

Slurs of Gender

What is the relationship between slurs of gender like ‘slut’, ‘cunt’, ‘bitch’, and ‘sissy’ and what I call group-referencing slurs like those targeting groups based on race -- ‘nigger’, ‘spic’; religion -- ‘kike’; sexual orientation -- ‘faggot’, ‘dyke’, ‘queer’; nationality -- ‘boche’, ‘wop’; occupation -- ‘whore’; political affiliation -- ‘commie’? In this paper, I argue that slurs of gender deviate in certain respects from the semantics of group-referencing slurs. Whereas the latter, in their most basic uses, make reference to a group (African-Americans, Hispanics, Jews, etc) and its members, the same as the slur’s neutral counterpart (in those instances in which it has one), slurs of gender are applied to individuals of a particular gender who deviate from patriarchal and misogynistic social norms for that gender. ‘Slut’, for instance, is applied to girls and women who break a whole host of patriarchal and misogynistic social norms regarding the amount of sex and number and variety of sex partners she has, as well as the autonomy and assertiveness she exhibits about wanting sex. ‘Sissy’ is applied to boys who break patriarchal social norms on masculinity. Yet, in other respects, the semantics of slurs of gender also aligns with that of group-referencing slurs: both encode the speaker’s expression of contempt toward their targets. For ‘slut’, by expressing contempt toward targets for breaking the patriarchal and misogynistic social norms on sex, speakers map social identities onto their targets: what she *is* is a slut; what he *is* is a sissy. I argue for these points by exploring slurs of gender speech act potential and patterns of semantic change, including those in appropriation, and by comparing them with stereotype encoding slurs like ‘Uncle Tom’ and ‘Jewish American Princess’.