

# A Study on Distinguishing between Using and Mentioning Derogatory Words- Taking the N-word as an Example

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**Abstract.** There has been a heated discussion on saying the N-word. Due to the history of slavery, the N-word has been carrying a derogatory meaning towards black people and it is used to put black people and white people into an inferior and superior position. There are many derivatives of the N-word and the meaning of it has changed from time to time which leads to the controversial situation of this word. Some people hold the view that the N-word should be banned and no one has the right to say it under any circumstances while other people think that people should realize the difference between using and mentioning the N-word. Mixing the use/mention may result in other kinds of discrimination. Therefore, based on Grice's meaning and Tirrel's language games theory, this paper analyzes the difference between use and mention and what consequences people may face if the use and mention are mixed.

**Keywords:** language games; N-word; use/mention.

## 1. Introduction

Due to complex historical reasons, the N-word has been carrying the implication of white supremacy and black inferiority. American popular culture and the formation of certain legal regulations have been influenced by the meaning of the N-word. With the change in cultural norms, the word's meaning and use have been changing over time. However, the N-word has still been affecting people's daily communication and speech acts. Certain people hold negative opinions about this kind of word, while others try to explain the slur and convert its meaning into a gesture of solidarity [1]. There are four different definitions and ways of using the N-word. Firstly, back in the age of slavery, the N-word was used by white people to belittle black people, which was the most common problem this word applied in the recent world. Secondly, the N-word is considered an affection bond between African Americans during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and its meaning is not unchangeable because of different contexts and interlocutors. Thirdly, it is a word that divides people into different classes and African-Americans are considered as lower class. Lastly, Whites, Asians, and Latinos use the N-word as a leveling effect to emulate the coolness and stealth of African Americans [2].

There are many derivatives of the N-word and their endings and pronunciations are slightly different from the original N-word. These derivatives which convey more positive meaning within the Black community are the results that the black people were trying to re-appropriate the N-word and turn it into a less derogatory word. Used in comedian routines and in hip-hop music are the two factors that lead to the widespread use of the derivatives [3]. Therefore, there have been many changes in the meaning and uses of the N-word which result in the controversial situation about this word.

Saying the N-word has been commonly regarded as offensive and defamatory, especially under specific cultural backgrounds. The argument about saying N-word has been raging in recent years and the N-word has gradually become unsayable. When people, especially whites, say this word, no matter whether he or she is using or just mentioning the word, people would think it is inappropriate to say it, and he or she should not say the N-word since it contains derogatory meaning. For instance, the journalist Mike Pesca mentioned the N-word in his podcast while talking about whether non-black people are not allowed to speak the N-word under any circumstances which lead to the result that other people think what he has done has made the workplace unsafe and his podcast is now on another platform [4]. What is worse, saying the N-word could result in violent confrontations and cases caused by saying the N-word happen from time to time. A 77-year-old man was punched and died after

arguing with a black manager at Dunkin Donuts. According to the manager, the old man called him by using the N-word and he was extremely rude. The manager could not tolerate the old man and he punched him in the face which made the old man fall to the ground and his head hit the floor. In the end, the old man died from bleeding in the head [5].

Some researchers hold the view that people should know the difference between mentioning and using the N-word, while others think that saying the N-word should be forbidden no matter what the situation, especially the whites. From the point of this research, it is important for people to realize the difference between mentioning and using the N-word.

This paper will first illustrate the general distinction between the use and mention of a word. Examples will be used to help understand the difference. The second part of this paper will pay attention to the argumentation about the N-word and what opinions different researchers hold toward this issue. Then, this paper will discuss whether people should realize the difference between using and mentioning the N-word in the framework of Grice's and Language Game theory in the third part.

## 2. Use and Mention Distinction

The distinction between use and mention is the distinction between using linguistic entities such as letters, sounds, words, phrases, or entire sentences and mentioning them [6]. To be specific, when using a word, the writer or the interlocutor aims to use the word to accomplish something such as connecting, transitioning, or explaining something [7]. As for mentioning a word, the writer or the interlocutor is paying attention to the word itself as a thing among other things, and saying something about it. To help illustrate the difference between them, here is an example of using and mentioning a word.

(1) The box is on the table.

(2) The word 'box' is spelled with three letters.

When the reader sees the first sentence, the reader would first picture an image that includes a box and a table in his or her head. The reader pays attention to the meaning of the word *box*. To be specific, the reader connects the object itself with the word *box*. As for the second sentence, the focus of the reader is on the word itself rather than the meaning of the word. From the reader's perspective, the word *box* is a string of three letters instead of a specific object or any particular box. The word itself is a part of the sentence and the reader understands the sentence as a whole. Besides, the quotation marks around the word *box* are regarded as signs of mentioning the word, and in some contexts, italics may play the same role.

Based on the basic concepts of mentioning and using a word, the difference between using and mentioning the N-word can be further analyzed in the contexts mentioned above. The journalist Mike Pesca said the N-word in his podcast when he was talking about a specific topic. The speaker and the listener's attention are mainly focused on the word itself and the speaker mentioned the N-word in an objective way without any other implication. However, in the case of the 77-year-old man who died because of saying the N-word to the black manager, he deliberately used the N-word while arguing with the manager since he knew that the N-word has derogatory meaning, and the manager also knew that the word was used to put him into an inferior position.

## 3. Argumentations towards the N-words

In the passage "The New N-Word Standard is not Progress" written by John McWhorter, the writer illustrates his opinion on why people should know the difference between using and mentioning the N-word [8]. On the one hand, mixing the concept of use and mention may lead to chaos and incidents. Under the circumstance that people think there is no difference between using and mentioning the N-word if a person accidentally says the N-word in his or her daily life, he or she would be seen as a racist, and even worse, if there are radical black people nearby, the N-word would lead to violence.

As a result, saying N-word would become an invisible standard that can judge a person's characteristics and morality.

On the other hand, people would believe that black people do not have the ability to distinguish between an epithet and a citation one if the situation continues to happen. It would become a strange kind of antiracism since discrimination still exists with the change of focus from skin color to black people's knowledge of word usage. What is more, if black people may feel insulted by just mentioning the N-word, people would assume that black people are too fragile to even hear the word. It would lead to another kind of discrimination in that white people are given the power to assume that black people are a weak race group.

Some researchers think that the N-word itself does not carry the meaning of a slur. It is the context, utterance, and reception that constitute the derogatory meaning of the N-word [1]. The N-word does not always have a derogatory meaning in all circumstances. Therefore, whether the N-word is a slur or not depends on the specific conversation situation. On the contrary, some people hold the view that N-word should be banned in school since it is a useless and inhumane word [9]. Banning the use of the N-word can make students and the school staff understand the harmfulness of the word. Moreover, some people insist that saying the N-word under any circumstances should be banned completely because the N-word reflects the history of slavery and marginalize black people from white people. In King's research on what person has the right to use the N-word, the result of the research shows that some people hold the view that when a person is at least 50% black, he or she has the right to use the N-word [3]. Besides, there are mixed opinions on whether it is acceptable for Black people to use the N-word with anyone in any situation and whether a person is just repeating what someone else said or wrote. It is also controversial whether it is offensive to use the N-word with a person that is familiar with. In conclusion, who can say the N-word and in what situation a person has the right to say N-word is a controversial topic.

Ignoring the distinction between the use and mention of the N-word would lead to destructive consequences since instead of helping improve the status of black people, it may cause rebellious psychology and result in more severe racial discrimination against black people.

#### **4. The analysis of the N-word and racial discrimination**

This study aims to illustrate further John McWhorter's opinion that the distinction between using and mentioning N-word should be paid attention to otherwise there would be self-destructive consequences for black people. Using the N-word means the speaker intentionally uses this word to disparage black people. Grice's meaning theory and Tirrel's language games theory are used in this part to help analyze the situation of using and mentioning the N-word.

##### **4.1 Grice's Theory**

According to Grice's theory, only when three conditions are satisfied that the meaning can be tenable [10]. Firstly, the speaker intends to do something by giving the utterance. The speaker's intention plays an indispensable part in words' meaning. In the second stage, the addressee should recognize that it is the speaker's intention to make him or she believe in something. Ultimately, the condition is that the speaker's intention succeeds by successful recognition of the intention by the addressee. In other words, the addressee realizes the speaker's intention.

Using the N-word refers to using its derogatory meaning in a conversation. Therefore, in the framework of Grice's meaning theory, using the derogatory meaning of the N-word should meet three conditions. First, the speaker has the intention to make the addressee believe that the N-word has a derogatory meaning and that the speaker is using the meaning to lower him or her. Second, the speaker wants the addressee to realize that he or she is disparaged. In the case of the 77-year-old man, the old man intentionally used the N-word to put the black manager into an inferior position and the black manager realized it which made him angry. Lastly, the speaker's intention succeeds by successful recognition of the intention by the addressee. In the end, the black manager hit the old man because

he felt offended. On the contrary, if the speaker only mentions the N-word, the speaker does not have the intention to use this word to insult black people in the first place. In this sense, the derogatory meaning of the N-word does not exist in the conversation because the focus is on the word itself instead of its offensive meaning. Therefore, there is a clear difference between using and mentioning the N-word.

## 4.2 Language Games

According to Tirrel's theory of language games, there are five features of derogatory terms [11]. First, the derogatory terms function to distinguish people between insiders and outsiders. The terms are used to mark the outsiders and differentiate them from the insiders. For example, if A uses a racial slur to tell B to stay away from people who are from a certain race. A is using the word to create an inside and outside relation. A and B are inside members of a better racial group. Second, the term has the function of negatively essentializing. Hierarchy is created and enforced when people use derogatory terms. Racial slur makes people give tacit consent to the biological difference between different races which leads to social and moral differences. The third one is the social embeddedness condition. The derogatory terms are deeply embedded in social and historical practices. Fourth, the derogatory terms commonly serve more than one function. Apart from insider and outsider function, they also have other functions such as enacting power, inciting crimes, and rationalizing cruelty. Fifth, derogatory terms have the function of engendering actions. For instance, if an adult woman is called a 'girl', the belief that she cannot make serious decisions and do hard work may be rationalized because of the inappropriate address. Derogatory terms would consequently result in actions.

The N-word can be regarded as a derogatory term [11]. It was used by white people to show that they are superior to black people. The derogatory meaning of the N-word divided white people and black people into two totally different groups and white people use it to marginalize the black from their society. The term is also used to make people believe that there is a clear biological difference between white people and black people which may lead to social and biological differences. Due to the history of slavery, it cannot be denied that the N-word does include derogatory meaning and it is deeply embedded in the social background. However, ignoring the difference between using and mentioning the N-word would lead to other kinds of discrimination. The N-word would become a weapon against both white people and black people. People would assume that black people cannot distinguish between use and mention which also regarded black people as a less intelligent race group. In a sense, discrimination still exists. Non-black people, especially white people, who mention the N-word unintentionally may be punished regardless of the use/mention distinction. If these kinds of cases continue to increase, it may play a negative role in helping erase the discrimination against black people since people may think they are unreasonable and only a word can raise their anger. In the end, the action-engendering force of derogatory terms may result in violence and the situation may become worse if a word can have such great power.

Some people may think that the N-word should not be spoken in any circumstances because of its derogatory meaning. However, knowing the basic difference between use/distinguish shows that a person is modernized and well-educated. In Chinses, there is the word "the prison of words" which means literary inquisition. It was a kind of control method implemented used by the sovereign in Qing Dynasty to control socio-cultural ideas. Certain words were strictly banned from use so that the government could rule the civilians more easily. If a word is banned because of its negative meaning, there is no difference between the modern world and the old one.

## 5. Conclusion

The difference between using and mentioning a word is whether the word is used to accomplish something or the focus is just the word itself instead of its meaning. This paper analyzed the distinction between using and mentioning the N-word in the framework of Grice's meaning theory. When a person intentionally uses the N-word to insult black people and he or she wants the addressee

to realize his or her intention. The addressee realizes his or her intention in the conversation and reacts to his or her insult. Then, the derogatory meaning of the N-word is used in the conversation. Otherwise, it cannot be defined as using a word. Besides, the consequence of mixing using and mentioning the N-word is analyzed in the framework of Tirrel's theory of Language Games. According to the Language Games theory, if people do not realize the difference between use/mention N-word, this word would become a weapon against both black and white people and other kinds of discrimination may emerge which would result in violence and even worse situations.

This paper aims to make a clear distinction between using and mentioning the N-word. What is more, this paper also aims to make people realize the importance of distinguishing between use/mention of the N-word. People should know the difference between using and mentioning the N-word. Black people may not be regarded as fragile and unable to distinguish between use/mention. Other kinds of discrimination may be avoided if people treat the N-word more rationally. Besides, the potentially volatile situation may also be avoided since if the concepts of use and mention are mixed, people would be injured by mistake because of mentioning the N-word.

There are three limitations of this study. First, since there is no professional theory that can define the distinction between using and mentioning a word, the distinction is rather vague and stays at the level of people's consciousness. The theories used in this study to explain the difference between use/mention cannot cover all the aspects of this issue. Second, this study only uses Tirrel's Language Games theory to analyze the consequences of mixing using and mentioning the N-word. The result is one-sided and not comprehensive enough to explain the situation. Third, this study is mainly based on the previous linguistic and philosophical theories. There is a lack of valid data and examples that can support the idea of this study. Future studies can explore more about how to distinguish between using and mentioning the N-word in real conversation situations and analyze what people are thinking and how they react to people who say the N-word in a conversation. Quality and quantity research methods can be used to collect data and analyze the examples of using and mentioning the N-word in daily life so that the issue can be supported in a more objective way.

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