

## Linguistic Disobedience

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### Abstract:

There has recently been a flurry of activity in the philosophy of language on how to best account for the unique features of epithets. A common understanding of epithets is that they are terms that cause warranted offense by targeting groups or individuals in virtue of being members of groups. The groups picked out are those that have social significance; such groups may share nationality, immigrant status, geographical origin, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability status, socio-economic status, political ideology, occupation, or common interests or aptitudes (Hom 2010, 165, Jeshion 2013, 232, Anderson and Lepore 2013a, 25, Bianchi 2014, 12, DiFranco 2017, 372-373, and Nunberg 2018, 239).

Members of groups who are targeted by the use of an epithet become aware that they have been categorized and derided in virtue of some property, real or imagined. They often react to and revolt against this mistreatment – either as individuals or as groups. One kind of reaction to being targeted by epithets is to attempt to make them ‘one’s own’. One’s goals in attempting to make an epithet one’s own include disrupting the standard negative practices in epithet usage and establishing a usage (which may be available to only members of the in-group or to the linguistic community in general) where negative force no longer targets the in-group. To *successfully* make an epithet ‘one’s own’ in this way is to appropriate it.

Though most recent philosophical accounts of epithets focus on locating and explaining their source of offensiveness, we will be concerned with a different issue: what are the features of an *attempt* to appropriate an epithet?

One of our central claims is that theories of the *source of offensiveness* of epithets needn’t themselves account for *attempts* to appropriate epithets. Accounts of the sources of offense are accounts of the literal usage of epithets. Attempts at appropriation are non-literal usage of epithets. We should note that other linguistic practices, such as sarcastic or ironic speech, can be characterized solely in terms of breaking from the normal usage of terms. However, understanding attempts at appropriation – in contrast to other kinds of non-literal speech - requires understanding the speaker’s intentions to perform a particular kind of socio-political act in virtue of breaking the normal usage of epithets. We will argue that attempts to initiate new norms governing epithets in a linguistic community, or sub-community, are best characterized as enacting the major features of civil disobedience. We will call such attempts at appropriation *linguistic disobedience*.