

Slurring without nouns

Gerhard Schaden (✉ gerhard.schaden@univ-lille.fr), Luca Gasparri

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Abstract: When we think of slurs in English – like the N-word, the F-word, and others – we tend to think of nouns rather than verbs or adjectives. This is probably not an accident: paradigm examples of slurs are indeed nominal in nature, and slurs exhibit a cross-linguistically robust tendency to concentrate in the grammatical class of nouns. But why? Recent work appears to suggest that the distributional predominance of nominal slurs is due to the fact that the offensiveness characteristic of slurs is downstream from the inferential biases associated with nominals and their predicative uses. We begin with describing this hypothesis, rehearsing the considerations in its favor, and clarifying its predictions. Next, we present cross-linguistic data from Italian and German indicating the need for a more nuanced picture of the distributional pattern. Finally, we make our proposal. We suggest that slur-level offensiveness is a class-insensitive achievement, yet slurs are often nouns because membership in the grammatical class of nouns is functionally conducive to higher derogatory potency.

Keywords: slurs, nouns, essentialism, offensiveness, derogation, cross-linguistic data

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1. Introduction

When we think of slurs in English – like *ni—r*, *fa—t*,¹ and others – we tend to think of nouns rather than verbs or adjectives. This is probably not an accident: paradigm examples of slurs are indeed nominal in nature, and slurs exhibit a cross-linguistically robust tendency to concentrate in the grammatical class of nouns. However, typical definitions of slurs do not feature any reference to noun status. They typically focus on how and why slurs derogate (e.g., Croom 2013, Davis & McCready 2020), on how and why they offend and constitute hate speech (e.g., Anderson & Lepore 2013, Cepollaro & Zeman 2020), or on their projective behavior (e.g., Gutzmann 2019).

¹ A note on our policy on mentioning slurs. If we suspect that the slur may be unfamiliar or difficult to identify on the basis of context (e.g., because it is a slur from a language other than English), we will write its first occurrence in full and censor its subsequent mentions. By contrast, we will censor all occurrences of the slurs we take to be familiar. The usual disclaimer applies: we do not endorse, nor condone, the use of any of these expressions.

As an example, consider the characterization offered by Nunberg (2018: 239). A derogatory word *w* is a slur just in case (i) *w* disparages people on the basis of properties that have historically been the focus of discrimination or social antagonism (such as race, gender or religion); (ii) *w* is a hybrid term mixing categorization and an unwarranted derogatory attitude; (iii) the expression of antipathy linked to *w* is considered a matter of civic concern, and using *w* counts as a social transgression.² While some may disagree with this precise definition, it is representative of a trend: typical definitions of slurs do not make reference to word class or distributional criteria – even when the examples they adduce to support their claims about the signature features of the category are mostly concerned with nouns.

For brevity, let us call slurs’ tendency to concentrate in the grammatical class of nouns, and the ensuing predominance of nominal slurs, Nominal Prevalence.³ The question we ask in this paper is: what is the *source* of slurs’ tendency to concentrate in the grammatical class of nouns? Recent work appears to suggest that Nominal Prevalence obtains because slurs’ offensive power piggybacks on the inferential infrastructure of nominal predication. Predicative uses of nominals reliably give rise to a certain set of semantic inferences which adjectival and verbal predicates do not trigger, and slurring words achieve their characteristic offensiveness by building on these inferential biases.

Our purpose in this paper is to suggest an account of Nominal Prevalence that incorporates elements of this hypothesis while improving on it in some respects, notably for what concerns the existence of languages where paradigm slurs are not lexicalized as nouns or are not *exclusively* lexicalized as nouns, and yet appear to retain their offensiveness across the switch in grammatical class (we will define this in due course). We begin by describing the initial hypothesis, rehearsing the considerations in its favor and clarifying some of its predictions (§ 2). Next, we present data from Italian (§ 3) and German (§ 4) that appear to call for some adjustments to the initial hypothesis. Finally, we make our proposal (§ 5). We suggest that the recruitment of the inferential biases of nouns is tangential to the issue of clarifying how

² Technical definitions of this sort have overlaps with the folk notion of a *slur* available in English, which often lacks a precise counterpart in other languages. This folk notion may also be unstable. For instance, some have classified the term *weird* as used by the Democratic campaign in the 2024 US presidential election to characterize Republicans, as a “political slur” (e.g., Zimmer 2024). Yet, it is unclear that the antipathy underlying *weird* is “a matter of civic concern” or constitutes “social transgression”.

³ Nominal Prevalence is a potential linguistic universal, and many linguistic universals are understood as statistical tendencies rather than as absolute generalizations (see, e.g., Comrie 1989, pp. 19 ff.). We take it that if we found a language featuring both a rich nominal system and slurs, but in which no slur is nominal in nature, Nominal Prevalence would be in trouble. We are not aware of any such language.

slurs project their offensive power, and that slur-level offensiveness is a class insensitive achievement. Yet, nominal slurs enjoy a selective advantage because they are more potent devices of derogation in predicative contexts.

2. Nominal bootstrapping

While considerations of grammatical category tend to take a back seat in the debate over slurs, there is a branch of the literature where reference to nouns takes center stage. In particular, Neufeld (2019) and Ritchie (2021) have suggested a way of accounting for slurs that regards noun status as central to the peculiar offensiveness of these expressions. Let us have a look at the underlying intuition, which already appears in older work in linguistics (e.g., Bolinger 1980; Wierzbicka 1986), as well as in the psychological literature on the connection between kind perception and nouns (e.g., Gelman & Markman 1986; Markman 1989; Walton & Banaji 2004; Carnaghi et al. 2008; Leslie 2017).

Verbal and adjectival predicates seem to give rise to interpretations markedly different from those generated by nominal predicates. Two contrasts are given in (1a-b) (from Ritchie 2021: 571) and (2a-b) (cf. Wierzbicka 1986: 358).

1. a. Dante is a queer.
b. Dante is queer.

2. a. Dante is a drinker.
b. Dante drinks.

The nominal versions of the statements in (1) and (2) are perceptibly stronger than their alternatives with an adjective or a verb. Specifically, (1b) and (2b) merely attribute a feature to their grammatical subject. In contrast, (1a) and (2a) appear to file Dante into a category of entities, and to suggest that membership in the category in question is somehow a central feature of Dante. Upon hearing (2a), one readily imagines Dante as having a lasting disposition to drink, possibly a problematic relationship with alcohol. Instead, (2b) can easily be taken to communicate that Dante occasionally consumes alcohol, or that Dante is not a teetotaler. The difference in meaning between the two alternatives is corroborated by the fact that each can be felicitously conjoined with the negation of the other.

3. a. Dante drinks but he is not a drinker.
b. Dante is queer but he is not a queer.

For Ritchie (2021), the pattern observed in (1)-(3) points to a general fact about nominals and their predicative use: predicate nominals *essentialize* – they file the entities they are applied to in categories of things (instead of merely ascribing properties), and trigger presuppositions that the categories involved are inductively potent and have explanatory membership conditions.

Now, the essentialist view of predicate nominals is a generalization about predicative uses of nominals and does not concern slurs in particular. However, it is relevant in the present context because it can be – and has been – invoked as part of an explanation for Nominal Prevalence. The reasoning is the following. In contradistinction to attributive predicates, predicate nominals express membership of their subjects in categories of things and trigger inferences that the expressed membership is a deep and explanatory feature of what they are predicated of. Predicative uses of slurs have a similar function: they offend by filing their subjects into categories, and by triggering an inference that membership in those categories warrants a derogatory attitude. For example, (4) files John in the category of homosexual men, and the slur conveys that John’s membership in the category of homosexual men makes him worthy of contempt (as the whole category is).

4. John is a fa—t.

The parallel suggests the following explanation for Nominal Prevalence. Slurs offend by placing their targets into categories, and by conveying that the target’s membership in the category introduced by the slur is deep, explanatory, and makes the subject worthy of contempt (as the whole category is). Predicative uses of nominals reliably convey similar readings, minus the auxiliary derogatory component; verbal and adjectival formations do not. Verbal and adjectival formations lack therefore the inferential potential required to express the offensive power of true slurs. Hence Nominal Prevalence.

For present purposes, and following extensive research on the topic, we grant the existence of a robust difference between the inferences typically triggered by nominal and non-nominal predicates, while remaining agnostic about the precise way this difference should be accounted for.⁴ In other words,

⁴ The phenomenon was recognized in linguistics before essentialism became a well-established topic in psychology and, more recently, in philosophy. Here is, for instance, Bolinger (1980: 79): “The noun OBJECTIFIES in a way the adjective

we grant the neutral point that predicative uses of nominals are generally associated with inferential biases that adjectival or verbal formations lack, without, however, delving into whether the contrast is systematic (as opposed to graded or mitigated by significant exceptions) and into whether the essentialist framework provides unique explanatory purchase on the contrast in play.

Instead, our focus will be on the more general hypothesis that Nominal Prevalence holds because slurs acquire their characteristic offensiveness by piggybacking on the interpretive biases associated with predicative uses of nominals. Such a hypothesis can coherently be pursued irrespective of one's beliefs about the essentialist picture of nominal predication, and therefore can be discussed, as we shall do, apart from it. Predicative uses of nominals are reliably associated with a specific, introspectively scrutable inferential potential that verbal and adjectival formations lack. Whatever that specific inferential potential consists of (essentialization for the essentialist, *x* for a rival), the instantiation of the offensiveness characteristic of slurs builds on the instantiation of the inferential potential of nouns. Let us call this, for brevity, the Nominal Bootstrapping Hypothesis (NBH).

In order to characterize the NBH in sufficient detail and operate with a reasonably well-defined terminology, some preliminaries are in order. First, we tease apart three distinct properties of slurs: their *offensiveness*, their *derogatory potential* and their *derogatory force*.⁵ We interpret *offensiveness* as the feature that tracks slurs' capacity to project antipathy and disparagement against a category in whatever environment of use (including under negation and quotation marks), and therefore accounts for their taboo status. We interpret the *derogatory potential* of slurs as their aptitude to express derogation in suitable contexts of use. This dispositional property grounds slurs' capacity to have derogatory force if tokened in appropriate sentential environments and as part of appropriate speech acts (e.g., as predicates of asserted, present-indicative declarative clauses without negation). Finally, we interpret *derogatory force* as the realized derogation expressed by occurrences of slurs. To illustrate, suppose Mary, talking to John, utters (5).

5. You're not a fa—t.

cannot. A quality may come and go. If we are disappointed at Jane's lack of appreciation we can call her *ungrateful*, or solidify it a step further and call her *an ungrateful person*. But if we call her an *ingrate* we put a brand on her: the noun implies that the world puts people like this in a class by themselves."

⁵ Similar distinctions have been made by others (e.g., Liu 2021). We offer no argument that the one we are developing is the only way to tease these properties apart, and the remainder of our argument would work under different terminological preferences.

In (5), *fa—t* appears in a negative context, and is not syntactically predicated of John; in present terminology, the occurrence of the slur *fa—t* in (5) has no (realized) *derogatory force* against John. However, speakers understand that the slur appearing (5) would be an extremely potent device of derogation if used in a different sentential context (e.g., in a counterpart of (5) without “not”). In present terminology, speakers recognize that the term *fa—t* has a high *derogatory potential*. Finally, speakers also understand that irrespective of its occurrence in (5), the slur tokened by (5) is troubling linguistic currency: even under negation, the term still conveys the insidious message that homosexual men are worthy of contempt as a result of their homosexuality – which is why its utterance is perceived as problematic even in sentential environments which, like (5), undercut its derogatory potential. In present terminology, speakers understand that the redacted term in (5) is highly *offensive*.

We propose, additionally, a parallel set of distinctions for nouns in general. Specifically, we distinguish *nouniness*, the *noun-bias potential*, and the *noun-bias force*.⁶ We use *nouniness* to denote the membership of a term in the grammatical class of nouns and the instantiation of the compositional properties that this entails (e.g., the capacity to be modified by adjectives). Next, we interpret the *noun-bias potential* as the dispositional property that allows terms belonging to the class of nouns to convey the lexical effects observed in (1) and (3). The noun-bias potential underlies nouns’ capacity to trigger inferences that remain inert under the use of denotationally close adjectives and verbs, provided the noun occurs in appropriate predicative contexts and in appropriate speech acts. Finally, the *noun-bias force* is the realized manifestation of the noun-bias potential in specific predicative and speech-act environments; for instance, the introspectively accessible bundle of additional inferences that *drinker* triggers against *drinks* in (3). Essentialists may wish to replace the terms *noun-bias potential* and *noun-bias force* with *essentializing potential* and *essentializing force* but, as was announced, we prefer remaining noncommittal about essentialistic parlance.

In light of these distinctions, we associate the NBH with the following take on Nominal Prevalence: slurs are prevalently nouns because their offensiveness exploits the noun-bias potential.⁷ Note that there

⁶ See Koch (2023) for similar terminology.

⁷ To reiterate: ours is not a critique of the essentialist analyses of slurs, and we believe that the NBH is a live option for theorists holding anti-essentialist views of the differences between the “lexical effects” triggered nominal and non-nominal predicates. With that said, Neufeld (2019: 23) may subscribe to something close to the statement of the NBH we have provided: “[...] it should be clear why my essentialist theory explains that nouns are the main syntactic vehicle of slurs. According to my theory, slurs encode essentialist information. We have now seen that nouns are the primary

are at least two readings of the claim in logical space: a diachronic reading and a synchronic one. A diachronic NBH would claim that because the offensiveness of slurs is downstream from the noun-bias potential, slurs must *be born* as nouns. This does not entail any rigid constraints on the synchronic distribution of slurs in a language: all a diachronic NBH would be committed to is that true slurs must be nouns when they first set foot in a lexicon. A diachronic NBH would therefore be compatible with, say, a hypothetical language with a rich system of initially nominal slurs that over time change their word class and become largely non-nominal, though it would still predict Nominal Prevalence for languages where slurs preserve their initial grammatical affiliation. Then there is the synchronic reading: because slurs' offensiveness is downstream from the noun-bias potential, slurs must either *be* nouns or *derive* their offensiveness from a nominal element. Like other parties to the debate, our focus is on the synchronic prevalence of nominal slurs and on the synchronic mechanisms governing these problematic expressions. We therefore interpret the NBH as a synchronic claim.

In order to facilitate the discussion, we operationalize the NBH as the conjunction of two separate predictions. The first prediction is the following. If slurs' offensiveness is partly constituted by the noun-bias potential, the offensiveness projected by nominal slurs should be stronger than the offensiveness projected by non-nominal slurs, because while the former can tap into the inferential effects of nouns, the latter cannot.⁸ For instance, in a language whose lexicon specifies a nominal slur and an adjectival slur encoding contempt against the same social category, the adjectival variant should be less offensive than the nominal one. Let us call this Prediction A.

Prediction A: Nominal slurs are more offensive than their non-nominal alternatives.

The second prediction is this. Since the NBH invokes a dependence of the offensiveness of slurs on the noun-bias potential, it should be difficult to identify cases where non-nominal expressions acquire slur-

linguistic device we use to convey that a category is essentialized. So if the semantics of slurs is essentialist, nouns should be the primary linguistic vehicles for communicating the meaning of slurs. Thus, the essentialist account uniquely predicts and explains this striking syntactic pattern of slurs". We return to the point in § 5.

⁸ In essentialist terms: suppose the offensiveness of slurs is partly determined by the fact that the semantics of slurs is essentialist; and suppose that predicate nominals essentialize more than non-nominal predicates. Then it should stand to reason to expect predicative uses of nominal slurs to be more offensive than predicative uses of non-nominal slurs, as dressing the underlying essentialist semantics of the expression in the essentializing envelope of a noun should reinforce the underlying essentialist semantics of the expression.

level or slur-like offensiveness without the mediation of a nominal element. For instance, *to gyp* and *retarded* are non-nominal expressions that have been described as slurs. While neither of them *is* a noun, they can be argued to inherit their characteristic offensiveness from the offensiveness of the nouns from which they are derived (*gypsy* and *retard*). Let us call this Prediction B.

Prediction B: If non-nominal terms exhibit slur-level or slur-like offensiveness, they do so as a result of the offensiveness of an underlying nominal element.

With these two predictions on the table, we can now turn to the evidence. § 3 will evaluate Prediction A on the basis of data on the competition between the adjectival and the nominal slur against homosexual men in Italian. § 4 will turn to the prospects of Prediction B against data pointing to the emergence of a verbal slur in German that is neither derived from a noun, nor based on a slur.

3. An adjectival slur in Italian

As in English, many slurs in Italian are nouns or behave like paradigm nouns. For instance, the most straightforward way of rendering (6a) in Italian would be (6b).

- 6. a. Gianni is a fa—t.
- b. Gianni è un frocio.
- G. is a fa—t.NOM

The slur *fr—o* appearing in (6b) passes the usual distributional tests for nouniness (e.g., Ježek 2011: 209): it is preceded by a determiner, a possibility precluded to non-nominalized individual-level adjectives, as shown by (7); and it can be modified by an adjective, in a language where adjectives tend to accept modification from adverbs but not from other adjectives, as illustrated by (8).

- 7. a. Gianni è un fr—o.
- G. is a fa—t
- b. ??Gianni è un famoso.
- G. is a famous

8. a. Gianni è un fr—o famoso.
 G. is a fa—t famous
 b. *Gianni è un altamente fr—o.
 G. is a highly fa—t
 c. *Gianni è intelligente famoso.
 G. is intelligent famous
 d. Gianni è altamente famoso.
 G. is highly famous

Yet, *fr—o* can also appear without an article, as in (9), and in these circumstances it looks suspiciously like an adjective.

9. Gianni è fr—o.
 G. is fa—t.ADJ(?)

But is it *really* an adjective? We will make two claims: (i) *fr—o* can have adjectival occurrences and is syntactically adjectival in examples like (9); (ii) Italian has a lexically adjectival slur *fr—o*_{ADJ}. Let us first develop these two claims, and then explain why, and how, they bear on Prediction A.⁹

We begin with claim (i): *fr—o* can have adjectival occurrences and is syntactically adjectival in examples like (9). One could think that the claim is easy to adjudicate, since in (9) the slur follows *be* without a determiner. However, like other Romance languages, Italian introduces an additional complication: it accepts bare nouns in post-copular position, as illustrated by (11) against (10a).

10. a. *John is teacher.
 b. John is tall.
 11. Gianni è insegnante.
 G. is teacher

⁹ Though in this section we focus exclusively on *fr—o*, much of what we have said and will say about it could be said about other slurs that in Italian have both nominal and adjectival occurrences. Examples include *ciccione* (slur against overweight persons), *terrone* (slur against Southern Italians), and *cruccho* (slur against Germans).

So the mere absence of the determiner is not conclusive; we need more data. First, as shown by (12) and (13), *fr—o* can pattern with adjectives in contexts of adverbial modification.

12. a. Gianni è davvero intelligente.
 G. is truly intelligent
 b. *Gianni è davvero insegnante.
 G. is truly teacher
 c. Gianni è davvero fr—o.
 G. is truly fa—t

13. a. Gianni è estremamente intelligente.
 G. is extremely intelligent
 b. *Gianni è estremamente insegnante.
 G. is extremely teacher
 c. Gianni è estremamente fr—o.
 G. is extremely fa—t

Also, *fr—o* accepts comparatives (see (14)) and superlatives (see (15)), like standard non-complementary adjectives.

14. a. Davide è più fr—o di Gianni.
 D. is more fa—t than G.
 b. Davide è più intelligente di Gianni.
 D. is more intelligent than G.
 c. ?* Davide è più insegnante di Gianni.
 D. is more teacher than G.

15. a. Davide è fr—issimo.
 D. is fa—t-ABSOLUTE.SUP.
 b. Davide è intelligent-issimo.

- D. is intelligent-ABSOLUTE.SUP.
 c. ?*Davide è insegnant-issimo.
 D. is teacher-ABSOLUTE.SUP.

Continuing further, (16) shows that *fr—o* can participate in sub-clausal predicative structures that are acceptable with adjectives but not with nouns.

16. a. Molte person-e fr—e, trans ed intersex¹⁰
 Several person-F.PL fa—t-F.PL trans and intersex
 b. Molte person-e intelligent-i, determinat-e, e famos-e
 Several person-F.PL intelligent-F.PL determined-F.PL and famous-F.PL
 c. Molte person-e *dottor-esse, *att-rici, e *banchier-e
 Several person-F.PL doctor-F.PL actor-F.PL and banker-F.PL

Finally, *fr—o* can serve as the basis for the formation of an adverb ending in *-mente* (*-ly*), an operation which, though not possible with *all* adjectives,¹¹ is acceptable *only* with adjectives.

17. a. Gianni ha reagito fr—amente.
 G. has reacted fa—t-ADV
 b. Gianni ha reagito *insegnantemente.
 G. has reacted teacher-ADV
 c. Gianni ha reagito intelligentemente.
 G. has reacted intelligent-ADV¹²

Overall, there is robust empirical support for the idea that *fr—o* can have adjectival occurrences and is

¹⁰ For an example of an occurrence of *fr—e* modifying *persone*, see Sottile (2020: 60): “Facciamo parte di quella crescente schiera di persone frocie che [...]” (~ *We are part of the growing ranks of fa—t people who [...]*).

¹¹ For instance, color adjectives: **giallamente* (yellowly).

¹² Two native informants report mixed feelings about (17a). In particular, they note that the example feels slightly odd because of its competition with the more common formula “Gianni ha reagito da fr—o” (~ *G. has reacted like a fa—t*). However, if pressed to concentrate on pure acceptability, they agree that the adverb *fr—amente* is in fact a grammatical possibility, and report the perception of a clear contrast with the failed adverb of (17b).

syntactically adjectival in sentences like (9). So we can grant claim (i).

We now turn to claim (ii): the lexicon of Italian has an entry for the adjectival slur $fr-o_{ADJ}$. Note the independence of claim (i) and claim (ii). In principle, $fr-o$ could have syntactically adjectival occurrences even if the lexicon specifies only the nominal version of the slur. Specifically, adjectival occurrences like the one observed in (9) could be generated from the lexical base $fr-o_{NOM}$ via online conversion: in building (9), the slur is retrieved from the word stock of the language as a noun, it is then shifted into a denominal adjective, and finally fed into the sentence in this converted guise.

We defend claim (ii) by exclusion, through a simple disjunction. For $fr-o$ to be able to have adjectival occurrences, the occurrences in play must either be formed via online denominal conversion from $fr-o_{NOM}$, or stem from the direct recruitment of a lexical adjective $fr-o_{ADJ}$. If so, all evidence militating against the hypothesis that all adjectival occurrences of $fr-o$ can be accounted for by appealing to conversion automatically lends support to the idea that the grammar can recover the slur in adjectival form from the lexicon; and therefore to the idea that the lexicon, in addition to the nominal slur $fr-o_{NOM}$,¹³ also specifies $fr-o_{ADJ}$.

There is one observation militating against the hypothesis that adjectival occurrences of $fr-o$ are systematically converted from a lexical noun. The observation is that though $N \rightarrow ADJ$ online conversion is possible in Italian, adjectives converted from lexical nouns typically have only a *subset* of the distributional features of paradigm adjectives.¹⁴ For comparison, Italian specifies a deverbal noun *inquisitore*_{NOM} (feminine form: *inquisitrice*), which can be converted into an adjective and used as a modifier. Like standard adjectives, modifying uses of *inquisitore* can agree in gender and number with the noun they modify but, as shown in (18), the adjective performs poorly in comparatives and superlatives, and it cannot form adverbs ending in *-mente* (*-ly*) (Grossman & Rainer 2004: 526–532).

18. a. Gianni ha uno sguardo inquisitore.
G. has a look inquisitive
b. Due domande inquisi-trici
Two questions inquisitive-F.PL

¹³ For the record, we are taking for granted that the correct explanation for the felicity of, say, (6b) is that the word stock of Italian has an entry for $fr-o_{NOM}$. However, the language could conceivably feature exclusively $fr-o_{ADJ}$ and generate the noun by conversion. We will not dwell on this possibility.

¹⁴ They are, as some morphologists would put it, only *partially* converted. For a primer to conversion, see Martsa (2020).

- c. ?Gianni è più inquisitore di Maria
G. is more inquisitive than M.
- d. *Una domanda inquisi-tricissima
A question inquisitive-F.S.ABSOLUTE.SUP
- e. *Gianni ha agito inquisi-tricamente.¹⁵
G. has acted inquisitive-ADV

By contrast, as we have established in (12)-(17), *fr—o* has near-complete adjectival properties: it accepts comparatives and superlatives, and can form adverbs ending in *-mente*. Hence, conversion from *fr—o* _{NOM} is unlikely to provide an exhaustive explanation for the possibility of syntactically adjectival occurrences of *fr—o*. Overall, the pattern exhibited by *fr—o* is closer to the one exhibited by non-slur insults like *coglione*, which though historically a noun (from the accusative of the early medieval noun *cōleō*, meaning *testicle*), and though still available as a noun in the lexicon (see (19)), has developed a homonymous adjective that can be recruited as such from the word stock of the language (see (20)).

- 19. Gianni è un coglione.
G. is an idiot
- 20. a. Gianni è coglione.
G. is idiotic
- b. Due domande coglion-e
Two questions idiotic-F.PL
- c. Gianni è più coglione di Maria
G. is more idiotic than M.
- d. Una domanda coglion-issima
A question idiotic-F.S.ABSOLUTE.SUP
- e. Gianni ha agito coglion-amente.

¹⁵ For the sake of completeness, we should mention that a neighboring adverb, *inquisitoriamente*, is acceptable in Italian. However, *inquisitoriamente* is built on the basis of the lexical adjective *inquisitorio*, not on the basis of the converted denominal adjective *inquisitore*. So the grammaticality of *inquisitoriamente* is compatible with the point we are making. Thanks to Paolo Mairano for pressing us on this.

G. has acted idiotic-ADV

So we have argued that *fr—o* has syntactically adjectival occurrences, and that there is reason to believe that the lexicon of Italian specifies *fr—o*_{ADJ}. How does this bear on Prediction A? Recall the contrast in (3b), repeated as (21).

21. Dante is queer but he is not a queer.

We noted that the nominal and adjectival version of the predicate give rise to markedly different sets of inferences, and, like others, we took conjunctions like (21) to reveal that the nominal versions of a predicate trigger inferential effects that are not triggered by their adjectival and verbal alternatives. Interestingly, although the operation is not possible in English, Italian allows for an analogous juxtaposition of the nominal and adjectival variants of the slur *fr—o*. See (22).

22. a. Dante è fr—o ma non è un fr—o.
 D. is fa—t.ADJ but not is a fa—t.NOM
 b. Dante è un fr—o ma non è fr—o.
 D. is a fa—t.NOM but not is fa—t.ADJ

In particular, (22a) can be felicitously used to convey that Dante is attracted to persons of the same gender or sex but does not instantiate the alleged stereotypical behavioral traits of homosexual men; and (22b) can felicitously convey that Dante instantiates the alleged stereotypical behavioral traits of homosexual men but is not attracted to persons of the same gender or sex. (22) presents us therefore with a case where the inferential contrast observed between nominal and non-nominal predicates extends *within* the class of slurs (and concerns, arguably, a *paradigm* slur). But while the acceptability of the examples in (22) is consistent with the idea that the adjectival and the nominal variant of the slur have non-identical derogatory potentials, and that predicative uses of *fr—o*_{NOM} have a higher derogatory force, there is no unequivocal variation in offensiveness: both alternatives project contempt for homosexual men in an equally striking manner, and are (or at least should be) policed just as harshly. In sum, examples like (22a) and (22b) confirm that the recruitment of the noun-bias potential affects derogatory potential and derogatory force, as evidenced by the different inferences triggered by the conjuncts of (22a) and (22b).

On the other hand, it is less clear that nouniness really enhances offensiveness here: *fr—o*’s projection of a disparaging attitude towards the category targeted by the slur appears to remain constant across the change in word class.

4. A slur derivation in German

The data from Italian centered on the comparison between a paradigm nominal slur and its adjectival counterpart. We now turn to another configuration, this time in German. We have defined Prediction B as the claim that if non-nominal terms exhibit slur-level or slur-like offensiveness, they do so as a result of the offensiveness of an underlying nominal element. Interestingly, there is evidence that slur-level offensiveness can emerge in derivations even in cases where neither the base nor the derivational process itself express pejoration, and where the outcome of the derivation is not a noun.

Our data center on the derivations in (23), both based on the non-slur German adjective for male¹⁶ homosexuals *schwul*.

23. a. *ver-schwul-en* → to make gay (~ to *gayify*)
b. *Ver-schwul-ung* → the process or result of making someone/something gay (~ *gayification*)

(23a) and (23b) are outcomes of productive derivational processes which are both common and semantically transparent. *Ver-ADJ-en* means “making something or someone ADJ / more ADJ”, and *VERB-ung* denotes the process or the result of the process described by the verb. Importantly, the morphological mechanisms in (23a) or (23b) do not add pejoration in themselves.¹⁷ For instance, the German equivalents of *to improve* and *improvement* use the same derivational pattern, based on the comparative of “good”, *besser*.

¹⁶ *Schwul* used to target to both male and female homosexuals in the past, but in contemporary use it is restricted to male homosexuals.

¹⁷ Bert Cappelle (p.c.) suggested to us that even if pejoration did not arise within the derivational process itself, it could be due to phonesthemic properties of the sequence *verschw-*, which may occur systematically in negative words and therefore trigger unconscious associations with a pejorative meaning (as in *verschwören*, “to conjure”, or *verschwenden*, “to waste”). According to *GermaNet 18* (cf. Hamp & Feldweg 1997; Henrich & Hinrichs 2010), there are 16 German verbs comprising *verschw-*, among which we find perfectly non-negative words like *verschwägern* (“to become affiliated by marriage”) or *verschweißen* (“to electroweld”). We thus believe that this explanation can be dismissed.

24. a. ver-besser-n → to improve/make something better
 b. Ver-besser-ung → improvement (process or result of making something better)

Schwul itself is not a slur;¹⁸ on the contrary, it has been positively associated with the gay pride and gay liberation movement in German-speaking countries (the *Schwulenbewegung*, i.e., the movement of the *Schwule*). There are, of course, slurs in German designating male homosexuals, which are nouns. The most common is probably (25).

25. die Schwuchtel (feminine noun, *fä—t*)

Schw—el can also enter into the derivations in (24), yielding (26).

26. a. ver-schw—el-n
 b. Ver-schw—el-ung

Once again, the meaning of these derivations is compositional, and can be represented as in (27):

27. $\llbracket \text{ver-}P\text{-en} \rrbracket = \lambda y. \lambda x. \text{DO}(\text{CAUSE}(\text{BECOME}(P(y))))(x)$

Since the derivation does not seem to introduce pejoration (see (24)), we would expect the social meaning of *ver-P-en* to correspond to the social meaning of *P*; in other words: *ver-P-en* should be exactly as (in)offensive as its base *P*. This, however, does not seem to be the case. We will try to show that both *verschwulen* and *Verschwulung* are common and have come to display clear features of slurs, whereas *verschw—eln* and *Verschw—elung* are very rare, and hardly used at all.¹⁹

While the grammatical status of the bases and their derivations is perfectly clear, the central issue is establishing whether *verschwulen* and *Verschwulung* are indeed slurs. In discussing the Italian term *fr—o*, we could assume slur status and the bone of contention was grammatical class. Here we have the

¹⁸ It seems to derive from *schwül*, an adjective designating “hot, moist weather” (see the *Digitales Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* (DWDS), <https://www.dwds.de/wb/schwul>, retrieved Aug. 30, 2024).

¹⁹ A search in the *DWDS Webkorpus* yielded 4 attestations for *verschw—elt* and 11 for *Verschw—elung*. As we will see below, the derivations based on *schwul* are more than an order of magnitude more frequent.

opposite problem: we can be confident about the word class of the expressions, but we must show that they have the offensiveness of slurs, a problem which, we suspect, cannot be reliably adjudicated solely on the basis of intuitions. Our strategy is twofold: first, we will attempt to identify a collocational behavior that distinguishes our presumed slurs from non-slurs. We will try to achieve this through a quantitative study, using the *DWDS Webkorpus*,²⁰ from which all the examples below are drawn. The quantitative approach will be complemented by a second, more qualitative element: we will demonstrate that the use of such expressions is often accompanied by signs of metalinguistic awareness that the expression is *risqué* and inappropriate.

Before turning to our analysis, let us look at some data points. Some occurrences of *verschwulen* appear clearly derogatory, as in (28), and we find language policing against them, as in (29).

28. Erst wenn alle afrikanisiert [sic], verschwult, und islamisiert werden

Only when all africanized, gayified, and islamized become
können Luzifers Anbieter [sic] ruhig schlafen.

can L.'s devotees calmly sleep

Only when everyone is africanized, made gay, and has been converted to Islam will the devotees of Lucifer be able to sleep in peace.

29. Bitte bemühe Dich künftig um eine etwas "gepflegtere" Schreibweise,

Please strive you in future for a somewhat more cultivated way of writing
vermeide möglichst Ausdrücke wie "verschwult", etc.

avoid if possible expressions like "gayified", etc.

Please make an effort to write in a more "cultivated" way, avoid if at all possible expressions such as "verschwult", etc.

However, there also exist neutral or even positive uses of *verschwult*, as in (30).

30. Adrian hat auch mich schon partiell verschwult [...]

A. has also me already partially gayified [...]

²⁰ See <https://www.dwds.de/d/korpora/web>. We chose this corpus because it collects writing that is mostly unfiltered, and therefore where the distribution of slur terms can be expected to be representative of their "natural" use.

Adrian has made me too partially gay [because he always points out when heterosexuals court and favor women without reason, and I notice this myself now every time]

These data points are not easy to interpret. Examples like (30) might indicate that *verschwult* is not a slur, or on the contrary, that it is a slur, but that it is being reappropriated. They might even exemplify idiosyncratic uses by non-representative or “stubborn” speakers (Bolinger 2020). Or, on the contrary, examples like (28–29) might be idiosyncratic and non-representative. Furthermore, language policing is not a simple predictor of slur status, since it is routinely found in cases involving non-slur words (e.g., policing of the improper use of the intimate address pronoun *Du* instead of the formal *Sie*).

Given these difficulties, we opted for a comparative “duck test”. The idea is that evidence of analogous collocational properties between words can offer insights into their status as potential slurs. There are in principle two different types of results we might expect from a comparison of collocation patterns. First, collocation patterns might be determined exclusively by subject matter, reflecting aggregate societal attitudes toward homosexuality rather than lexical properties. In this case, all terms relating to male homosexuality should show similar collocation patterns, and we would expect these words to be opposed *en bloc* to words denoting other subjects. Such a result would also suggest that it is generally futile to try to assess slur status on the basis of distribution. Second, collocation patterns might be at least partially determined by the semantic properties of individual terms, particularly their status as slurs vs. non-slurs. In this case, we would expect a difference between *schwul* and *Schw—el*, and we could then determine their respective distributional proximity with words with unclear statuses (like *verschwulen* and *Verschwulung*).²¹ This could in turn yield a few different outcomes: a) the words of interest could have a collocation behavior close to the one exhibited by the slur, but unlike the non-slur,

²¹ We are aware that this methodology has limitations and that, as such, should not be taken to offer conclusive proof of slur status, but only to provide defeasible evidence that an expression has acquired derogatory and offensive qualities closely resembling those of slurs. Notice that the test does not rely on the assumption that slur vs. non-slur status is the *sole* determiner of the collocation behavior; it merely relies on the idea that slur status should leave *some* footprint in collocation behavior. Therefore, even if there should be interactions between slur status and subject matter (e.g., it is conceivable that aggregate societal attitudes towards sexism are different from societal attitudes towards racism, which could impact the frequency of terms related to these fields in negative contexts), the test should still be sound when the subject matter is held constant. Finally, an important advantage of quantitative distributional approaches is that they can be applied cross-linguistically to languages which have no primitive concept of a “slur”, and where in consequence the elicitation of judgments of slur status from native informants could be difficult.

which would give us an abductive argument that they are slur-like; b) the words of interest could behave in collocations like the non-slur, but unlike the slur, which would provide an argument that they are not slur-like; c) their collocational behavior could be somewhere in between the behavior of the slur and the non-slur, which would indicate an intermediate status (not as innocent as *schwul*, but not as bad as the slur); or d) their behavior could fall outside of the portion of collocational bandwidth bracketed by the slur and the non-slur: they may pattern with totally innocent words (in which case we should assume that they have no negative connotation whatsoever, and clearly are not slurs), or they may pattern with clearly negatively connoted non-slur words like *cancer* (in which case we have an abductive argument that they are strongly negatively connoted, but not slurs).²²

To implement this test, we extracted all occurrences of *verschwulen*²³ and *Verschwulung* from the *DWDS Webcorpus*. The extracted occurrences were then compared to 200 occurrences (drawn at random) of the slur *Schw—el* (our benchmark for slur status), to 200 random occurrences of *schwul* (our benchmark for absence of slur status), and 200 occurrences of *breast cancer*, *towel*, and *to sing* – words which we expected to appear mostly in negative, neutral and positive contexts, respectively.²⁴

To test the relevant similarities and shield our analysis from antecedent assumptions about the meanings of the expressions in play, we examined the contexts where the occurrences appeared. We stipulated that an occurrence of a word counted as “negative” if at least one of the following conditions was satisfied: i) the speaker clearly views the *quid* denoted by the expression as harmful or undesirable, for instance by opposing it to something beneficial or desirable; ii) the context features language policing against the occurring expression; iii) the occurrence is semantically embedded under expressions of negative emotions such as *fear of*, *warn of*, *victim of*, and so on; iv) the occurrence appears within the reproduction of the discourse of someone who clearly views the *quid* denoted by the expression as bad.

²² Why did not we regard a high count of negative occurrences *per se* as indicative of slur status? The reason is twofold. First, what matters for the test is the *similarity* in collocational behavior between the occurrences under scrutiny and those of the clear slur *Schw—el* (or: that the propensity of *verschwulen* and *Verschwulung* to occupy “negative contexts” is comparable to that of *Schw—el*). Second, a high number of negative occurrences is not a reliable non-comparative marker of slur-level offensiveness. Many non-slur words (e.g., *death*, *illness*, *famine*) appear in very high numbers of negative contexts because speakers have a robustly negative attitude towards the referents of those words, even if speakers do not take the words themselves to be offensive.

²³ We extracted both *verschwulen* and *verschwult* from the *DWDS*, since lemmatization is not available with verbs.

²⁴ We used *breast cancer* rather than the more generic *cancer* because the German noun for cancer (‘*Krebs*’) can also denote *crabs* (the animal), and lead to false hits. As for *to sing*, it was included to control for the impact of nominal vs. verbal class on the collocational patterns.

Otherwise, the occurrence was counted as “non-negative” (which means that it is either positive, or neutral, or not clearly assignable without making additional hypotheses about the attitudes of the speaker and/or the context).

This is a rather conservative count, in which an occurrence is presumed to be “non-negative” unless proven otherwise. One motivation for this move was to avoid an obligation to resolve potentially ambiguous cases, which turned out to be rather frequent with these derivations, amongst which we find irony and different forms of quotation. For instance, in (31a), the massive presence of *schwul* in several forms – together with the very technical *copulate* – seems to indicate that the intent is parodistic (but beware of Poe’s Law).²⁵ (31b) features a *Konjunktiv I*, which means that the sentence represents indirect speech, and that its content cannot be attributed to the commitments of the speaker.

31. a. Die geheime *Umschwulung* der Heteros durch *schwule* Modemacher
 The secret gayification of the heteros by gay fashion-designers
verschwult das Schönheitsideal junger Frauen, sodaß sie nicht
 gayifies the beauty-ideal young.GEN women.GEN such that they not
 mehr mit heterosexuellen Männern kopulieren.
 anymore with heterosexual men copulate.
The secret gayification of heteros by gay fashion designers makes the beauty ideal of young women gay, and as a consequence, they don’t copulate anymore with heterosexual men.
- b. Die Gesellschaft sei *verschwult* und nur eine Handvoll Aufrechter kämpft
 The Society be.KONJI gayified and only a hand full irreductibles fight
 tapfer dagegen an.
 courageously against on.
Society is said to have been made gay, and only a handful of irreductibles continues to fight against that.

With these stipulations in place, the results are reported in the table below.

	# negative	# total	% negative
singen (<i>to sing</i>)	0	200	00.00

²⁵ Parodies of views are often indistinguishable from sincere expressions of the views themselves. See, e.g., Aikin (2013).

Handtuch (<i>towel</i>)	1	200	00.50
schwul (<i>gay</i>)	33	200	16.50
verschwulen (<i>to make gay</i>)	62	127	48.82
Schw—el (<i>fa—t</i>)	102	200	51.00
Verschwulung (<i>gayification</i>)	162	286	56.64
Brustkrebs (<i>breast cancer</i>)	145	200	72.50

Schwul appears in relatively few negative contexts, but in considerably more than *singen* and *Handtuch*. The negativity rating of the slur *Schw—el* is clearly higher than that of *schwul*, but also clearly lower than the one of *Brustkrebs* – which displays the highest rating. The ratings of *verschwulen* or *Verschwulung* are much closer to those of the slur (which they bracket) than to that of the non-slur *schwul*, and also, closer to the slur than to *Brustkrebs*, which is the next closest item.

How is this result to be interpreted? The data are inconsistent with the idea that the frequencies are determined exclusively by subject matter. They are also difficult to reconcile with the idea that *verschwulen* and *Verschwulung* behave nothing like the slur, but more like negatively connoted non-slur words (like *breast cancer*). We believe that the best explanation of the distribution of the table above is that these two words have indeed a slur-like quality to them – just like *Schw—el*.

Let us now move to the second element that indicates that there are slur-like qualities to these two words: explicit indications of metalinguistic awareness that *Schw—el*, *verschwulen* and *Verschwulung* are either abusive, that they should not be used (in a given context), or that their use reveals ideological affiliation with a problematic group. In the corpus, such symptoms were entirely absent in our sample of occurrences of *Brustkrebs*, and marginal with *schwul*. Relevant examples include language policing, the appearance of the terms between scare quotes, or evidence of a distancing, ironical attitude towards the word, as we have seen in (31) and can see again in (32).²⁶

32. [Last night I caught myself being in the kitchen, slicing aubergines for a *gratin*, to my right parsley – suitably cut into small pieces, and a bottle of fine white wine to my left]

Da hab ich mich schon kurz gefragt ob ich jetzt komplett verschwult
 There have I me already short asked whether I now completely gayified
 bin und hab sicherheitshalber erstmal 5 billig Bier hinterher gegknallt [*sic*].

²⁶ For a more detailed analysis of these metalinguistic markers in German, see Techau (2016).

am and have for security first 5 cheap beer afterwards popped.

Then I asked myself whether I've really become completely gay, and just to be sure, I popped five cheap beers.

Finally, institutionalized evidence for such metalinguistic awareness can be seen from the fact that *Verschwulung* was voted into the shortlist of the *Unwörter des Jahres 2015*, a sort of linguistic “hall of shame” for words that are against the principles of human dignity.²⁷ Thus, linguistic and extralinguistic data alike suggest that many German speakers interpret *verschwult* or *Verschwulung* as unbecoming expressions stigmatizing homosexuals.

Let us sum up and return to Prediction B: if non-nominal terms exhibit slur-level or slur-like offensiveness, they do so as a result of the offensiveness of an underlying nominal element. An analysis of corpus data indicated that the German derivations *verschwult* and *Verschwulung* exhibit the same prevalence in negative contexts as the uncontroversial homophobic slur *Schw—el*. Furthermore, and contrary to non-slur terms that denote entities viewed negatively by the speaking community, they are associated with the same symptoms of metalinguistic awareness often accompanying slurs. We believe this warrants an argument that *verschwulen* and *Verschwulung* have indeed the offensiveness profile typical of slurs. However, these results are not easy to reconcile with Prediction B, as they suggest the existence a) of a slur-like expression, *verschwulen*, generated via derivation from an *adjectival* base which itself is not perceived as a slur, and b) a slur-like expression, *Verschwulung*, generated on the basis of the same mechanism but whose “terminal” nouniness does not trigger the inferential biases at the center of the NBH: e.g., *Verschwulung* denotes a process and cannot semantically express membership in a category of ordinary individuals.

5. Discussion

We began by noting that slurs exhibit a cross-linguistically robust tendency to concentrate in the grammatical class of nouns (Nominal Prevalence). We raised the question of the source of Nominal Prevalence, and introduced the Nominal Bootstrapping Hypothesis (NBH): slurs tend to concentrate in the class of nouns because their offensiveness exploits the noun-bias potential. We distinguished a diachronic and a synchronic reading of the NBH, and focused on its synchronic version. We then

²⁷ See <https://www.unwortdesjahres.net/unwort/kriterien-und-auswahlverfahren/> (retrieved Aug. 30, 2024) for the criteria used by the jury, which include finding these expressions objectionable on civic grounds.

operationalized this reading of the NBH by associating it with two interrelated predictions. *Prediction A*: nominal slurs should be more offensive than their non-nominal alternatives. And *Prediction B*: if non-nominal terms exhibit slur-level or slur-like offensiveness, they should do so as a result of the offensiveness of an underlying nominal element.

Evidence from Italian and German appears to put pressure on these predictions. In Italian, *fr—o*, the counterpart of the English slur *fa—t*, is a paradigm slur that can be shown to have syntactically adjectival occurrences, and is plausibly specified as an adjective in the lexicon of the language. We have presented evidence suggesting that the alternation between these two variants leads to variation in derogatory force but not – or not clearly – to variation in offensiveness (recall (22)). Data from German suggests that verbal derivations of a neutral adjective can acquire slur-level or slur-like offensiveness even without the intermediary intervention of a nominal element, and without the support of the inferential biases associated with nominal predication.

If our reasoning is correct, the NBH lacks part of the resources required to offer a viable account of Nominal Prevalence. We suggest the following refinement: slurs have a propensity to be lexically registered as nouns because, by being nouns, they can recruit the biases towards readings of category membership and explanatory power triggered by predicative uses of nominals, and therefore, used as predicates, can derogate more potently. Their derogatory potency in predicative contexts confers nominal slurs a selective advantage: assuming that the sociolinguistic function of non-reappropriated slurs is to stigmatize and discriminate individuals because of their membership in a group defined by the instantiation of a salient trait (sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so on), nouns provide an expedient means to accomplish such a goal, since typical count nouns compositionally introduce sets of entities – unlike adjectives and verbs, which typically denote properties and events, and therefore require additional compositional maneuvers to semantically categorize what they are applied to within a larger group. However, this selective bias towards greater derogatory potency, and the ensuing distributional unbalance it generates, does not provide unique explanatory purchase on what endows expressions with the offensiveness indicative of slur status. Some true slurs (like, if our observations are correct, the adjectival slur *fr—o* in Italian) derogate in a semantically attributive manner without *ipso facto* projecting a lesser degree of contempt against the group instantiating the feature targeted by the expression. In other words, we suggest treating the explanation of Nominal Prevalence and the explanation of how slurs manage to project the offensiveness they project as separate theoretical tasks. While the NBH lumps these two tasks together and tries to account for both via the noun-bias potential, there are reasons to consider

accounting for Nominal Prevalence via the conjunction of the noun-bias potential with a selective bias towards high derogatory potency, and leaving the projection of offensiveness a separate explanandum grounded on entirely different mechanisms.

Since we acknowledged that our proposal was going to incorporate elements of the hypothesis that slurs' offensiveness piggybacks on the noun-bis potential, it is important to recall the parallels and the non-parallels between our take and earlier work. Neufeld (2019: 23) argues that the conjunction of her essentialist theory of slurs (the view that slurs encode essentialist information) with the view that nouns are the primary linguistic device used for conveying that a category is essentialized, “uniquely predicts and explains” Nominal Prevalence.²⁸ Neufeld (2022: 12) further elaborates: “the essentialist account of slurs [...] makes sense of the otherwise curious fact that slurs occur predominantly as nouns. Research in cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics shows that nouns are particularly prone to essentialize. If the semantics of slurs is essentialist, nouns should be the primary linguistic vehicle through which we communicate their content.” There is a reading of these statements on which they convey a version of the appeal to selective mechanisms we have developed, but our commitments remain different. First, as best we can tell, these statements also admit of a reasonable reading on which they are committed precisely to the claims we have tried to fine-tune, such as the claim that we should predict a scrutable difference in offensiveness between nominal and adjectival slurs. Second, these statements are not theoretically neutral: they presuppose an essentialist account of the noun-bias potential and are options to account for Nominal Prevalence only relative to the premise that slurs have an essentialist semantics – neither assumption has been made here. Finally, we would be cautious about the idea that essentialist treatments of the semantics of slurs and of the noun-bias potential are “uniquely” well-positioned to account for Nominal Prevalence. For what we have provided is precisely a way for thinking that Nominal Prevalence is not “curious” without committing to an essentialistic description of the phenomenon at stake, and without committing to the idea that having essentializing contents must be part of what makes slurs (nominal and non-nominal alike) the peculiar expressions they are.

In a sense, our proposal increases the complexity of the theoretical landscape. It explains Nominal Prevalence via a functional pressure towards derogatory potency while leaving the attainment of slur-level offensiveness as a separate mechanism that calls for separate grounding. However, the proposal can pay for theoretical complexity in the coin of some descriptive advantages. First, the proposal assigns a source to Nominal Prevalence while still being able to accommodate languages where key slurs are

²⁸ Recall fn. 7.

available in non-nominal forms, and yet are perceived by socially aware speakers of the language as matching the repulsiveness of their nominal alternatives. Second, the hypothesis has the flexibility required to account for why offensiveness may be perceived as constant across word classes even if slur alternatives are separated by an underlying difference in derogatory potential, as shown by (22). The third advantage is that this hypothesis can be integrated across the board with extant accounts of the offensiveness of slurs. At least *prima facie*, the NBH goes naturally with a *content* account of the offensiveness of slurs, since it ties slurs' status as problematic linguistic currency with the set of semantic inferences associated with nominals and their predicative uses. The explanation we have developed can instead be pursued both within a content account (it can *still* turn out that offensiveness is determined by an aspect of content in need of further theoretical specification), and within accounts on which slurs' capacity to project offensiveness is determined entirely by social mechanisms (e.g., Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Stojnić & Lepore, 2022).

6. Concluding remarks

Though our paper has focused on two rather unexotic SAE languages, we hope our discussion has served as a reminder about the importance of cross-linguistic comparison in the pursuit of general theories of slurs. We also hope that the data and the methodology we have presented may stimulate further comparative work – for instance on how to define proxies for native intuitions of slur status in languages whose speakers are unfamiliar with the very concept of a slur. If the ideas developed in this paper are on the right track, further theoretical and experimental inquiry is also called for to clarify, among other things, the precise differences in derogatory force between nominal and non-nominal slurs; the differences in meaning between simple uses of adjectival slurs in predicate adjectives (e.g., *John is SLUR_{ADJ}*) and adnominal occurrences of adjectival slurs modifying a common noun (e.g., *John is a [SLUR_{ADJ}N]*); and the differences in realized derogatory force between adnominal occurrences of adjectival slurs in different positions of a sentence (e.g., within subject phrases or complements; *the [SLUR_{ADJ}N] VP* vs. *John V a/the [slur_{ADJ} N]*). Based on how frequently morphological considerations have emerged in our analysis, we hypothesize that bringing the research on these themes in closer contact with existing work on diachronic change and word formation could yield significant benefits.

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