

21. Beyond their semantic and evaluative tone: Derogatory group labels as a social tool of disempowerment

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Derogatory group labels (i.e., DGLs) frame group memberships (e.g., a Jew) in an offensive fashion (e.g., a kike), thus allowing an individual or a group to be insulted by disparaging their social identity (Carnaghi & Bianchi, 2017; O'Dea et al., 2015).

In this chapter, we will review three distinct, though related, theoretical perspectives that have conceptualized DGLs differently. The first perspective is focused on the lexical aspects of DGLs, and suggests that label semantics account for both the appraisal and the psychological consequences of exposure to DGLs (Mullen & Leader, 2005). The second perspective stems from Allport's insight suggesting that DGLs are 'emotionally toned labels' (Allport, 1954/1979, p.181). Accordingly, DGLs are framed as 'a telegraphic shorthand for hostile prejudice' (Mullen & Leader, 2005), thus highlighting the close interplay between DGLs and prejudice. The third perspective was introduced by Maass and later developed by other scholars; this perspective has emphasized the role of DGLs in highlighting the lower status of a stigmatized group and the disempowering of that group (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007a; Wang et al., 2017).

Rather than being mutually exclusive, these perspectives have focused on specific facets of DGLs and have highlighted a panoply of unique psychological consequences associated with overhearing such labels.

The semantics of DGLs

The mispronunciation of ethnic group labels (e.g., Paki for Pakistani), as well as the intentional phonological alteration of the first names of members of an ethnic group, and the conceptualization of an ethnic group with the most frequent proper name (e.g., Giuseppe for Italian people) appear to be the most common ways to denigrate and engage in verbal (micro)aggressions towards ethnic groups (Allen, 1988; Kholi & Solórzano, 2012).

A more blatant fashion to verbally denigrate outgroups is to replace the category labels which are merely meant to describe the groups (e.g., proper, preferred labels of a group, such as 'woman') with 'an altogether different name with negative semantics' (Allen, 1988; p. 217). The target group is conflated with the name of a famous, and possibly negative, group member (e.g., Adolf for German people), or called by food names (e.g., baguette for French people) and animal metaphors (e.g., frogs for French people).

Animal metaphors have been regarded as taboo words, and their use has been long sanctioned or limited in various cultures because of the acknowledged harm that could result from their use (Jay, 2009). Examples of animal metaphors as DGLs can be easily detected in the history of genocides and violence: 'Jews' were depicted as rats, snakes, and parasites in 'La difesa della Razza' -a fascist publication issued in Italy in 1938- (Volpato, 2013); Tutsis were referred to as 'cockroaches' during the conflict in Rwanda (Bell-Fialkoff, 1996).

Mullen and Leader (2005, p. 195) noticed that animal metaphors are disproportionately used to name the outgroups compared to the ingroup, suggesting the risk run by the outgroup of being dehumanized: 'ingroup gives itself [names] often derive from native words for 'real humans' or 'the people', whereas the ethnophaulisms [i.e., DGLs] given to outgroups are often derived from native words for 'beast' and 'animal' (Fried, 1975)'. Along this line, Haslam and colleagues (2011) suggested that the perceived offensiveness of DGLs issued by animal metaphors is accounted for by the unique meaning conveyed by the various metaphors. In particular, the offensiveness of animal metaphors used as DGLs is strongly entrenched both in their content of depravity and unpleasantness and in the dehumanizing meaning they suggest. Indeed, some animal metaphors, such as those comparing humans with rats and snakes, convey (moral) disgust. In addition, animal metaphors that are judged highly offensive

are those that succeed in turning humans into animal-like beings, as in the case of metaphors indicating stupidity (e.g., “monkey”).

The key role of the semantics of DGLs in enacting and perpetuating social exclusion has been established by several archives and laboratory studies carried out by Mullen (Mullen & Johnson, 1993; 1995; Mullen & Leader, 2005; Mullen et al., 2000; Mullen, 2001). According to Mullen and colleagues, DGLs are organized along two basic dimensions. The former deals with the semantics of DGLs and is referred to as complexity, and the latter points to the evaluative tone of DGLs and is termed valence. Specifically, DGLs for some ethnic groups span several semantic clusters. For example, Italian immigrants in the United States are referred to by personal names (e.g., Giuseppe, Maria), by the names of typical Italian food (e.g., pasta, spaghetti), by the names of criminal associations (e.g., mafia), signaling a relatively higher level of complexity in cognitive representation. For other ethnic groups, DGLs are grouped around a few semantic clusters, implying a relatively lower level of complexity in cognitive representation (e.g., Belgian immigrants in the United States are addressed by some semblance of their group name, “belgeek” and “flamingo” – Mullen & Leader, 2005). Also, for the same group, some semantic clusters are more negative (e.g., mafia) than others (e.g., spaghetti). The overall evaluation given to the DGLs of a group is derived from the average of the valence associated with each cluster, so that some groups are represented more negatively than others.

Archival research carried out by Mullen and Smyth (2004) and Mullen and Rice (2003) has demonstrated that the complexity of the DGLs, more than the valence of these DGLs, better predicted the social exclusion of ethnic groups across 150 years. This pattern of results was later corroborated by experimental research. Mullen, Leader, and Rice (2004) orthogonally manipulated the complexity and valence of DGLs pointing to a group. Results indicated that decreasing the complexity of the DGLs which participants used to call a group, more so than increasing the negativity of such DGLs, promoted the stronger exclusion of that group.

Overall, this line of research warns of the crucial role played by the semantics of DGLs in their perceived offensiveness, as well as of the complexity of DGL semantics in perpetrating social exclusion.

The evaluative tone of DGLs

According to Allport, when DGLs are used ‘we can be almost certain that the speaker intends not only to characterize the person’s memberships but also to disparage and reject him’ (p.181, italics in original; Allport, 1954/1979).

This conceptualization puts forward three fundamental aspects of the DGLs. First, while both DGLs and category labels point to the group membership of their targets, DGLs convey a harsher evaluative tone than category labels (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007a; 2007b). Second, while common insult convey a negative tone that targets an individual identity, DGLs disparage the targets’ social identity (Bianchi et al., 2019; O’Dea et al., 2017). Third, DGLs can be linguistic discriminatory tools that bear prejudiced meanings and can reinforce prejudiced attitudes (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007a).

Carnaghi and Maass (2007b) proposed that as DGLs and category labels point to the same group membership, they should activate similar stereotypical content. However, due to their prejudiced undertones, DGLs should activate less flattering evaluative reactions than category labels. To test this idea, Carnaghi and Maass (2007b) analyzed the manner in which heterosexual participants appraised category and DGLs referring to gay men. Specifically, the authors relied on a lexical decision task in which heterosexual participants were shown a screen in which words (i.e., targets) or strings of letters which did not make up a real word. Participants were asked to quickly decide whether a word was real or not by pressing appropriate keys on a keyboard. The targets varied orthogonally in their level of stereotypically to the category of gay men (i.e., stereotypical targets, such as ‘effeminate’; counter-stereotypical targets, such as ‘virile’, and irrelevant targets, such as ‘greedy’) and valence (i.e., positive and negative targets). Each target was preceded (i.e., primed) once by a DGL (e.g., ‘fag’) and once by a category label (e.g., ‘gay’). Participants were faster in recognizing stereotypical targets as words regardless of the prime. This implies that when primed with category labels or DGLs referring to gay men, the stereotypes were equally activated. Importantly, DGLs in comparison to category labels inhibited the accessibility of positive contents. Corroborating these results, albeit by using a self-report measure, Bianchi and colleagues (2019) found that both DGLs and category were similar in pointing to the group membership of their targets, but DGLs were appraised as more offensive and their use as less socially acceptable than category labels.

A key test of this perspective is the comparison between DGLs and common insults. Both types of labels slander their targets, but only DGLs point to a specific social group while common insults are not tied nor address any specific group. With regard to this, O'Dea and colleagues (O'Dea et al., 2015; O'Dea et al., 2017) presented participants with vignettes describing an interracial interaction in which a White man referred to a Black man using either a non-racial term (e.g., 'buddy'), a common insult (e.g., 'asshole'), or a racial DGL (e.g., 'nigger'). Results showed that participants' ratings of offensiveness would increase from non-racial terms to common insults, peaking with DGLs. In a similar vein, Bianchi and colleagues (2019) found that DGLs were appraised as more offensive and less socially acceptable than common insults.

A crucial claim of this theoretical perspective is that only DGLs, but not category labels or common insults, 'precipitate subsequent hostile prejudice, exclusion and violence towards the target outgroup' (Mullen & Leader, 2005; p. 194). In support of this claim, Fasoli and colleagues (2016) showed that heterosexual participants increased their physical distance from a gay man after being exposed to a DGL (e.g., 'faggot'), compared with a category label (e.g., 'gay') and a common insult (e.g., 'asshole'). Hence, DGLs appear to increase participants' prejudice-based responses, as physical distance represents an unobtrusive measure of participants' prejudice. Bianchi and colleagues (2019) tested the reverse relationship, namely whether enhanced levels of prejudice towards specific groups affected the appraisal of DGLs referring to those groups. Bianchi and colleagues (2019) found that participants' level of prejudice reduced the perceived offensiveness of DGLs, and in turn enhanced their social acceptability. Importantly, participants' prejudice toward the groups that were targets of DGLs was unrelated to both the offensiveness and social acceptability of common insults.

Overall, these results point to the specificity of DGLs as linguistic devices that carry a negative evaluative tone and perpetuate prejudice and discrimination.

DGLs as a disempowering social device

DGLs are words typically created by majority members to name minorities. This genesis of DGLs gives rise to two constitutive features of DGLs. First, DGLs strengthen intergroup contexts, leading to a cascade of cognitive and social biases typically observed when intergroup relations

are worsened (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007a). Second, DGLs are words that highlight the inferiority and stigmatized status of the outgroup and cause the victim to feel disempowered (Henry et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2017).

Carnaghi & Maass (2007a) relied on a lexical decision task in which participants were presented with some words (i.e., targets) and some strings of letters that did not form a real word. Importantly, targets comprised words that pointed to inter-group context (e.g., cooperation and antagonism), and words that were pretested as unrelated to the intergroup (e.g., holiday and vomit). Each target was preceded once by a category label (e.g., 'gay'), and once by a DGL (e.g., 'fag'). Analyses on reaction times revealed that no difference was observed between a DGL and a category label for words that were unrelated to the intergroup relations, while reaction times tended to be faster for words related to intergroup relations when following a DGL rather than a category label. Therefore, exposure to DGLs, rather than category labels, is highly likely to frame the social context in an intergroup fashion.

The idea that DGLs are effective in stressing the inter-group nature of social interactions has been corroborated by studies showing that DGLs enhance ingroup favoritism (Fasoli, Maass, & Carnaghi, 2015). Indeed, Fasoli and colleagues exposed heterosexual participants either to a DGL or a category label (i.e., homosexual) addressing gay men, and asked them to allocate fictitious funds to two prevention programs. One program was stereotypically associated with heterosexuals, namely a sterility prevention program, while the other was stereotypically associated with gay men, that is an AIDS-HIV prevention program. Findings suggested stronger ingroup favoritism, namely a preference to allocate funds to prevention programs for heterosexual rather than gay individuals, after the exposure to DGLs than to category labels.

Subsequent studies have highlighted the power of DGLs not only in accentuating the intergroup nature of social interactions, but also in worsening the quality of those interactions. Indeed, DGLs are not only effective in increasing favoritism toward the ingroup (Fasoli et al., 2015), but are particularly effective in promoting disdain toward the outgroup (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). It is worth noting that while ingroup preference is, at least to varying degrees, a pervasive side effect of intergroup contexts per se, outgroup hatred is more likely to emerge in deteriorated group contexts, such as those characterized by conflict and enmity (Mummendey & Otten, 1998; Weisel & Böhm, 2015).

The potential for DGLs to emphasize and degrade the nature of intergroup relations is likely due to their potential to highlight the minority and stigmatized status of the group they target. Indirect evidence to support this conjecture are findings attesting that the perceived offensiveness of DGLs depends on the status of the group they target (Henry et al., 2014), and on their ability to disempower the targeted minority (Wang et al., 2017). Hence, it is most plausible that DGLs function as signals of the differential status of groups. Such accentuation of status asymmetry likely leads members of the dominant group to discriminate against (out-group disdain) members of the minority group, as it occurs in a clearly asymmetrical group status context (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1987).

Conclusion

We briefly illustrated three different non-mutually exclusive perspectives in the study of DGLs.

The first perspective takes into consideration the semantic content conveyed by DGLs and how this content differs from the one conveyed by category labels. Significant to this perspective are studies that focus on the lexical aspect of DGLs and show how the contents and the semantic complexity of the DGLs shape bystanders' reactions to such labels.

The second perspective considers DGLs to be discriminatory devices that express negative evaluative tones and perpetuate prejudice. Studies from this perspective have focused on the comparison between DGLs and category and/or common insults and show a differential appraisal of DGLs as conveyors of negative meanings and reinforcers of prejudice.

The third perspective takes into account the complex intergroup dynamics that embed the use of DGLs and their consequences for status and power. In this perspective, DGLs are mainly products of the dominant majority used in the maintenance of status hierarchies via the exacerbation of intergroup dynamics and the exclusion of comparatively less powerful minorities.

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