

The N-word: the Necessity of Prohibiting it

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Abstract. The main point of this paper is to help readers to decide whether people should allow the n-word to become prevalent in public. The behavior of speaking the n-word, consciously or unconsciously, might be treated as racial discrimination, and thus people who utilize it might be considered a racist, as the n-word could not be detached from the social context that generalized it. However, a few people began to consider its culture and historical values. By using this format, a speaker can create an identity that demonstrates knowledge of African American history as well as a practical understanding of the nature and significance of the diaspora experience. The form of the n-word has been changing over time, which means the public gradually endeavored to accept this word. Those scholars suggested that there should be less tragedy, in which case people, Caucasians in particular, could not defray the cost of mentioning the n-word (such as losing jobs, online violence), and it has proven somewhat effective in spreading a variety of attitudes related to its fundamental meaning, including solidarity, a provocative voice for equality.

Keywords: N-word; racism; language game.

1. Introduction

According to the definition of Oxford dictionary, a slur could be defined as an aggressive remark that is dedicated to an individual or a group of people, in which N-world is considered the most offensive term that only exists in an abbreviated form. Chideya (1999) even gave its name “a nuclear bomb of racial epithets” (p.9) to expose the strength and threats it might cause [1]. The phrase has been used as a racist insult since the mid-1800s, but due to greater awareness of the feelings of those who have previously been the objects of racial and other sorts of dysphemisms, it has fallen out of popularity with the public [2]. Moreover, Henderson (2003) asserts that nigger is unspeakable and has now acquired a taboo associated with the most contemptible word in the English language [3]. With social media being around, there are more opportunities for people around the world to express their views, so the networking platforms become ever acceptable to multicultural attitudes. The n-word avoids its original form, “nigger”, attempting instead to achieve less offensive efficacy with the new form of “nigga” or “negro” [4] and began to occur occasionally in conversations and interactions, especially in the African American community in which black people use it to express fraternity [5]. However, it is obvious that other races, the Caucasian, in particular, making this word occur intentionally or unintentionally in their utterances might descend into unimaginable outcomes. Scholars, say John McWhorter, had heightened the need for the refusal of this voice [6]. He differentiated the difference between the use and mention of the n-word. People who intentionally “use” it towards Black people should not be treated the same as those who “mention” it involuntarily. When speakers particularly use this word in any context many times, they are provoking hostile attitudes towards Black people and relegating them to the lowest status. The use of it is the conduct of treating black people in a derogatory way. On the contrary, if speakers cite the n-word from other speeches occasionally, not directly articulate it, a behavior like this would not be considered an offense mostly because the intention of the word user is not to use for the purpose of insult, but simply to quote the word, and does not reveal any more information about it. Scholars stressed the necessity that use and mention must be separable. For one thing, the ignorance of the distinction might make people believe that black people could not discern a slur or epithet from a citation. For another, there could be a considerable fragility rooted in their blood so that they can be destroyed by saying a word, which means the Black is not strong enough to face any speech attacks. The situation changes for the worse once the hypersensitivity ever prevailing among black people could ruin their confidence in

culture. Prohibiting people, especially the white, from saying that word empowers black people to give them ways to deprecate their other behaviors. Moreover, finally, the dictionary definitions of use and mention are different. “Use” means something to be done for a particular purpose, whereas “mention” means something is spoken without giving much information. It is not a tough task for a literate person who could understand the n-word to differentiate the two methods. The current analysis based on Tirrell’s language game strives to give explanations for the necessity of prohibiting the n-word in conversations [7].

2. History Context of the N-word

The origin of the n-word is entwined with the tortured African American history. The debut of it in English form was as early as 1574, according to the online Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Furthermore, it formally occurred in writing in John Rolfe’s diary on New World soil in 1619, which recorded the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in British North America [8]. The word “nigger” was thought to have been borrowed from the Spanish and Portuguese slave trader term “negro”, which meant “black” and referred to the dark skin enslaved people. In the first stage, the n-word had not alluded to racism and kept its neutral property. However, the use of it frequently was found in the settings of the slave trade. Europeans, with a benignly patronizing mindset, believed Africans were a group of people who assumed inferiority and a lack of social, intellectual, and cultural advancement. In terms of OED’s explanation, why white people at the beginning began to use the n-word is to illustrate their hidden empathy towards oppressive people rather than the malicious usage itself. The locals tried to differentiate themselves from other migrant working people in this way. As political, economic, and social conflicts unfolded, people gradually shifted their once neutral and sometimes sympathetic attitudes to a more vitriolic and condescending manner towards black people for their humble social status and slavish adherence to the rules. African American has endured such torment in which they are in a position of being dominated and suppressed for a long time so that the politicians, the slavers, and the ruling elite would ignore their fundamental human rights and take their labor for granted. In the nineteenth century, as the drive to abolish slavery gained momentum, more African Americans were set free, and the n-word was derogatorily transformed into a racial dysphemism for many people have found the strength of the black and even had an irrational fear of African Americans. Researchers found that there was fierce competition between the white and the black for jobs [9]. To withhold African Americans from any opportunities for a decent job, an ideology that emphasized and strengthened preexisting racist beliefs emerged. The n-word was quickly used to index the dehumanizing traits that were linked with African Americans. In the later years, the Whiteness has blatantly juxtaposed the Blackness in American society. Whiteness, according to Leonardo (2002), is labeled for white people in a racial context to emphasize the societal ideology on the basis of skin color [10]. Leonardo (2009) further added to this statement by arguing that racism is a system of oppression that marginalizes colored people and privileged White people rather than just the collection of disparate, unfavorable individual opinions against minoritized people [11]. White people continue to enjoy White privilege whether or not they participate in a debate on Whiteness. In part, because it establishes unseen societal norms that all other races are measured against, Whiteness retains its social supremacy. The pith of Whiteness is anti-blackness, while the Blackness is the reverse of the Whiteness not only because of its color property but also the societal identity associated with the authority. Anti-Blackness has been made explicit in historical and contemporary discourse as a result of White people’s persistent use of the n-word [12,13]. It legitimized verbal racial attacks towards the Black by explicating their inferiority and by highlighting the supremacy of the Whiteness [14]. James Baldwin, a famous American Black writer, has made a profound statement on the matter, “What white people have to do is try to find out in their hearts why it was essential for them to have a nigger in the first place, I am not a nigger, therefore. I am a man [15].” Baldwin’s speech serves as a reminder to readers that African American people, no matter how

wealthy, how influencing, how talented did not count as human and the n-word was perfectly used to distressingly destruct their dignity and humanity.

3. The use of the n-word: Racist language game

Lynne Tirrell (2012) proposed a language game theory to explicate the power of language. A language game is much similar to the child's game that is regulated by rules [7]. However, language games activate the utterances through human activities, which means the addresser constructs some social relations with the addressee through the language. Once the addresser hurls the n-word at the addressee, whether they are Black or not, they license non-linguistic behaviors (such as maltreatment, derision, and even lynching) to other speakers to use dysphemistic terms towards other people. Deeply derogatory terms serve five major functions to enable the oppressive language game to play: (1) the term serves to divide the marked group to which the targeted people belong and the unmarked group as the outsider of the marked group. For example, a speaker persuades another speaker to say away from the Black by using the n-word to set up the "we" group, whereby the two are members of that group, and they are naturally outside of the disgraceful group. (2) the term must satisfy the "essential conditions" which means the racial epithet must manifest the badness of being that kind of human (p.19). N-word, for example, establishes and reinforces hierarchy by communicating a negative message that is presumably intended to convey to the target and audience a crucial element of the target. (3) the functions that the word performs are under the contemporary social contexts, which are named "social embeddedness condition" (p.20). Social context is the most significant factor which endows the n-word with the power and leverage so that it could be used to achieve the purpose of dehumanizing people. (4) In spite of the group division, the terms also serve other functions. Sometimes, the slur, as a signal directed at a third person who is in the subordinate group, used by the speaker is transmitted to the listener who is also a member of the minor group, the effect of which would finally have on the hearer. (5) the use of derogatory terms also generalizes actions. Calling black people the n-word is labeling the speaker a racist and the black a victim of racism.

N-word as the most derogatory term continuously functions as "a mechanism of a persistent racial ideology" [16]. It marks the outsider group and insider group first. There is a specific example in Richard Pryor, a Black American comedian unfolded a realistic workplace conversation between a white supervisor and a black employee. In the company, workers are ill-paying and marginalized, and their desire for promotion and higher remuneration is always ignored. However, when the situation is linked to the ethnic group, it is aggravated into workplace bullying and racism.

Boss: How you feel, Fred?

Fred: Fuck you!

Boss: I beg your pardon, Fred? Why don't you just—ah—take the day off.

Fred: You know, they think you crazy. Niggas is in trouble. [17]

Fred, whom Pryor played, was a Black employee. In this segment, even if the n-word was spoken out by black people, it was evident that the n-word marked all the Black workers combined into an inner group that excluded white administrators. The white skin color and superior position made employers outsiders of that group, the contrary side of the workers. It was almost impossible to investigate whether Richard enlarged the discourtesy of the Black at work willfully. Based on his reactions, readers could find it easy to speculate that the administrator, a white man, was polite and amiable, whereas the blacks were rude and surly so that they were naturally labeled with the n-word, even calling themselves the n-word. However, as Richard imitated the real working scenery, readers could infer that black workers' rights or discontent might seldom be treated properly, and therefore they utilized the n-word to express solidarity with other African Americans for working survival. Secondly, to be the worst derogatory term, the n-word should satisfy the essentialism condition. N-word establishes and enforces hierarchy by communicating a negative message that is ostensibly intended to convey a slavish and subordinate characteristic of the black to the listener. In other words, the essential qualities of a Black and a White are disparate, in which case the white are naturally gain

more respect and compliment, but contempt and hatred left with the Black. If one person is not an African American or a black, he might not be thought to cause any threat or detriment to society and would not be classified at the ground level. A few of the unfavourable stereotypes of African Americans mentioned by Reddick, Asim, and Croom asserted that they are intellectually, socially, and educationally humble, ready to serve anyone in any positions [18-20]; indifferent and well-accustomed to the mental and physical abuse; indolent; irresponsible; tending to commit crime and violence; skilled at making noises; and sexually obsessive. In addition, social background factors play a facilitative role in the n-word eventually becoming a derogatory epithet, “nigger”. In terms of n-word development in African American groups, black people are prevented from competing equally with the White, but they are not deported. Furthermore, the point is that they are labeled as subhuman and excluded from the primary social system. Due to their enslavement, a few African civilians were denied political power, in which case they would not be permitted to launch campaigns and unleash their protests. Slaves were definitely, legally prohibited from doing so because they initially lacked a common language to initiate their rebellion and lacked the legal assistance to protest without risking violence from whites because slaves were not yet regarded as fully human in the societal sense [21]. Slaves had no purchasing power because they were more like consumers than actual people. Therefore, an ideology emerged with emphasized preexisting racist beliefs, and the n-word was authorized to ascribe dehumanizing traits to African American people through this ideology. Fourthly, besides signaling the inside and outside groups, the n-word also serves other functions. Once on the Internet Platform, a man had his moment in the limelight for his hurling of the n-word directly toward a black woman in an airplane that was full of passengers with diverse skin colors. The black woman hit the man in his stomach with her knee by accident, and then the man burst into excessive irritation and began shouting, “*Take her shit! Get fuck off my seat! ...I just say nigger anytime I want!*” At the end of the video, the man was enforced to be taken away by police. It is worth to be noted that the man swore offensive language to express his fury and scorn for the women. He intended the woman to believe that he despised her. He intended for her and the audience to recognize his intention for them to believe the n-word. Indeed, the audience successfully understood what he intended to do, which means they could discover that the man was an utter racist. In short, saying the n-word not only gives people authority who use them but also impairs the dignity of the people who are the targets. Last but not least, the use of the n-word engenders speech act in a context. Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) asserted that violence is an inseparable part of racism [22]. Deeply derogatory terms, especially the n-word, dissimilar to other slurs, have the power to hurt or cause great psychological pressure and damage to people. Take the conversation between the man and the black woman, for example. Speaking in that way helps him manage to construct the stratification in which he was the upper class, and the black woman should be the lower one. The sense of racial superiority is the guiding force that leads to the happening of the n-word, and then brings about the violence.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

It has become clear that the pejorative phrases imply an expressive commitment to the plausibility and value of such use. N-word basically serves the markedness group, which targeted the Black. And then it intends to make the audience believe the negative essence of the black: Nigga is an AAE trait that stands out for some African Americans because it emphasizes an aspect of identity that presents the speaker, addressee, or referent as a pragmatic and pitiable survivor in the diaspora. Besides the group’s markedness, the n-word serves other functions, including political strategy, in which crafty politicians could further utilize the n-word to weaken the black people’s influence and preserve the White privilege. Based on African American history, the development of the n-word could not be separated from the socio-alternation. In the past, the n-word is embedded in the socio-network of oppression and racism with tragic African American slavery history. A small part of people has mitigated their antagonistic attitudes towards the n-word and accepted its occurrence in their lives.

African Americans believe in their capacity and determination to overcome misfortune because they are deeply aware of the suffering they have experienced. They suggested that the dramatic nuances between use and mention were often disregarded, and the two were generalized into the point of use so that a few people might exaggerate the efficacy of the n-word to deliberately damage anyone who just “cite” them. What is more, due to its essentialism condition, people who are hurled at the n-word would be automatically put into the oppressed and vulnerable position. They strongly dissented from the Black delicacy. It is unreasonable that such fragility could gain black people’s sympathy and effectuate Black power escalation instead of genuine contribution and achievement. However, the most significant point for the n-word is not speakers’ use or mention of it but how listeners react to the n-word. Either using or mentioning the n-word, the addresser made it occur in the conversations and transmitted information about the n-word to the addressee, which enables the addressee to understand what happened in the n-word and then decide how to treat it rationally. Based on the mention and use definition, if speakers “mention” the n-word in their speech, they give little information about it. However, speaking the n-word is action-engendering. Listeners are given the opportunity to use the word because they realize its functions from the speaker, despite the fact that the speaker would not give many details. Notwithstanding, researchers supposed that if people try to change the extreme antiracism phenomenon, the meaning of use and mention must be interpreted respectively first. The main problem still attends to people’s attitude towards the n-word, the ideology of African American people. If the mainstream attitudes towards the n-word have changed, the damage that it caused will decrease to a great extent. The study does not allude to the social context in which the n-word occurs. The reason why the n-word could have such power to injure others is because its intended perlocutionary effect. The functional meaning is always influenced by the core semantic content, but the pragmatic contribution of connotations is crucial in determining the veracity of the statement in which the word “nigger” appears. In addition, the study does not shed its light on the roles of the speaker, the listener, and the Black play in conversations. Whether the speaker could be accused as a racist. The listener is the victim of the racism or a bystander who witnesses the happening of racial discrimination, or a hypocrite who indirectly incites the ethnic conflicts. Future research should exert more focus on the people’s attitudes towards the n-word, for example, the public attitudes towards the white’s use of the n-word, and the black’s use of the n-word. As many people have had the tendency to accept the occurrence of the n-word in African American conversations, there is a possibility that it could circulate in society by anyone at any time. Such terms’ usage has changed from being a cultural phenomenon to a societal phenomenon. More evolutionary and comparative analyses of the original usage, classical, slavery, and civil rights perspectives of racial epithets, as well as perspectives on the first term’s usage by African Americans, are worth to be explored.

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