaged in conversation want to understand each other and will do what they can to ensure that the understanding is reached. With this precondition, Grice proposes four maxims of communication: (1) quality (people tell truth), (2) quantity (people give others enough information to understand what is said), (3) relevance (people give out relevant information), and (4) manner (proper words, phrase, tone, speaking manner is used). When someone obviously violates the maxims, the audience will draw a conversational implicature by inferring the speaker's intention for speaking in an unexpected way [8]. Green believes that the use or mention of the n-word or any taboo slurs does not fulfil all four maxims, so there must be some hidden implicature behind it [9]. However, Green is not justified in claiming this because her argument is shaky and, in a logical sense, begging the question. She justifies her claim with a circular argument that "since some recipients find the n-word in conversations or conversational situations not acceptable, mention of the n-word must have not fulfilled all the four maxims, which further proves that there is an implicature in mention of the n-word. And this indicates the reason why people think the mention of n-word is not acceptable". This is obviously begging the question. Furthermore, Green's argument is fallacious as manifested by her example that the sentence "[n-word] is a racial slur" is problematic. The reason she gave for this claim is that the sentence is a common sense, and

it violates the maxim of “quantity” by giving a piece of unnecessary information [9]. No complicated implicature should be drawn from a plain, straight-forwardly descriptive sentence like this one. It is possible that this sentence is said to a child, or a person unfamiliar with the American cultural context. Consider that everything taught in elementary school are common sense, but most people would believe it is apparently nonsense to assume everything elementary school teacher said in class has special implicature. The ongoing fear of the n-word is what gives it power, it makes it possible for the word to be weaponized. As Lynne Tirrell puts in her paper “genocidal language games”, saying is a kind of action, it represents someone’s view of world and of themselves [10]. Language, especially derogatory slur, gains power from its social embedment, which is, furthermore, shaped by people’s understanding and reaction to it.

Therefore, it is incorrect and unjustified to claim that the mention of the n-word contains implicature. Based on this conclusion, the argument that there are implicatures in the mention of the n-word should be refuted, and the conclusion that the implicature explains and justifies people’s anger at the mention of n-word should also be denied. Since there is no implicature, hidden or explicit, in the mention of the n-word, the former conclusion that people should not be reasonably provoked by mention of the n-word is defended and further justified.

5. Conclusion

This paper developed the argument that mention of the n-word should not be punished. It began with looking at the history of the n-word, the historical context and background in which it developed from its Latin and Spanish roots to a neutral term applying to Africans, and eventually turned into a racial slur towards African Americans. Cokley’s paper was then analysed to show what he means by the weaponisation of the n-word and the reason for the word’s destructive, negative psychological impact on African Americans. Following the criticism of the derogatory, humiliating nature of the n-word, the opinion that the n-word should not be utterly unsayable was introduced. Thinkers argue that because they believe there is a difference between the use and mention of the n-word. Linguist John McWhorter’s argument was presented and the use/mention distinction he argues for was explained. The author then developed her own argument in favour of McWhorter’s claim. The argument supports McWhorter’s use/mention distinction, emphasises that mention of the n-word should be differentiated from the use of it. Based on this distinction, the author argued that it is not reasonable for people to be provoked by the mention of the n-word, which bears no meaning and is nothing more than referring to the word itself. To further develop and clarify this claim, some possible objections and opinions from other scholars were critically discussed and the author defended McWhorter’s argument by refuting the objections. At the end of this paper, it is concluded that the negative implications and impact of the n-word should be overcome, as the word bears no meaning or implicature when it is merely mentioned. The vanishing of the n-word’s impact and implicature in people’s mind signifies true emancipation from historical mistakes and smashes the attempt to weaponize the slur.

The argument hopefully contributes to the discussion. As there is already plenty of arguments by other thinkers and considerable efforts put into the investigation of the issue, there is still a lot to be discovered. For example, the exact psychological impact of the n-word, and other derogatory slurs alike, is still unclear. There should be more research in the future that help scholars to develop a more profound insight into the subject. For instance, there can be more studies on African American’s reactions to the n-word under different circumstances, occasions, and contexts. Or whether their background, social class, or education level have an impact on their reaction. Models can be built up to analyse the data derived from social studies and interviews. Moreover, there probably exists a better theory than the use/mention distinction in addressing people’s negative emotions towards slurs. The more the subject is learned and investigated, the more likely the correct theory is to be found. It will be thrilling to see more insightful opinions and studies about the subject, which are important not

only to those who suffer from the harm of derogatory slurs, but also to people who care about the harm and wish to eliminate it.

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