

# Reappropriation

This is a key notion to comprehend when we are talking about the way language reflects changing social values.

# By the end of this lesson

you'll be able to:

1. define reappropriation
2. identify links between this and language
3. say how appropriation leads to language change
4. say how appropriation can change group/individual perception
5. answer the question: can reappropriation be used as a method for social change?

# The N Word

We know you know what it is.

# A quick history of the N word

- From the Latin word *niger* meaning black.
- Originally began as a term **used by slaves\***; concurrent use by slaves and masters.
- Liberation of the African-Americans in the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865; **slavery ended**
- Abolition of slavery did not equate to the immediate abandon of social values intricately tied to the hierarchy.^

# The N Word (cont.)

- For hundreds of years this was accepted as being an appropriate way to address and refer to African-Americans (a shift which was only evident during the 1950s).
- This loaded **lexeme** is no longer considered appropriate to use in wider society; why?
- What cultural event can we tie this semantic shift to?\*
- How is it used in today's society?#

‘Fear of a name  
only increases fear  
of the thing itself.’

# Queer\*

‘strange or odd from a conventional viewpoint; unusually different;  
singular: *a queer notion of justice.*’

# A quick history of the queer

- Mixed debate about origins
  - OED states its first usage as 1513, *odd/peculiar*
  - Queer as 'bad' appeared approximately 1567
  - Old High German → Scottish
  - Origins aside, it's initial meaning, across most uses, related to the concept of 'not straight'\*
- 1914 saw the emergence of its use in relation to homosexuality^



# Queer (cont.)

- Term imposed by the heterosexual community; used in a **derogatory** sense.
- 1990s saw its reclamation; why?
- How do we see it being used in today's society?
- What groups do we associate with this term?

# Why the change?

*Henri Tajfel (1970)\* ascribes these changes to the critique of a discourse's legitimacy and stability.*

# So we have to ask...

- How do we define legitimacy?^
- How do we define stability?#
- What does it mean to critique something?

# What is reappropriation?

Appropriating (transitive verb), **appropriated**, **appropriating**; to take to or for oneself; take possession of.\*

Reappropriation (noun); ???

Review semantic changes

The way that we perceive and understand a group is inextricably linked to the way that we address and discuss the group.^

Further to this, it is in these semantic shifts that we can identify changes in power and hierarchy.

# Shifting relations and language

What are some examples?

Think of groups who have colloquial (slang) names, that have changed over time.

- What are the repercussions of changing intergroup relations?
- Linguistically, what must we change when we alter the way a society understands a group?

**“Once that matrix is contested and renegotiated, all practices sustaining the system of inequalities, including linguistic practices, become candidates for renegotiation and contestation. The words used to refer to or address a group are especially likely to be subject to scrutiny and reanalysis.”**

(Meyerhoff, 2006)





There's more...

What does it mean  
to be polite?

# Politeness

- Culturally defined.
- Reflects social values.
- Not a static concept.
  
- What is polite in our culture?
  
- Politeness in other cultures?

