

Introduction:

The language that we use changes over time as people's beliefs, values, and viewpoints evolve. One way that we use language is to identify others, and who gets to "identify" someone is wrapped up in complex power dynamics. Sometimes, individuals with this power will use words with negative or disparaging connotations, which then come to be identified as slurs. However, while slurs are associated with pejorative hate speech, they are often used in more casual contexts or get reclaimed by their targets—which causes them to become entrenched in the language. In this activity, participants will first discuss how slurs become unacceptable to the general population. Then, they will identify the power of slurs and investigate how they are used and viewed in contemporary culture.

Note: This activity asks students to engage with language that is hurtful and offensive. The facilitator should warn participants beforehand and acknowledge that participants may have emotional reactions to these terms.

Materials:

Lakoff reading (in [Links](#)), Internet access, computers/tablets/smartphones for all participants

Activity Instructions:

Part 1: The Power of Slurs

1. Discuss the following questions briefly:
 - What is a slur?
 - How do slurs impact the people they target? The people who use them? The people who hear them but aren't targeted?
2. Provide participants with copies of the Robin Tolmach Lakoff's "[From Ancient Greece to Iraq, the Power of Words in Wartime.](#)" Ask them to spend 5-10 minutes reading it.
3. Discuss the reading with the following questions:
 - Why are the terms that Lakoff references—and slurs in general—generated in the first place?
 - This article was written in 2004, during the height of the Iraq War and when anti-Muslim and anti-Middle Eastern sentiments were particularly high in the United States. What has happened to the slurs mentioned in the article since that time? Why do you think that happened?
 - How do you relate this article to current social justice issues, like the Black Lives Matter protests or the push to rename athletic teams with Native American mascots?
 - The title of this article references the "power of words." In general, who gets to "identify" someone else with words, whether or not that involves a slur?

Part 2: Investigate

1. Divide participants into small groups. Ensure that each group has a computer, tablet, or smartphone.
2. Groups should choose a slur that has been "called out" to investigate. The slur could deal with ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, etc. First, groups will investigate the history of the slur term:
 - Where did it come from? Who used it, and in what context? When did it first emerge as a pejorative?
 - How has its use changed over time?
 - Are there instances where it is being reclaimed? If so, by whom and in what context?
 - In general, who have been its defenders and who its critics? Where do these groups fit within the broader economic, political, and social power structures?

Note: If the facilitator and participants have access to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), that might be a good resource for groups to begin their search.

Note: The facilitator might want to provide an example to help students get started. For instance, in July 2020, rapper Cardi B received backlash because she referred to her sister's eyes as "chinky" in an Instagram comment. Cardi B apologized, but she initially defended herself by saying that she didn't know it was a slur and did not mean to use it in a derogatory way. She claims that the term was often casually used in the area where she grew up. The facilitator might use this as an example to explain how slurs associated with hate speech may appear in casual speech when speakers are unaware of their pejorative origins and use.

3. Once each group has finished investigating, conclude the activity by debriefing with the following questions:
 - Which slurs did you investigate, and in what contexts and by whom were they used?
 - How has the use and meaning of these slurs changed over time?
 - What were the reactions to these slurs? Was there anything about these reactions that surprised you?
 - Why might casual or non-pejorative uses of slurs (outside of instances where the targets of slurs are reclaiming that language) be dangerous?
 - Why might individuals who have been targeted with slurs want to reclaim that language?
 - What have you learned about how and by whom slurs catch on and get perpetuated within society?
 - What have you learned about how and by whom slurs get reclaimed and/or called out?
 - How will you apply what you have learned about slurs?