Language Sciences 52 (2015) 98–107

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langsci

Social acceptability of sexist derogatory and sexist objectifying slurs across contexts

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 24 March 2015

Keywords:
Social acceptability
Sexist slurs
Context

ABSTRACT

In one study, we investigated how Italian men and women generally evaluate and socially accept two classes of sexist slurs, namely Sexist Derogatory Slurs (e.g., *bitch*) and Sexist Objectifying Slurs (e.g., *hot chick*). Moreover, we examined whether social acceptability of these classes of slurs change across different types of relationships (i.e., work-related context or affective relationship) and as a function of the gender of the user (i.e., man or woman). Results showed that Sexist Derogatory Slurs were rated as more offensive and less socially acceptable than Sexist Objectifying Slurs. Moreover, in an affective relationship the latter were more acceptable than the former. In the working-relationship, Sexist Derogatory Slurs were always unacceptable whereas Sexist Objectifying Slurs were less acceptable when used by a man than a woman.

1. Introduction

In the few last years, several episodes of sexist derogation have hit the headlines, especially when they involved politicians. This was the case for Silvio Berlusconi when he suggested renaming his political party *Forza Gnocca* ("Go Pussy" in English; Ceccarelli, 2011, October 7), as well as the case of Patrick Devedjian, who called a female opponent *salope* (i.e. "bitch"; "Sarkozy ally says sorry for 'unspeakable' insult", 2007).

Several studies conducted mainly in the United States have highlighted frequent use of sexist language (Swim et al., 2001; Swim et al., 2004). In a daily-diary study (Swim et al., 2001), it has been found that 75% of women reported sexist hassles within three days. These emerged especially in the form of verbal comments targeting participants themselves, other women or women in general. Specifically, the most common offenses fell into three main categories: comments referring to traditional gender role prejudice and stereotyping (e.g., "you are a woman, so fold my laundry"), demeaning and derogatory comments (e.g., "bitch"), and sexually objectifying remarks (e.g., "that's a nice boulder holder"). In addition to frequency, studies in the United States have investigated which are the most offensive comments that men and women use to address a woman. The results showed that both men and women equally pointed to sexist slurs that portrayed women as sexually loose, such as "bitch", "slut", and "cunt", regardless of the user's gender (James, 1998; Preston and Stanley, 1987). In a similar study conducted in different cultures (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008), the results attested that the majority of terms addressing women were sexist slurs and that female participants overall perceived the insults to be more offensive than men did.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2015.03.003
0388-0001/

In the present study, we aim to extend this line of work on the evaluation of sexist slurs in several respects. First, differently from previous studies, we focused on two different classes of sexist slurs. As pointed out by Swim and colleagues (Swim et al., 2001), sexist comments can be differentiated on the basis of their content. We focused here on the same sexist derogatory slurs that were considered in previous studies (Preston and Stanley, 1987; Swim et al., 2001; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008), but we also extended our analysis to sexual objectifying slurs. Second, we examined not only the offensiveness, but also the social acceptability of these two classes of slurs. Social acceptability refers to the extent to which a slur that targets an individual member or a group is (or is not) at odds with social norms of nondiscrimination concerning that group (see the concept of acceptability of prejudice introduced by Crandall et al., 2002). Hence, while offensiveness points to the negative, detrimental tone of the slur *per se*, social acceptability refers to the extent to which using such a slur to label a target is condoned (or condemned) by society. Third, we examined the influence of different social contexts, beyond the gender of participants and of the target, on the social acceptability of both sexist derogatory and sexist objectifying slurs. The present research highlights the interplay between language and context on the acceptability of such slurs and contributes to the understanding of the potential reactions and consequences of being targeted by and of being exposed to sexist language.

1.1. Sexist slurs between derogation and sexual objectification

While "women" is a descriptive term used by the speakers and listeners to identify individuals or groups in an affectively neutral manner, slurs point to "members that possess certain descriptive features […] to derogate them on that basis" (Croom, 2013a, p.4). Sexist slurs then are not purely category or descriptive labels, but they refer to women in a disparaging and pejorative manner. As other classes of derogatory labels, slurs may vary on their evaluative tone as well as on their content (see the distinction between valence and complexity; Mullen, 2001; Mullen and Johnson, 1993; Mullen et al., 2000).

Previous research has mostly focused on slurs such as "bitch" or "slut" (Preston and Stanely, 1987; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). However, these slurs are not the only frequently used women-bashing terms. As suggested by the study of Swim et al. (2001) in addition to derogation, sexism can verbally manifest itself through sexual objectification. Notice that previous works on racist slurs have also put forward the distinction between derogatory and non-human, objectifying slurs (Croom, 2008, 2013b). In the present research, we suggest that sexist slurs can be differentiated into at least two classes. On the one hand, there are *sexist derogatory slurs* (SDSs; see also Swim et al., 2001). These are terms (e.g., "bitch," "whore") that derogate women by stressing hostile stereotypes of women along with a dimension of promiscuity and sexual looseness in which women's morality is denied (Coyne et al., 1978; Preston and Stanley, 1987). Likely this type of slur goes hand in hand with a distancing motivation and negative emotions, such as contempt and disgust, toward women. On the other hand, there are *sexist objectifying slurs* (SOSs). By contrast, these are terms (e.g., "hot chick," "pussy") that stress women's physical appearance and attractiveness rather than promiscuity (Allen, 1983). This second class of sexist slurs communicates the subordinate status of women with respect to men's sexual desires and reduces women to objects of men's sexual interest. Thus, SOSs likely underline an approaching motivation, although it is limited to a sexual goal (Gruenfeld et al., 2008).

In this study, we analyzed the offensiveness as well as the perceived social acceptability of a series of slurs that are exemplars of SDSs and SOSs in the Italian language. In particular, we examined how these two classes of slurs are appraised when decontextualized (i.e., not embedded in a social context). Given the distinct content and the different motivations underlying these two classes of sexist slurs, we expected SOSs to be judged as less offensive (Hypothesis 1a) and more socially acceptable than SDSs (Hypothesis 1b).

1.2. Contextual factors and sexist slurs

Research on sexist slurs has devoted limited attention to investigating whether the evaluation of sexist slurs varies across contexts. To our knowledge, only the gender of the person making women-bashing comments has been empirically examined (Preston and Stanley, 1987; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). It has been shown that the gender of the user did not matter, as both men and women use similar sexist slurs to address women. Notwithstanding the importance of these studies, our work aims to investigate the impact of other contextual factors beyond the gender of the user. The importance of the context has been stressed by a different but related line of work, which is the research on taboo terms (Jay, 1992, 2009; Jay and Janschewitz, 2008). Specifically, in this line of research it has been shown that slurs such as "cunt" are judged to be more offensive and less appropriate when used in a public situation (i.e., an office) rather than in a private situation (i.e., a college dorm), and when used by a person of high status (i.e., a dean) rather than of low status (i.e., a janitor).

Sexist episodes may emerge in a variety of specific social settings and relationships (e.g., friendship, love relationship, workplace, etc.; Klonoff and Landrine, 1995; Matteson and Moradi, 2005), and it is likely that people's evaluation and reactions differ across contexts. Hence, we examined the acceptability of SDSs and SOSs when used in a relationship. In particular, we varied the gender of the user and compared the acceptability of sexist slurs when used in the course of an affective relationship or in a working relationship in which the user of the slurs holds a position of either higher-status or equal-status to the target.

We reasoned that the use of derogatory language could be considered more inappropriate in non-intimate rather than in intimate relationships (see Nussbaum et al., 2005), assuming that the use of slurs in an intimate relationship is more likely to take place in a private situation. Moreover, slurs used by a friend or a partner could be reframed in the light of a positive intimate relationship, thus leading to a higher rate of acceptability (Croom, 2011; Kleinman et al., 2009). Conversely, the use of

sexist slurs is strongly condemned in the working context as it can be perceived as an expression of gender harassment and mobbing, particularly when spoken by a supervisor (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; see also the anti-sexual harassment code in the European Union Directive 2002/73/EC). On the basis of the above considerations, we hypothesized that sexist slurs would be seen as more acceptable when used in the context of an affective relationship rather than in the workplace, and the acceptability of these slurs would be even lower when stated by a person holding a higher-status position than the target (Hypothesis 2). Finally, as sexual harassment is usually perpetuated by men rather than by women (Gutek, 1985; Hulin et al., 1997), we would also expect participants to consider the use of sexist slurs more inappropriate in a workplace if they were stated by a man rather than a woman (Hypothesis 3).

1.3. Overview

In the present study we investigated the offensiveness and social acceptability of SDSs and SOSs when decontextualized, meaning when no information about the context was provided. In addition, we tested their social acceptability in specific contexts that were varied in terms of user's gender and of relationship between user and target.

Initial (decontextualized) judgments were first used to perform factorial analysis and to validate the existence of the two classes of sexist slurs, namely SDSs and SOSs. Then, focusing on the best exemplars of each class (highly saturated in the factors and most frequently used), we tested our hypotheses that SOSs are judged less offensive and more socially acceptable compared to SDSs. Finally, we examined the effect of context (type of relationship and user) on the social acceptability of these two classes of slurs.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

Forty-three participants voluntarily took part in this experiment. Six of the participants were excluded from the analyses because they did not complete all the scales in the questionnaire, and one was excluded because he/she did not specify his/her gender. The final sample consisted of 36 participants (N = 19 women, $M_{age} = 22.22$, $SD = 6.94$). With regards to political orientation, the sample was equally divided between left-wing (45.8%) and right-wing (49.2%) supporters. Moreover, 58.3% of the sample had earned a high school diploma, 30.6% a bachelor's degree, and 5.6% a master's degree, while 5.5% of the participants did not specify their level of education.

2.2. Materials

In a pretest, three participants (2 women and 1 man ranging in age from 23 to 26 years old) were asked to think about all of the labels that people commonly use to portray women in a sexist manner. The obtained list consisted of 13 slurs: *bona* (foxy), *bagascia* (cunt), *baldracca* (floozy), *bambola* (doll), *figa* (pussy), *gnocca* (hot-chick), *pupa* (babe), *puttana* (bitch), *sbarbina* (no translation available; it is a disparaging term referring to young girls), *sgualdrina* (tramp), *troia* (whore), *zoccola* (slut), and *velina* (showgirl).[1]

2.3. Procedure

Participants (mostly students) were recruited via email, social networks (e.g., Facebook), or though the research assistants' contacts. The research was advertised as a study on language and communication. Specifically, and regardless of the way they had been recruited, participants were informed that participation was anonymous and voluntary. Then, participants were provided with a link to an online survey. Once they were logged in, they read that the aim of the study was to examine the way people perceive verbal expressions that portray women in everyday language. Note that no reference to the word "slurs" was made in order not to influence participants' judgments. After being informed about the aim of the research, participants consented to take part in the study. Next, they were presented with the 13 sexist slurs one at a time.

First, participants were asked to judge how pleasant or derogatory each term was in terms of three positively evaluated adjectives (i.e., pleasant, gratifying, and respectful) and three negatively evaluated adjectives (i.e., offensive, humiliating, and derogatory). Moreover, participants were asked to indicate how frequently each slur was used (i.e., "How commonly is this term used?") and to rate the acceptability of each slur on two items (i.e., "How socially acceptable is this term?"; "How morally acceptable is this term?"). Responses to all the above questions were registered on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely). Note that no information on the context of use was provided in this set of judgments.

Next, participants were asked to rate the social acceptability of each slur in specific social settings. Specifically, we varied the information about the user of the slur and of his/her relationship with the target of the slur (affective vs. working

[1] All the Italian terms under consideration are referring exclusively to women by definition. Note that the English translation of these slurs is merely representative. Indeed, connotation of some of these terms may vary across culture (e.g., the Italian word "figa", that we translated with the English term "pussy", it is a slur referring by definition to vagina and commonly used to emphasize a woman's attractiveness).

relationship-same status vs. working relationship-higher status). Depending on the social setting, participants were asked to imagine that *(a)* the user was a man or a woman, and *(b)* that the user and the target were partners in an affective relationship, such as lovers or friends, or in a working relationship in which the user had either the same status (i.e., colleague) or a higher status (i.e., boss) than the target. The target of the slurs was always a woman.

At the end of the questionnaire, participants reported their age, gender, political orientation and level of education.

3. Results

3.1. Factor analyses

A score of offensiveness and of social acceptability were created for each slur. Participants' ratings on positive and negative adjectives were first averaged to create two indexes for each slur, one for pleasantness (Cronbach's α ranging from .73 to 1.00) and the other for derogation (Cronbach's α ranging from .72 to .98). Then, we computed an index of offensiveness by subtracting ratings of pleasantness from those of derogation: the higher the score, the more offensive the slur. Moreover, an index of social acceptability for each slur (Cronbach's α ranging from .78 to .93) was created by averaging participants' ratings on the two acceptability items: the higher the score, the more acceptable the slur.

To empirically establish whether SDSs and SOSs were two different classes of sexist slurs, a confirmatory factor analysis of 13 items (i.e., slurs) was conducted on participants' ratings of offensiveness and social acceptability. We first controlled for the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy, which indicated that the sample was factorable for both offensiveness and social acceptability (KMO = .72 and KMO = .82, respectively). Moreover, a Bartlett test of sphericity was also significant when performed on offensiveness, χ^2 (78) = 277.03, $p < .001$, and social acceptability, χ^2 (78) = 274.58, $p < .001$.

As for offensiveness, principal components analysis was conducted to identify groups of sexist slurs. Analysis using Varimax (orthogonal) rotation and constraining the number of factors extracted to two yielded a two-factor solution that explained 60.61% of variance. We considered items whose factor loading was above .55 (see Table 1). The first factor included six items (i.e., *bambola*, *bona*, *figa*, *gnocca*, *pupa*, *velina*), whereas six other items (i.e., *bagascia*, *baldracca*, *puttana*, *troia*, *sgualdrina*, *zoccola*) were loaded onto the second factor (see Table 1).

As for social acceptability, the same analysis as above showed a two-factor solution that explained 62.80% of variance. Six items (i.e., *bagascia*, *baldracca*, *puttana*, *troia*, *sgualdrina*, *zoccola*) were loaded on the first factor. The second factor included seven items (i.e., *bambola*, *bona*, *figa*, *gnocca*, *pupa*, *sbarbina*, *velina*). All items in this analysis had factor loadings over .55 (see Table 1).[2]

Results of these analyses clearly showed that a two-factor solution can be derived from our data, suggesting that dividing slurs into SDS and SOS categories is a meaningful distinction, at least when offensiveness and social acceptability are concerned.

3.2. Perception of sexist derogatory and sexist objectifying slurs

In the main analyses, to reduce the overlap between the two-factor structure, we focused on a subsample of slurs for each class that met the following criteria. First, slurs should be highly rated as commonly used in our sample (see Table 2), thus dismissing the possibility that they were not well-known; uncommon slurs might bias subsequent ratings. Second, slurs should be highly loaded on one of the two factors, namely either on the SDS or on the SOS factor, thus stressing the bi-factorial organization of the slurs. The terms that satisfied these criteria were three SDSs, namely *puttana* (bitch), *troia* (whore), and *zoccola* (slut), which were rated as commonly used terms, and had factor loadings for offensiveness above .75 and for social acceptability above .70; an equal number of SOSs were also selected: *bona* (foxy), *figa* (pussy) and *gnocca* (hot chick), which had high ratings of slur use and had factor loadings for offensiveness above .68 and for social acceptability above .58.

Next, participants' ratings were averaged to create two indexes, one for offensiveness (SDSs: $\alpha = .68$ and SOSs: $\alpha = .87$) and one for social acceptability (SDSs: $\alpha = .79$ and SOSs: $\alpha = .89$) of each class of sexist slurs. Finally, we proceeded to test whether the two classes of slurs were differently perceived when they were presented in an isolated manner; that is, when they were not embedded in a specific context.[3]

3.2.1. Frequency of sexist derogatory and sexist objectifying slurs

Although we focused on the most common slurs, we examined whether the two subsets of slurs were perceived differently in frequency. A 2 (gender: male vs. female) x 2 (type of slur: SDS vs. SOS) analysis of variance was performed on frequency of use of sexist slurs. A main effect of type of slurs emerged, $F(1, 34) = 5.33$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. This indicated that the

[2] Factor analyses were also run considering a eigenvalues cut-off of 1.00 and a three-factor solution emerged. As for offensiveness, a three-factor solution explained 70.68% of the variance. As for social acceptability, a three-factor solution explained 71.27% of the variance. Note that the third factor of social acceptability was loaded only by one slur (i.e., "pupa"), and hence it was difficult to interpret. Moreover, the three-factor solutions explained only an additional 10.06% and 8.47% of the variance for offensiveness and social acceptability, respectively. For these reasons a two-factor solution was preferred.

[3] Analyses conducted on the entire sample of SDSs/SOSs, especially on the social acceptability of slurs across social contexts, are largely similar to the one performed on the most common exemplars of SDSs/SOSs.

Table 1
Factor loadings and communalities based on a principal components analysis with Varimax orthogonal rotation for 13 items from the list of sexist *slurs* (N = 36).

	Social acceptability		Offensiveness	
	SDS	SOS	SDS	SOS
Zoccola (slut)	.87		.75	
Sgualdrina (tramp)	.86		.76	
Baldracca (floozy)	.82		.79	
Puttana (bitch)	.82		.79	
Troia (whore)	.70		.79	
Bagascia (cunt)	.56		.70	
Bona (foxy)		.83		.83
Bambola (doll)		.80		.67
Velina (showgirl)		.76		.77
Figa (pussy)		.65		.68
Sbarbina (–)		.59		
Gnocca (hot-chick)		.58		.90
Pupa (babe)		.58		.71

Note. Factor loadings < .55 are suppressed.

Table 2
Means and (Standard deviation) of frequency of slurs.

Gnocca (hot chick)	6.30 (1.20)**
Figa (pussy)	6.11 (1.28)**
Puttana (bitch)	5.59 (1.46)**
Zoccola (slut)	5.49 (1.39)**
Troia (whore)	5.35 (1.51)**
Bona (foxy)	5.11 (1.43)**
Velina (showgirl)	4.97 (1.80)*
Sgualdrina (tramp)	4.50 (1.48)*
Bambola (doll)	4.46 (1.64)
Baldracca (floozy)	4.28 (1.76)
Bagascia (cunt)	3.76 (1.75)
Pupa (babe)	3.61 (1.62)
Sbarbina (–)	2.83 (1.84)**

Note. Frequency ratings range from 1 to 7. The superscript show that means differ from the midpoint of the scale (4). *p < .01, **p < .001.

SDSs ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.26$) were rated as slightly less common than the SOSs ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.01$). No effect of gender was found, suggesting that both male and female participants equally considered these classes of slurs to be frequently used terms, $F(1, 34) = 2.21$, $p = .15$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. This effect was not modified by an interaction with the type of slur, $F(1, 34) = 1.05$, $p = .31$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

3.2.2. Offensiveness of sexist derogatory and sexually objectifying slurs

Participants' ratings on offensiveness were submitted to a 2 (gender: male vs. female) × 2 (type of slur: SDS vs. SOS) analysis of variance. A main effect of type slur, $F(1, 34) = 125.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .78$, confirmed that participants judged SDSs ($M = 5.59$, $SD = .78$) as more offensive than SOSs ($M = 1.37$, $SD = 2.53$). Moreover, a main effect of gender, $F(1,34) = 4.14$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$, was found, indicating that female participants rated sexist slurs to be more offensive ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.58$) than male participants ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.16$) did. No other significant interactions were found. These results confirmed that women tend to perceive sexist slurs as more offensive than men.[4]

3.2.3. Acceptability of sexist slurs

To compare the two classes of slurs, a 2 (gender: male vs. female) × 2 (type of slur: SDS vs. SOS) analysis of variance was performed on the acceptability score with the first as a between-participants variable and the second as a within-participants variable. Analysis yielded a main effect of type of slur, $F(1, 34) = 82.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .71$, showing that SDSs ($M = 2.70$,

[4] In line with a bi-factorial structure of the inter-group attitudes (Katz and Braly, 1933), we also considered pleasantness (positive adjectives; SDSs: $\alpha = .74$ and SOSs: $\alpha = .87$) and derogation (negative adjectives; SDSs: $\alpha = .68$ and SOSs $\alpha = .87$) of the two classes of slurs separately. Analysis on the pleasantness ratings showed that both SDSs, $t(35) = -80.75$, $p < .001$, $d = 27.29$, and SOSs, $t(35) = -6.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.07$, significantly differed from the midpoint of the scale, suggesting a low overall pleasantness of both types of slur (SDSs: $M = 1.07$, $SD = .22$ and SOSs: $M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.30$). At the same time, participants judged SDSs ($M = 6.67$, $SD = .65$) as derogatory, $t(35) = 24.41$, $p < .001$, $d = 8.25$, while the perceived derogation of the SOSs ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.53$) did not differ from the midpoint of the scale, $t(35) = .28$, $p = .86$, $d = .06$. Said otherwise, the SDSs were clearly perceived as disparaging, while the SOSs were judged on average as not pleasant but at the same time as not derogatory.

Table 3
Means and (Standard deviation) of acceptability between type of slurs, type of relationship and gender of the user.

	User	Affective	High status user	Equal status user
SDSs	Man	1.43 (.76)	1.06 (.23)	1.12 (.29)
	Woman	1.73 (1.06)	1.06 (.23)	1.20 (.55)
	Tot	1.58 (.84)	1.06 (.24)	1.16 (.40)
SOSs	Man	3.91 (1.71)	1.30 (.67)	1.63 (1.04)
	Woman	3.95 (1.77)	1.41 (.76)	1.77 (1.17)
	Tot	3.93 (1.69)	1.35 (.70)	1.70 (1.08)

$SD = 1.30$) were judged to be less socially acceptable than SOSs ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.35$). Moreover, analysis revealed neither a main effect of gender, $F(1, 34) = 2.18$, $p = .15$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, nor a significant gender by type of slur interaction, $F(1, 34) = .18$, $p = .68$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$.

3.2.4. Correlational analyses

Correlational analyses were performed to examine the relationship between frequency, offensiveness and social acceptability of sexist slurs. Social acceptability of sexist slurs was positively and significantly correlated with frequency of their use, $r(36) = .553$, $p < .001$. Offensiveness was significantly unrelated to social acceptability, $r(36) = .026$, $p = .88$, and frequency, $r(36) = .104$, $p = .548$. In sum, higher levels of social acceptability were associated with higher levels of frequency of use (and vice versa). This pattern of results is in line with Crandall et al.'s (2002) study, suggesting that the frequency of addressing a group by a slur is associated with the extent to which it is acceptable to express prejudice towards that group. This interpretation is further corroborated by the lack of any association between the perceived offensiveness and the social acceptability/frequency, indicating that it is not the offensiveness of a slur *per se* that may encourage or inhibit its use or may determine its social acceptability.

3.2.5. Summary

In sum, we found that, when decontextualized, the two classes of sexist slurs are differently perceived. Slurs that are derogatory are always evaluated as more offensive and less acceptable than those that objectify women. Not surprisingly, the latter are also rated as more commonly used than the former.

3.3. Social acceptability of sexist derogatory and sexist objectifying slurs across social contexts

To test how sexist slurs were socially accepted in different social contexts we analyzed participants' judgments of these slurs when they were used in distinct types of relationship and by users of different genders. We entered the participants' responses about the acceptability into a 2 (gender: male vs. female) × 2 (type of slur: SDS vs. SOS) × 3 (type of relationship: affective vs. working-higher status user vs. working-equal status user) × 2 (gender of the user: male vs. female) analysis of variance with the first factor as a between-participants variable and the other factors as within-participants variables. In line with our previous results, the analysis showed a main effect of type of slur, $F(1, 34) = 79.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .70$, confirming that SDSs ($M = 1.27$, $SD = .43$) were judged to be less acceptable than SOSs ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .90$). Moreover, confirming Hypothesis 2, the main effect of the type of relationship was also significant, $F(2, 68) = 69.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .67$, which demonstrates a higher acceptability of the sexist slurs in the affective relationship context ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.08$) than in both work-related contexts (both $ps < .001$, $ds > .1.46$). Moreover, the use of sexist slurs tend to be less tolerated when used by a higher ($M = 1.21$, $SD = .44$) than by an equal working-status person ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .70$; $p = .07$, $d = .38$). This pattern of results was moderated by the class of sexist slurs, as shown by the type of slur and type of relationship interaction, $F(2, 68) = 48.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .59$. An overall tendency to rate SDSs as less acceptable than SOSs emerged in all types of relationships (Table 3). In particular, pairwise analyses corrected for multiple comparisons (Bonferroni's correction) showed that, although both classes of slurs were judged very low on social acceptability, SDSs were slightly more acceptable in the affective condition ($M = 1.58$, $SD = .84$) than in either the higher-status user condition ($M = 1.06$, $SD = .23$; $p = .001$, $d = .84$) or equal-status user condition ($M = 1.16$, $SD = .40$; $p = .001$, $d = .64$), and these two last conditions did not differ from each other ($p = .28$, $d = .30$). Similarly, SOSs were more accepted in the affective ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.69$) than in both work-related contexts (both $ps < .001$ and $ds > 1.57$). Nevertheless, the acceptability of the SOSs was even lower in the higher-status user condition ($M = 1.35$, $SD = .70$) than in the equal-status user condition ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 1.08$; $p = .07$, $d = .38$), albeit the statistical comparison fell short of significance and the effect size was small. In other words, use of SDSs in a work-related context was always considered inappropriate, while SOSs were more strongly condemned when used by an individual in a superior status position than when he or she was a peer of the target.

Furthermore, a main effect of the gender of the user, $F(1, 34) = 6.29$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$, was found. Specifically, participants considered slightly more acceptable the use of sexist slurs by a woman ($M = 1.85$, $SD = .65$) than by a man ($M = 1.74$, $SD = .58$). In addition, the gender of the user interacted with the type of slur and the type of relationship, $F(2, 68) = 3.61$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$. As for the affective relationship, SDSs were slightly more acceptable when used by a woman ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.06$) than by a man ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .76$; $p = .03$, $d = .32$). At the same time, the same SDSs were equally judged to be socially unacceptable in

any work-related context, regardless of the user's gender ($ps > .21$, $ds < .18$). As for the acceptability of SOSs in a work-related context, these slurs tended to be tolerated less when used by a man rather than by a woman (both $ps = .07$; $ds < .15$), regardless of the status of the user. Note however that the size of these effects was generally low, suggesting an overall unacceptability of the use of these labels by both men and women. No difference in terms of user's gender was found in the affective relationship condition ($p = .75$, $d = .25$; Table 3). This result partially supports Hypothesis 3, as it suggests that the gender of the user only influenced the acceptability of SOSs, but not of SDSs, in a work-related context.

No significant main effect of the participants' gender, $F(1, 34) = 2.32$, $p = .14$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, or significant interactions emerged, indicating that the acceptability of the use of sexist slurs was equally perceived by both female ($M = 1.66$, $SD = .69$) and male participants ($M = 1.96$, $SD = .44$), regardless of the type of relationship and the gender of the user.

4. Discussion

Sexist slurs are commonly used (Swim et al., 2001), and people can be targeted or incidentally exposed to them in different social situations. Swim et al. (2001) showed that women in the United States experience different types of sexist comments that include slurs (e.g., "bitch") and remarks about their body or physical appearance. Herein, we focused only on slurs. Surprisingly, although objectifying slurs such as "hot chick" exist, no research seems to have examined how they are appraised or how their use is perceived. In our research, we extended the literature by taking into account sexist labels that derogate women by stressing their promiscuity and sexual looseness as well as those that stress the sexualized aspects of women. We named the two classes of slurs *sexist derogatory slurs* (SDSs) and *sexist objectifying slurs* (SOSs).

Our study showed that these two classes of sexist slurs are evaluated differently. In line with previous research (Preston and Stanley, 1987; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008), our findings showed that SDSs were perceived as more strongly offensive than SOSs. Although women rated overall sexist slurs as more offensive than men did, both male and female participants agreed in rating SDSs as more offensive than SOSs. Moreover, we extended previous research on sexist slurs (Preston and Stanley, 1987; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2008) by investigating whether these two classes of offensive slurs differed in terms of their social acceptability. Regardless of gender, participants indicated that SOSs were much more socially acceptable than SDSs. This could be explained by the fact that these slurs reflected different motivations: approaching versus distancing. Indeed, SOSs could be seen as appreciative and complimenting the attractiveness of a woman, whereas SDSs are seen as derogatory to women. The lack of a gender effect on social acceptability could be explained by the fact that participants of both sexes were raised in the same cultural context and likely interiorized to the same extent the inappropriate tone of these slurs. Indeed, individuals have prior knowledge about norms related to language and its use (see Croom, 2013a, 2014).

Furthermore, the main goal of the present research was to examine whether the social acceptability of sexist slurs varies in different social contexts. In particular, we focused on two contextual factors: type of relationship and gender of the person speaking the sexist slurs. Our results showed that the acceptability of sexist slurs changes across different types of relationships. Overall, both SDSs and SOSs were more accepted when used in an affective relationship rather than in a formal context such as a workplace, as suggested for other types of slurs (Jay, 2009; Kleinman et al., 2009; Nussbaum et al., 2005). Unexpectedly, we found that in an affective relationship the gender of the user was a crucial variable in the perceived acceptability of the use of SDSs but not of SOSs. In an intimate relationship, SDSs were more tolerated when used by a woman than by a man. This could be explained by the fact that when SDSs are used by a woman to address another woman, they could be reframed in a positive way (Kleinman et al., 2009) that increases cohesion and solidarity between people belonging to the same group (Croom, 2011; Leech, 1983; Pfister, 2010). In this regard, there is increasing literature about "reclaimed terms" showing that using labels that stigmatize the self and the group to which individuals belong increases the observers' and individuals' perception of the self-labeler's power (Galinsky et al., 2013).

The use of SOSs in an intimate relationship was instead slightly tolerated when used by either a man or a woman. As SOSs are generally considered socially accepted terms, it is possible that their connotation does not change depending on the gender of the user. Moreover, these slurs may have an ambiguous connotation as they could be perceived as appreciative or even complimentary when the user and the target share a close intimacy such as a friendship.

Finally, in line with research on taboo terms (Jay, 1992; Jay, 2009) and on sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Gutek et al., 1983), the acceptance of sexist slurs in a work-related context depends on the user's status and gender. We found different outcomes for SDSs and SOSs. Indeed, the status and gender of the user tended not to affect the acceptability of SDSs in work-related settings, as this class of slurs is never tolerated. This lack of effect due to contextual factors is probably caused by the blatant negative tone of SDSs, which are clearly recognized as inappropriate. In contrast, the acceptance of SOSs was affected by the status and gender of the user. As a matter of fact, the data showed that SOSs were strongly condemned when used by a man who held a higher status position than the target. These findings are in line with Henry, Butler and Brandt's study (2014), suggesting that the lower the status of the target of a slur, the higher the perceived offensiveness of that slur. These authors also claimed that low-status targets are expected to respond emotionally to group-based slurs, a factor that, in turn, affects the perceived acceptability of the offense. In this regard, our results may also be interpreted in light of the fact that sexist slurs may be perceived as sexual harassment toward a woman who endorses a low-status role in an organizational setting. Indeed, SOSs in a work-related context are less acceptable when used by a man than by a woman, especially when the male perpetuator holds a higher rather than an equal status position compared to the victim of such sexist labels.

Taken together, these results show that contextual factors influence the acceptability of sexist slurs, especially when their prejudiced connotation is less evident, as is the case of SOSs. Although SOSs are generally processed as less offensive and

slightly acceptable, in certain contexts they cannot be tolerated. Indeed, in a formal context such as the workplace, SOSs are clearly condemned when used by a man in a powerful position as they may be processed as episodes of sexual harassment. This idea was corroborated by the fact that both men and women condemned the use of SDSs. Thus, as SOSs have an ambivalent connotation (i.e., flattering, but at the same time reducing the female body to a sexual object), the use of this class of sexist slurs is perceived as an expression of harassment only when the intent of the user can be considered harmful or contrary to social norms.

Our findings provide new evidence about the acceptability of sexist slurs and new insights into the debate on the condemnation of verbal harassment toward women in public contexts. Indeed, when judges of a court have to assess the "objective severity" of harassment events, they are invited to consider the social context in which these events happened. This includes the relationship between the victim and the harasser, the setting (private vs. public) and the type of harassment (Frank, 2002). Given our findings, this debate could take into account the distinction between SDSs and SOSs, in addition to different contextual factors. To our knowledge, this study provides the first evidence that distinct types of sexist slurs are differently accepted and that their connotation might change depending on the social setting. As a matter of fact, while SDSs are clearly at odds with anti-sexist norms, SOSs are difficult to classify as sexist *per se*. Indeed, the social unacceptability of these labels emerges when they clash against a normative context and end up being reframed as sexual harassment acts. As a matter of fact, SOSs may be interpreted as revealing an approaching motivation when used by a man. This motivation, potentially perceived as complimenting in an affective relationship, becomes inappropriate in a work-related context as these objectifying slurs emphasize a woman's subordination and portray her as a mere sexual object of men's desires.

Our findings also shed light on the way contextual factors can affect the appraisal of group-based insults. First, the membership of the user of such insults may alter the appraisal of the evaluative tone of a derogatory group label. Indeed, our findings indicate that the membership of the user may signal the evaluative aspects and then the acceptability of the derogative labels. Second, the relative status of the user of the slurs affects how the target would react to such insults. In line with Henry and colleagues' (2014) findings, one may expect a low-status target to respond emotionally to group-based insults more than a high-status target. Hence, contextual factors, such as the asymmetrical user-target status, would affect the understanding of the insult by anticipating the consequences of that insult. Third, the type of relationship might reframe the meaning of what is communicated with a group-based insult. This would likely be the case of SOSs stated in an intimate relationship rather than in a formal context.

In conclusion, our study suggests that contextual factors might alter the evaluative tone, the understanding and the meaning of group-based insults. However, our study investigated situations in which members of two different groups (i.e., men and women) were present in the same setting, and the group-based slur was pointed to one of these groups (i.e., women), thus leaving the question unsolved as to whether the same contextual factors may alter the evaluative tone and the understanding and the meaning of a slur addressing a third group (e.g., Jews). It might be plausible that in this case, for instance, the acceptability of the anti-Semitic labels would be more stable across settings and would likely be ruled by broader norms that condemn (or condone) the expression of anti-Semitic statements. Thus, the factors that might allow for the stability or for the malleability of the meaning of group-based insults need to be taken in account.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

This study is the first to suggest a distinction between different classes of sexist slurs and to test their acceptability across contexts. However, as with all research, it has some limitations. The generalizability of our findings is at least in part constrained by the sample size, which is modest. Our sample, albeit almost balanced with respect to the participants' gender, was mainly young students, thus limiting our inference to other populations, such as adults in general or non-student participants. Future research may rely on larger and more diverse samples where age and political orientation should be considered. Indeed, compared to adults, young people seem to differ in their use of sexist and nonsexist language from adults (Parks and Roberton, 1998). This may relate to the fact that youths often use slurs without referring to the actual content of the words (see the use of homophobic slurs among young peers; Korobov, 2004; Phoenix et al., 2003). Moreover, political orientation-related variables (e.g., activism, identification with liberal vs. conservative ideology) may play a moderating role in participants' acceptability of SOSs and SDSs.

Another limitation refers to the fact that we considered slurs that are specific for the Italian language. Nevertheless, we believe that even in other languages it is possible to distinguish between derogatory and objectifying sexist slurs. Indeed, the distinction between derogatory and objectifying slurs is not only applicable to sexist labels, but it also extends to racial slurs (Croom, 2008, 2013b). Croom (2008) reported that racial groups can be derogated by using non-human metaphors (e.g., terms like "apples" in referring to Native Americans and "bananas" in referring to Asian Americans) and objectifying expressions (e.g., "antique farm equipment" to refer to African–Americans and depict them as non-living entities; Croom, 2013b). When used to address group members in these ways, these words become slurs that do not substitute for, but rather appear alongside more straightforwardly derogatory labels (e.g., "nigger"). However, these classes of words are both used and perceived as social slurs rather than descriptive terms (Croom, 2015). In sum, the distinction between derogatory and objectifying slurs that we put forward in our work mirrors a similar theoretical and empirical distinction drawn on racial slurs by Croom (2008, 2013a, 2013b, 2015, and 2014).

Finally, the role of user's intention and the audience's interpretation of the slurs should be examined in future studies. Research on sexist language has shown that comments and remarks acquire a different connotation and lead to different

consequences if presented in a serious or humorous way (Ford and Ferguson, 2004; Pexman and Olinek, 2002). Moreover, the interpretation and reactions may depend on the audience. Research has demonstrated that the presence of other men and women in situations where someone uses sexist language affects the way in which the user and the language are perceived (Swim and Hyers, 1999).

At a practical level, the current findings might support intervention programs aimed at reducing sexist language and contributing to gender equality. Anti-sexist interventions in educational and public contexts should allow individuals to be aware of the women-bashing power of these apparently neutral objectifying terms by showing the negative consequences of this class of slurs.

5. Conclusion

Our research shows that making a distinction between sexist derogatory and sexist objectifying slurs is useful. These slurs are indeed perceived and socially accepted in general and across contexts differently. Our findings inform about the fact that contextual factors such as the type of relationship between the user and the target, the gender of the user, and the setting (private vs. public) influence the social acceptability of the two classes of sexist slurs. In particular, while sexist derogatory slurs tend to always be condemned, sexist objectifying slurs are more "malleable" in the sense that they are tolerated differently and are affected more easily by contextual factors.

Acknowledgments

This work is supported by PRIN (2012)-20123X2PXT_003 grant to the second author. We would like to thank Claudia Huidobro Pomarolli and Roberta Raniero for their assistance with the data collection.

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