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A nigger in the woodpile? A racist incident on a South African University campus

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This case study starts by providing a brief background description of the shock value of swearwords and derogatory terms before moving to a more focused discussion of the social and psycholinguistic features associated with their use. After a brief overview of the history of highly-charged taboo words referring to black African people in South Africa, the paper then discusses the repercussions of a recent and much-publicised racist incident on a South African campus in which the word 'nigger' was used by a white student against a black staff member and his family. Finally, some suggestions are made regarding directions for future research.

Key words: Nigger, taboo, racism, expletives, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Expletives are exclamatory words or phrases that are obscene or profane (including homophobic ethnic and racial slurs), and cursing is the deliberate utterance of these emotionally powerful and offensive words in order to be insulting, rude or vulgar. All these words are covered by the umbrella term 'caconym', a term which means a bad word, insulting or ugly in some way. I once gave a public lecture titled "Taboo or not taboo: A f***ing interesting lecture ... on why people swear", and started with a warning that, the subject was potentially offensive and extremely delicate, and that inevitably I was actually going to say, out loud, several of those dreadful words we are never supposed to say in formal, polite company. The lecture-hall was packed to capacity, and interestingly enough, the people there had all chosen to come of their own free will, and were actually eagerly anticipating my inevitable real-world use of expletives. Nobody was insulted - on the contrary, everyone hugely enjoyed the deliberate breaking of taboos in what would normally have been a highly formal occasion. (Although I have no record of the demographic composition of the audience, it was largely composed of white men and women over the age of 20).

In this paper, of course, the same warning applies: there is no intention to offend as I break all the rules yet again, but readers will hopefully appreciate the use of asterisks instead of the word 'f***ing' as an initial effort to observe social niceties. For the remainder of the paper; however, expletives and swearwords will be printed in full, with due apology to

those whose sensibilities are offended. This paper is a short case study, set in a South African University context, in which a racist term of abuse was uttered by a white student with the intention of expressing disparagement towards a black academic and his family. After a brief theoretical overview of the use of such words from a linguistic perspective, I give a detailed account of the event, and explore the incident from the perspective of the University (as disciplinary authority), the victim who experienced the insult, and the perpetrator himself, who was eventually identified and made a confession. The topic itself is of particular interest in the South African context, because, as pointed out in de Klerk and Radloff (2009), our tertiary institutions have become increasingly diverse in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, cultural background, social class, disability, and sexual orientation, and the problem of discrimination based on these personal characteristics is at the forefront of challenges which must be addressed.

While brutal forms of discrimination are highly visible, more insidious and equally damaging are the small, subtle and repeated acts of exclusion and marginalization which often go unnoticed (Mayekiso and Snodgrass, 2008:124), and which are frequently subconscious and not evident to the perpetrators themselves. This case study describes a single and powerful act of discrimination, that while not physically brutal, was not taken seriously by the perpetrator. It was a typical act of racial stereotyping and prejudice, in that its target (a black family) was "visible" in terms of physical

characteristics, like other targets, who are recognizable by their race, sexual orientation and gender (Greenblatt , 2005, 2006: 164). The University has stated that it aims to transform and put an end to such discriminatory practices and to develop a high level of 'mindfulness', which entails paying careful attention to any sign of subtle discrimination that might affect equity.

Issues of discrimination and prejudice are very current in educational debate, but 14 years after the advent of democracy in South Africa, there has been very limited success in achieving genuine change in attitudes (Norris, 2001; Cross, 2004). This was recently highlighted after an unpleasant racist incident at the University of the Free State in May 2008, where white students publicly abused and humiliated black female staff in a manner which attracted world-wide media attention. The resultant renewed pressure from the State to respond more urgently to the need for genuine transformation, led to the formation of a Ministerial Committee on Institutional Transformation to investigate progress at all (21) tertiary institutions, and a working group on racism, which released its report a year later. The report confirms that, most of South Africa's formerly white universities, because of their deeply embedded histories as colonial, 'white' institutions, still have a long way to go before Black students entering such universities feel comfortable, instead of finding the experience "painful, dislocating, unsettling, angering, confusing and difficult" (Rhodes submission to the Task Team, 2008: 13). Black staff are equally at risk of feeling alienated, and the incident described in this article is an example of such an experience.

Why taboo words are shocking

We need to start by asking exactly what it is that makes 'shit' so much more exciting than 'flit', and 'fuck' so much more shocking than 'pluck'. There is nothing phonemically or phonetically remarkable about these words, of course. It all lies in the shock value and the taboos that are broken in their use. This shock value is a product of social norms, and it tends to change dramatically over the years, within and across societies. The Victorian era saw the heady days of absurd euphemism: 'rooster' came into use in place of 'cock' as a matter of delicacy, and reference to a 'smock' was replaced by 'shift', and then by 'chemise' until even that garment became unmentionable (Mencken, 1921). The nature of taboo words, and levels of sensitivity to them vary hugely depending on a range of factors, and these will be discussed more, later in the paper.

The BBC Standards Commission, Independent Television Commission, and Advertising Standards Authority regularly commission research on this topic (Milward-Hargrave, 2000) and their latest report (called "Delete expletives"), which was based on a survey of 1033 adult respondents, lists the most well-known English profanities in order of severity. The 'top ten' offensive words were cunt, motherfucker, fuck, wanker, nigger, bastard, prick, bollocks, asshole and paki - it's a kind

of "Richter Scale" for swearwords, if you like (2000: 12). The top three have remained in their prime position since 1998, but it is pointed out that gender and age make a difference as to the severity judgement. The most offensive of these were deemed at the time to be terms of racial abuse such as 'kaffir 'paki' and 'nigger'.

A nice piece of local up-to-date evidence to prove this point that shock value shifts constantly is an article in a Rhodes campus newspaper (Activate) where the writer, a female, berates her fellow students for upping their game, as it were, from the now-boring over-use of 'fuck' to the much more thrilling use of the word 'cunt'. Unlike 'fuck', all references to the word in the article were written as c***, because, as the writer explains, "it is one of the remaining non-racist words that almost everyone takes offence to and if we say it too much it will lose its power" (Douglas, 2010). The article urges readers to use the word sparingly, so as not to "ruin it for others who really want to cause a stir … if we just throw it around its strength will be diluted … so try keeping it sacred" (op. cit.). Of course, apart from its shock effect, 'cunt' is much less amenable to overuse linguistically anyway, since it refuses to act syntactically as anything but a noun, unlike 'fuck' which is chameleon-like in its ability to do duty as virtually any part of speech at all.

While there has always been some difficulty in deciding on levels of offensiveness (Flexner and Wentworth, 1975; Hudson, 1983; Tweedie, 2003), we do come across these words on a daily basis, in day to day life, and in text and audio-visual media, and all of us can freely access them on the web if we wish to. But the fact remains that the words are not nice, and they provoke disapproval mainly because those who hear them assume that they are used deliberately in order to be disrespectful, deeply offensive or to break social taboos. And what is particularly relevant is that right now, in South Africa, racist terminology is probably regarded as the most offensive and inflammatory language we can use, because of heightened awareness of constitutional values.

What do linguists have to say about expletives?

The tendency, until recently, has been to shunt offensive language such as the use of expletives into the realms of the unnatural, and as a consequence this taboo area has been seriously neglected by academia, creating even more of a taboo as a result. Until recently, we thus had a theory of language which has typically skirted around the emotional and offensive aspects of speech, despite the obviously vital role they play in the expression of humour and emotion, especially anger and contempt (Dumas and Lighter, 1978). While writers such as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) have explored aspects of the (less "colourful") social labelling practices of adolescents, Thurlow (2005: 26) makes the point that until recently, there have been surprisingly few instances in the literature where writers deal explicitly with abusive naming practices. But there have been several scholarly works in recent years addressing this gap

(Hughes, 1991; McEnery, 1996; Jay, 2000; Stenstrom et al., 2002) and all acknowledge the strong link between expletives and power, social inferences and attitudes, the fact that cursing is deeply human, and highly rule governed, and that these words are unique in providing a means of expressing exceptional emotional intensity.

The most significant phenomenon underlying swearing is the attitudes of society which give such taboo words power – power which they would otherwise not have at all; all very engagingly discussed by McEnery (1996), who discusses moral reform movements and the building of a discourse of power for the growing middle classes.

Recent analyses by sociolinguists have very usefully provided a range of convincing reasons why humans persist in using expletives and derogatory language. First and foremost among these is peer pressure. During adolescence, the peer-group is typically confined to a segregated school environment, which results in a sort of social 'hothouse', with huge influences on linguistic patterns and styles, as these young people seek to create their own social order and communities of practice (Holmes, 1992; Cameron, 1997; Eckert, 2000; Thurlow, 2001). Using slang and swearwords is one of the many ways in which members of groups can ensure that they are seen as 'cool', fashionable, up-to-date and part of their linguistic community, while at the same time distinguishing themselves as different from parents and others.

It is in these communities where we find the highest levels of linguistic innovation, as they constantly renew and change old and familiar ways of doing things (including hairstyles and clothing), in order to maintain a sense of modernity, and of being distinctive and different from established norms and values (de Klerk, 2005). It is for this reason that adolescents use slang, non-standard and taboo language (Holmes, 1992: 184)- these forms act as markers of group membership. In many ways, people 'perform' language, using specific words and styles, in order to belong to their group. Crispin (2005) puts it this way: "The use of taboo slang can simultaneously mark one out as different or rebellious by breaking social norms or showing disrespect for authority, and can be used to reinforce group membership through verbal displays".Such linguistic styles are options, only meaningful within a particular social context.

In addition, the use of homophobic and sexist terms, which usually include taboo words, flourishes in groups which conflict in some way with the dominant culture, emphasizing the values, attitudes and interests of the subculture, and marking their identity while simultaneously excluding others who do not use the code (Matthews, 1997: 343). In this way, homophobic terms can and do act coercively in signaling what is viewed as 'acceptable' behavior in contrast to effeminacy, which is seen as not conforming to the prevailing cultural code regarding 'normal' sexual behavior (Thurlow, 2001; de Klerk, 2005, 2006). So, one can hear the word ,gay, being used to refer to almost anything that is not cool or odd (e.g. just making a mess), and in South Africa racist terms like 'zot' and 'munt' are used in the same way; to

express general disapproval of anything, such as a T-shirt, for example. In similar vein, Cameron (1997) shows how an all-male group used homophobic terms to refer to people who were undoubtedly not sexually 'deviant' but more broadly deviant in terms of their gendered behavior, in relation to the in-group's norms of masculinity (for more on gendered use of expletives, Oliver and Rubin, 1975; Staley, 1978; Spender, 1980; Schultz, 1975; de Klerk, 1990, 1991; Sutton, 1995; Waksler, 1995; de Klerk, 2006). For most users of these words, their actual meaning is overlooked, and the usage relates to belonging and reaffirming common values (and group boundaries) and reinforcing power. In many cases, the use of such terms in a friendly context will tend to have the effect of reassuring those present (be they white, homosexual or female) that they are part of the in-group, and should not take offence, because their open use indicates that the user actually does not assume the hearer to share the assumed negative attributes of those "other" niggers, faggots or cunts. If they were, of course, the terms would be avoided.

A third reason why these unpleasant words remain in use is that they assert power: thus it has often been noted that males tend to use sexist terms which are derogatory of women to reinforce male dominance (Sutton, 1995; O'Barr and Atkins, 1980) and to "maintain their hegemonic power over women" (Armstrong, 1997: 327). De Klerk and Antrobus (2005) provide similar evidence from South African teenagers, as do Harris and Edwards (2010: 52), who describe how college men in the US conform to hegemonic masculinity to gain acceptance and credibility, expressing demeaning and degrading attitudes toward women, while acknowledging that these attitudes and behaviors did not always reflect their authentic beliefs and feelings about women, but that they acted in this way in order to remain accepted by the peer group. Instead of viewing verbal interaction as independent of actual use, harmonious or cooperative, critical linguists (Fairclough, 1992) link linguistic behavior of this sort to wider social processes, relationships and power, because people enter social interaction with social identities which are pre-formed, their discourse tends to reproduce and perpetuate existing social relations and structures, thereby playing a significant role in constructing ideologies which may be oppressive to minority groups and which are reinforced in daily spoken interaction, reaffirming the existing (so-called normal) order and inequalities (Kramerae, 1981).

In this way, derogatory words are subtle forms of coercion, with people finding themselves constrained by their own subculture when it comes to the use of such language, despite their awareness that the terms are stigmatized and might well offend. While male adolescents might be expected to know and use far more of these words than females, the fact is that many of them have very little choice in the matter. As Moreau (1984: 60) puts it, the concrete and verbal practices of the dominant seem to induce the dominated to adopt specific language practices; the use of expletives by adolescent males can be seen as a way of

attempting to assert self, while at the same time it can be viewed as expected behavior which conforms to the definition imposed by the dominant. Across all groups, abusive naming practices reveal the social attitudes of the community of users, distinguishing the outgroup from the insiders, and implicitly or explicitly declaring who one is and who one is not. Part of this is "the continual, vocal branding of 'Other' in order to identify 'Self' simultaneously" (Thurlow, 2001: 32), and many adolescents use strongly racist, homophobic and sexist pejoratives, some deeply hurtful, with apparently little concern for their antisocial and abusive effects. It is this combination of exclusion and bonding which makes such words especially attractive to teenagers.

For this reason, disproportionately large numbers of pejorative terms typically abound in contemptuous reference to disempowered groups, there are far more misogynistic words than those that derogate men in general (Risch, 1987). Sutton (1995) also reports more negative terms referring to women than men, most of which carry sexual connotations. Similarly, the number of racist slurs referring to black people typically outnumbers that for other groups – certainly in South Africa. Taking this one step further, one finds males (and even young females) using words like girls or ladies as derogatory terms, and women frequently refer to themselves as 'guys' or 'chaps' in an effort to align themselves more closely to those who are socially powerful. This maintains the hidden prejudices, allowing people to continue to use such terms with scant regard for their effect and slowly, over time, habit and constant exposure can dull the power of words which are strongly taboo for non-group-members. These words may therefore not always be used with deliberate intent to exclude or criticise, although their careless use nonetheless has a negative effect.

There are also psycholinguistic reasons for the use of offensive words, and they are rooted in the fact that we do not acquire these words in the same way we learn other words. Firstly, these words tend to be highly emotionally charged, unlike ordinary words (like cup, or book), which are learned slowly and calmly, through constant daily exposure, practice and reinforcement. The connotations of ordinary words are typically fairly neutral and there will be nothing excessively positive or negative about them (unless of course one is beaten over the head daily with a cup or a book!). But swearwords or deeply pejorative terms are learned in a very different way, and one or two usages may be enough to make them deeply memorable. This is because they are typically associated with strong emotion or high levels of stress, when levels of awareness are heightened. Screams, shouting and violence may often accompany such words, conflict and pain may also be associated, and the word is thenceforward marked as very different from others - memory and awareness are very susceptible to stress, and the stronger our emotions at the time, the deeper the memory of the word and its use. In many social contexts, if the child subsequently tries to use such words him- or herself, it provokes a strong negative response from adults, which reinforces their strong, subliminal emotional links.

Psycholinguistic studies have shown that such taboo words actually produce measurable physical effects in people when they read or hear them, such as an elevated heart rate (Jay, 2000).

The other interesting difference between most words in any language and the small subset of expletive terms is that expletives are often fairly empty, semantically, at least for most of their users. Part of the reason for this is the limited exposure one has, as a learner, in acquiring an expletive term, which restricts the opportunities to flesh out the meaning. As a child, I remember asking what the term 'crap' meant after I had overheard adults use it, and being denied a definition of the meaning. I sensed the discomfort of the adults, dropped the subject, and relied on guesswork for years (- it was quite disappointing to find out what it did refer to, eventually). For me, the only certain aspect of the word for some time was that I was not allowed to use it. In contrast, a word like cup refers to something concrete, and people will usually gladly explain exactly what it means; because of this avoidance, many expletives and pejorative terms are not readily definable because much of the meaning is unspoken and implicit, even for their adult users; they pick up the words by careful observation, having discovered that asking about their meaning causes embarrassment and is discouraged. Such words are inherently vague, and for many young people, asking about their meaning would be tantamount to admitting failure as a member of the group.

The fact that in many linguistics subcultures, such words are forbidden, adds yet another special dimension to them. Swear words are typically suppressed and discouraged in front of children (certainly in middle class communities), and they carry an extra-heavy emotional weight because they refer to deeply unpleasant, offensive or forbidden things. They are emotionally charged, and it is expected that only emotional extremes would cause one to break the taboo and use them and, as is the case with many forbidden things in life, they attract special attention, and acquire a certain powerful mystique. Using them, in secret or in a special social clique, can bring a thrill of pleasure and power in flouting social conventions. But more dangerously, by having words that stereotype certain groups very negatively, there is a danger that these words may construct our view of the world as we grow up, build and reinforce our hidden prejudices, and contribute to constructing who we are and how we fit in. Unless challenged, the words can easily become part of our identities and colour the way we see the world.

Naturally, the shock value of pejorative terms is culturally calibrated, and varies from subculture to subculture. If one is constantly surrounded by taboo words from the start, and if everyone uses the same racist terms unashamedly, then they become ordinary. If everyone is doing it, it loses its taboo value, and children in certain subcultures hardly notice these words, since their use is either not markedly aggressive or emotionally charged. Swearing is a culturally acquired way of expressing emotions, especially anger, and

different environments produce different thresholds for using offensive language. This is why it is so much easier to use swearwords borrowed from other languages, and in South Africa it is a much-observed phenomenon that Afrikaans speakers use English expletives and vice versa, without causing offence among themselves or breaking their own taboos. Thus, cursing is basically a product of interacting systems which are linked to the ways that we, as humans, are socialized while learning language and experiencing and expressing emotional states. Much of our instinctive emotional behavior is controlled by the hypothalamus and the limbic system which controls instinctive behaviours (Jay, 2000), and if particular words are strongly linked to extreme emotional states, they too become part of that instinctive behaviour. These are the deeply personal aspects of some of the words we learn.

Counteracting these strong instincts is our learned socio-cultural behavior, which depends on our lived experiences in relation to race, gender, religion, age etc. Each swearword and pejorative term we encounter will be linked to information about the speakers, the context and the degree of offensiveness its use involved. These more social aspects of the word, linked to the question "what does my group do?" combine with the more personal, instinctive aspects described earlier. Thus, any person's knowledge and understanding of cursing is a mix of one's psychological makeup, one's private, personal experiences, as well as one's shared experiences of the cultural content. As far as race goes in South Africa, people born after 1990 (when significant political and social change began) should generally have had a better chance of developing fewer racial stereotypes and prejudices than those who carry with them the baggage of apartheid, given the recent changes in legislation and the heightened awareness about the urgency for real transformation. However, these chances are compromised by the fact that there are still many enclaves in the country where racism goes unchallenged. Thousands of schools, for reasons of class and economy, are not yet multi-racial, and there is little doubt that racist terms and prejudices are still acquired at home and at school in those places.

Cursing is thus an essential part of language, even if individuals eschew or suppress these words. The more educated and socially aware one is, and the more enlightened about the value of diversity and the rights of others, the stronger the sanction against using derogatory terms will be, the rarer one's use of these words is likely to be, and the higher their impact factor when used, because they are linked to exceptionally strong emotions. Shock value is linked to levels of use - it is the non-users who feel the shock, and who are sharply aware of their strong emotional impact; and it is particularly the disempowered groups, who are targeted or referred to by these words, who experience strong feelings of degradation, humiliation and pain.

As members of a linguistic community, adults are expected to know these words, and to recognize that they are unacceptable in a society that values human rights and diversity. They actually need to know them, not in order to use them, but in order to know what other people mean when they use them. It is a socially necessary skill to recognize these words, to know what they represent and how they can offend when used in the wrong social context. The knowledge of what is hurtful and taboo is a vital part of linguistic knowledge. We have to know these words and understand their social meaning, in order to choose whether or not to use them, or to know how to respond to them when they are used in our presence.

The South African context

High on the list of the most shocking words are racist terms, and these have particular power in multi-racial countries such as South Africa. As a result of its strongly racist history, there is extreme sensitivity to racial differences in South Africa, and terms to refer to various racial groups - official and unofficial - abound. Inevitably, every time a new word is officially coined to refer to people of colour, the term rapidly acquires accompanying negative connotations, social resistance to the term grows, and a new word has to be found to replace the old term of reference. For this reason, over time, South Africa has witnessed regular shifts in the words which have been regarded as acceptable to refer to people of colour, most particularly African blacks.

Starting in the late 1800s, when it was acceptable officially to refer to local indigenous black people (that is not from the colonies) as 'kaffirs' (unbelievers), the spelling of the word rapidly shifted (through approximately four spellings), already a sign of social discomfort, possibly (although possibly also due to a lack of standardization, and a reflection of generally low levels of literacy at the time). Now defined as derogatory and highly offensive, the word is strongly discredited, and its use is an actionable insult, a term of contempt which is as offensive as 'nigger' is, in the US (Branford, 1991: 143). Early examples of written usage cited in Branford (1991: 144) include "The Caffers … were very much pleased at my calling them by their true titles … Kosa" (1827) and "I have been very busy compiling a Kaffir grammar" (1842). As a result of its negative connotations, compounds which use it, such as 'kaffirboom', the 'kaffir wars' and 'kaffir beer' have been replaced by the more neutral terms 'coral tree', 'frontier wars', and 'tshwala' (Branford, 1991: 144).

It was not long before this word was abandoned completely in official contexts, in favour of the word 'natives' as the preferred or acceptable way to refer to African black people. Although all of the country's ethnic groups (including the majority of whites) are South African 'natives' in the general sense, the word came to be used exclusively of black Africans, the earliest usage recorded with this sense occurring in 1826 (Silva et al., 1996: 495) (In the 1980s, Riaan Malan writes in 'My Traitor's Heart': "Natives cooked my meals, polished my shoes … dug holes at my father's direction"). Now obsolescent, the term rapidly also became offensive, and in 1941 a new 'official' term entered the

scene, via the Office of Statistics of the Union: "Non-Europeans", a blanket term to refer to Asiatics (natives of Asia and their descendants, mainly Indians, Coloureds (mainly Cape Coloured but also Cape Malays), Bushmen, Hottentots and all persons of mixed race (Silva et al., 1996: 508). The earliest usage recorded with this sense was in 1918, and a later citation from 1939 states: "The Indians were now excluded from the 'European' room and compelled to use the 'non-European' room in the company of Natives" (Silva et al., 1996: 508).

The next short-lived, accepted term of reference to replace 'natives' between 1953 and 1978 was 'Bantu', from the Zulu / Xhosa word 'abantu', meaning people / humanity. Originally the word meant "of or pertaining to negroid peoples inhabiting the equatorial and southern regions of Africa, and of the languages spoken by them" (OED). It was one of four major official ethnic designations, the others being 'Asian', 'White' and 'Coloured'. Originally a neutral term used by blacks to refer to themselves, 'Bantu' became increasingly unacceptable once it had become part of the terminology of apartheid (Branford, 1991; Silva et al., 1996: 45) and is now avoided, even as a scientific term for the language group ('Sintu' is used often instead). The derogatory slang term 'munts' quickly evolved from this word (based on 'umntu', the singular), and still seems to flourish in certain sub-cultures.

During the same period, the Population Registration Act in 1950 endorsed the word 'blacks' which was the last 'official' designation applied to black African people. Inevitably, the word soon acquired negative connotations from its association with apartheid laws, and despite claims that 'black' has replaced 'African' as the (presently) most widely accepted term (Silva et al., 1996: 65), sensitivities around its use still prevail. When the Department of Plural Relations and Development (later renamed the Department of Cooperation and Development) was launched in the 1970s, the word 'plural' was used facetiously as a term of reference for black people (Branford, 1991: 247) (whites were 'singulars') – a sardonic social comment on the apartheid government's efforts to whitewash its policies. A close and more formal contender as official term of reference for a while was the word 'African': a member of one of the black indigenous peoples, as distinct from 'coloured', Indian, white or Khoisan people (Branford, 1991: 3), but recent years have seen obligatory scare quotes creeping in, along with the term 'so-called Africans', and currently 'black Africans' and 'African Blacks' (which reinforces racism all over again). Even the plural marker is being avoided, and viewed as dehumanising, and the preferred usage is 'black people' rather than 'blacks.'

The important point to note is that there is no mention in any South African lexicographical work of the word 'nigger' apart from 'nigger-ball' – a large, hard, spherical, black, aniseed-flavoured sucking sweet ('gob-stopper') which changed colours in successive layers. This is not marked as pejorative. While 'nigger' is probably the most offensive, hateful and hurtful term in American English today when used by a white person to describe a black or African-American person (internet 1), one cannot say the same of its use in South African English. All the main senses and citations defined in the Oxford English Dictionary relate to the United States, with two relatively minor entries relating to its use in Australia and New Zealand. They point out a recent conscious, politically motivated reclamation of the term among black Americans, which does not usually carry negative connotations, although it may be considered offensive when used by whites in imitation of this usage. They also give more recent examples of the word used in reference to white people, or showing neutral or positive connotations in reference to black people.

METHODOLOGY

"The case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (Yin, 1984: 23). This approach is qualitative, seeking to explain a complex issue or shed further light on what prior research suggests through detailed contextual analysis of a current real-life event in order to apply ideas and test theories. Usually the strengths of a case study approach are its objectivity, and the fact that there are no a priori hypotheses to be tested – the researcher is free to discover any potential factors which could have played a role (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991).

Such studies are often referred to as hypothesis-generating, since the scope of perspective is unrestricted. This article is a somewhat atypical focused case study, because a non-participant indirectly reports on observed behavior without engaging directly in it. Unlike typical longitudinal case studies, which involve predetermination of research questions, and a careful selection of cases with planned observations over an extended period, this study reflects on a single unanticipated incident, post hoc. Because it did not observe behavior directly, this particular case study is also free from one of the other usual limitations - the observer's paradox (Labov, 1972), which questions the naturalness of any observed behavior. The reason why this approach lends itself to a study of the phenomenon of swearing is because swearing does not easily lend itself to a quantitative, positivistic, experimental orientation, given the great difficulty of capturing real-life, spontaneous usage of taboo words. This type of behavior is not homogeneous or routine, and cannot be planned or predicted; the only way one can 'capture' it is through the eyes of participants. For this reason, like all case studies, this study is undoubtedly subject to a more troublesome limitation: the possibility of bias and subjectivity in the retrospective and qualitative personal accounts on which it is based, which undermines its reliability and generality. As a result of the lack of presuppositions or planned observations, this study has no "results" as such. Instead, there is a certain amount of speculation in the discussion and analysis of the event, in an attempt to seek a clearer understanding of what happened.

Evidence was gathered in the following ways: firstly, as Dean of Students, I was privy to the perpetrator's name and identity, and could discuss the incident with him, albeit briefly and in a very supportive way; secondly, the public announcements made in connection with the incident and the written apology were available to me; and thirdly, an article published later by the victim shed light on his perspective. The perpetrator in this study was a first-year, English-speaking, white, Zimbabwean male, aged 19 years, whose mother was deceased, and whose father had remarried. The fact that he was not receiving financial aid suggests that he had financial means. The victim was a black male, who held a senior tenured academic professorship in the Journalism Department at the University, and his wife and small child (also black), who were passengers in his car at the time of the incident.

THE INCIDENT

At Rhodes University in September 2009, a huge furore followed a very public and offensive use of the word 'nigger' on the campus. The context was the annual Intervarsity sporting competition against three sister institutions, which is usually accompanied by an unfortunate tradition of excessive partying and drinking by a certain very vocal and visible group of students. A black Professor and his wife and child were driving slowly past a group of drunken white students on campus and one of them shouted out the word 'Niggers!' at them. The Professor (who was not a South African) was extremely distressed; as he put it in a subsequent article "The racist indignity to which a white Rhodes University student subjected my family ignited conflicting emotions and thoughts in me. Such is the psychological violence engendered by racism. Feelings of outrage engulfed me, followed by thoughts of vengeance … As a black person, I felt racially violated. My family and I longed for restorative justice" (Banda, 2009: 5). Despite what he called "the numbing discourse of evidentialism" which absolves those who should act from the responsibility of acting, he decided to report the incident, in order to achieve "restitution and education". For him, the act of public disclosure would test the university's commitment to anti-racialism and the efficacy of its investigatory-prosecutorial processes, and would assuage "the mental anguish" wrought against his family. ✳

In response to the report, the Vice-Chancellor sent out a public circular on the intranet, endorsing the feeling of outrage – echoed by many in the university hierarchy – which led to an outpouring of solidarity and support. As he put it, "Needless to say, I am hugely distressed by this despicable behaviour, which I condemn in the strongest possible terms. This is an affront not only to an outstanding and respected colleague and his family, but to humanity and all that we stand for at Rhodes University. I wish to make absolutely clear that such behaviour will under no circumstances be tolerated at Rhodes University. Racism and racial abuse in all its forms has no place at Rhodes University. Conduct, relationships and responsibilities at Rhodes are guided by the values of the South African Constitution and Bill of Rights - respect for human dignity, human rights, equality, non-sexism and non-racialism. Everyone at Rhodes … deserves respect and dignity. Rhodes is a home for all!" He sent out a request to witnesses to come forward and identify the group of misbehaving students and appealed to each of the misbehaving students to free themselves "from this great shame and injustice and come forward and identify the student who abused Professor Banda and his family" and not to collude in violating the dignity and human rights of an individual. Two days later, he issued a call for a public three-day stand against racism on campus, in order to affirm and promote human dignity, human rights, equality, non-sexism and non-racialism. Lecturers, wardens and students were asked to raise the matter and discuss it widely, posters were distributed campus-wide, purple ribbons were worn as a sign of solidarity, and the media had a field day.

As a result, where investigatory techniques would probably have yielded nothing, an Afrikaans-speaking white student came forward and exposed the culprit. Investigations resulted rapidly in a full confession with written apologies. A disciplinary hearing followed and punishment was swiftly handed down: a suspended exclusion from the University, 40 hours of compulsory service and an essay about racism. He was also required to apologise in person to the family. The punishment ignited considerable controversy, some feeling it was too harsh, others amazed at its leniency. A call for a review of disciplinary processes followed. Professor Banda wrote later: "What occurred to me was how early in one's life the dice is cast. Racist behaviour is not biochemically ingrained in people; they are socialised into it. In tackling it, then, we need to assume both a psychological individualist and communitarian-constructivist approach. Individuals who manifest racist tendencies clearly need the help of everyone, unless they recant any claim to humanity and humanness. More importantly, we all – in community – must take responsibility for transforming all those significant social apparatuses that influence the development of human behaviour – the family, the school, and the like" (Banda, 2009: 5).

The perpetrator remained tight-lipped throughout the ordeal. After his initial strong denial, he complied meekly with all the requirements of the disciplinary process. In his letter of apology to the Banda family, he expressed deep regret, and made reference to his troubled family background. At the hearing, he claimed that he used the word, which he acknowledged he knew was derogatory, in an effort to seem 'cool' and to amuse his friends. He was contrite, and attributed his behaviour and subsequent 'memory loss' to excessive use of alcohol, which he acknowledged was problematic. He was deeply embarrassed and humiliated, and was not prepared to comment any further, in private discussion with me, on the possible linguistic reasons why he had used the word nigger. The students in his residence (some 50 of them) must all have known about the incident, given the huge furore that ensued, and there must have been extensive discussions amongst themselves about what happened.

DISCUSSION

What factors predispose a young white male first-year student 7 months into a year of study to shout out 'nigger' in the company of 5 or 6 white male friends in broad daylight as an insult to three unknown black people driving past in a car? Below I offer a few explanations each of which is linked to the foregoing theoretical discussion, and each of which will be discussed *seriatim* in order to establish which of them are the more likely explanations for what happened:

1. His racial group is in the numerical majority at the university. He is reaffirming his own superiority, whiteness and masculinity. His world has always been a white one, and

he has adopted certain racist assumptions of superiority.
2. He is in the company of his peers, like-thinkers, who share the same values and world views. He wants to impress his peers, and appear macho and important.
3. By labeling outsiders as 'niggers' he has simultaneously indexed their otherness. The 'other' is removed from his world - an easy target.
4. He does not know these people and thinks he never will – stereotyping is easier under such circumstances.
5. He is drunk and has lost control of his inhibitions. He is annoyed by the car in his way as he tries to cross the road and draws automatically on a non-propositional utterance.
6. He has regularly used such words with his peer group and has lost sensitivity to the shock value of the word for others.
7. He is a racist, and intended to be as offensive as he possibly could.
8. He thinks 'nigger' is not as shocking as the word 'kaffirs' could be

As far as the first reason is concerned, one could argue that his membership of a racial group which is the numerical majority at the university has predisposed him to assume that his group is the 'norm', and be less inclined to take other groups into account. Because of the hegemony of hetero-sexism and Eurocentrism, having a diverse student body and good policies does not necessarily mean that people embrace diversity; discriminatory practices such as this incident probably happen frequently, and can easily result in certain staff and students feeling very marginalised indeed. In a recent 2-year longitudinal survey of the attitudes of students at Rhodes University (de Klerk and Radloff, 2009), it was shown that, of the students who completed the survey (1986 in 2007 and 2558 in 2008), the white students were significantly less aware that there might be any problem of prejudice on the campus than other, marginalized, groups. As a result of their hegemony, it seems that the white students see themselves as the norm, and make less effort to adjust or engage with students who are different from themselves. Just as various forms of intolerance are expressed linguistically via derogatory language, so racism is maintained through the same process of othering, decreasing the likelihood of empathy for members of the 'other' group, and making it easy for people to associate themselves with their own group, especially when that group is in the majority. In contrast, black, Indian and coloured groups on campus were far more aware of their differences, and of the potential for prejudice. The perpetrator (and his white peers) would probably see the institutional culture as neutral, since it so closely reflects their own norms, values, preferences and expectations (Kivel, 2005). Hill-Collins (2005: 54) refers to this sort of behavior as 'new racism', which is highly likely to be perpetuated because of a common-sense idea that racism is over, and there is no problem at all (cited in the Rhodes submission, 2008). As a white male, the perpetrator was not sensitive to his own power or privilege, and during the ensuing investigation, he hotly denied that he could possibly be seen as a racist. His

world has always been a white one, and he has subconsciously adopted certain racist assumptions of superiority. His aggressive use of the word 'nigger', while reaffirming his superiority, whiteness and masculinity, does not of course imply that he knew what he was doing was having this effect.

The second reason listed previously is that, he wants to impress his peers, like-thinkers, who share his values and world views, and in so doing to appear macho and important, is the explanation he actually gave during, his disciplinary hearing: he claimed to have used the word to be cool and to impress his friends (the fact that they were all members of the dominant group means that their hegemonic power was operating to protect all members of the group, regardless of whether they intended the hurt or were trying to fit in). This type of reasoning is supported by the research of Armstrong (1997: 327), who notes that, the language men sometimes use often serves to maintain their hegemonic power and to define what is regarded as normal masculine behavior. He examines homophobic slang terms and shows how they act coercively in signaling what is viewed as 'acceptable' behavior in contrast to effeminacy, which is seen as not conforming to the prevailing cultural code regarding 'normal' or acceptable sexual behavior. The use of racist terms could similarly be regarded as a type of masculine behavior in this white subculture. Thurlow (2001: 35) cites several other studies in this regard. In an effort to distance themselves from minority groups, members of social groups find themselves using pejorative terms, in spite of their awareness that they are frowned upon.

The third reason concerns using the term in order to reinforce otherness, as is commonly the case when abusive naming practices implicitly or explicitly declare who one is and who one is not. As Thurlow says, "It is not surprising that racial, sexual and homophobic pejoratives, many of them vitriolic, constitute one of the most predominant categories of abusive language among adolescents" (2001: 32). Extending his argument that the use of homophobic terms can simultaneously index otherness while reaffirming one's own belonging, the white student could have labeled those in the car as 'niggers' in order to index their otherness while reaffirming his sense of being a white 'insider' on the campus, marking out his sense of belonging more authentically to the University (imagined by him as a white cultural space) than those in minority groups. This could have been a deliberate act of alienation: overt, hostile, and aimed to reinforce his sense of belonging.

The fourth explanation is grounded in stereotyping. Despite the inherent conflict between cognitive approaches to prejudice, which view stereotyping and categorization as a normal and inevitable consequence of human thought processes and social structure, and views of prejudice as fundamentally irrational hatred borne of ignorance and weak personality, there is little doubt that stereotypes can be both causes and consequences of prejudice. Basically, "the stereotype acts as both a justificatory device for categorical acceptance or rejection of a group, and as a screening or selective device to maintain simplicity in perception in

thinking" (Dovidio et al., 2005: 192). Cognitive, motivational and socio-cultural processes intertwine, and categorizing social groups by using terms such as 'nigger' becomes inevitable and normal, since thinking processes are facilitated by categorisation. Disentangling these processes in this particular case study is not possible - acknowledging that they are probably present is the best one can do.

The fifth reason postulated for this behavior is that the student was drunk and has lost control of his inhibitions. His annoyance caused by a car full of black people blocking his path leads him to use an automatic, non-propositional utterance. This explanation is based on Timothy's (2000) theory that much of our instinctive emotional behavior is controlled by the hypothalamus and the limbic system, and extreme emotional states or total lack of inhibition (occasioned in this instance by intoxication) would bring out the particular taboo word. Whether or not the word was used non-propositionally is a moot point: the victim of the verbal onslaught was adamant that it was used with intent to offend; the perpetrator hotly denied this. But it is indeed possible that a lack of inhibition resulted in failure to suppress the impulse to use the word. There is no doubt a personal history which could explain why this young man used this particular word, but my later efforts to explore this question with him were fruitless, and the circumstances do not make it possible to interrogate these any further. Speculation is the only alternative.

The sixth possible explanation for the behavior, closely linked to number five, is that this student has regularly used such words with his peer group and has lost sensitivity to the shock value of the word for others. Feagin and Vera (1995), one of the leading North American sociologists of racism, cites research that whites tend to use racist language among other whites, which partly accounts for the incident (my thanks to the anonymous reviewer who brought this to my attention). Unfortunately, the other witnesses (who were identified as white males) did not come forward, and so this hypothesis remains untested.

The seventh explanation is not out of the question, despite the perpetrator's denial. There is plenty of evidence that Professor Banda believed that the term was used in a way that made it clear that the user intended to mark out and hurt the recipients, and there is also abundant evidence that he was indeed hurt and publicly humiliated. The word was certainly not used simply to proclaim the presence of 'niggers', but was rather uttered as an interpellation, which attached a negative attribution to the referent.

The eighth speculation is that the student possibly thinks 'nigger' is not as shocking as 'kaffirs' could be, based on the evidence (discussed earlier in this article) that the word is not used in common parlance, and is not listed in local dictionaries. This line of reasoning is based on extending to different varieties of English the argument that using swearwords in a foreign or second language is 'easy', because the shock-value of these words is lost in translation. So one could then argue that 'nigger', which is deeply offensive in the United States, cannot be expected to have

the same value for all its users in South Africa. This deserves to be interrogated a little more closely: one must not underestimate the power of global media, both written and spoken (especially in rap music), where 'nigger' is regularly used in ways which make it abundantly clear that it is highly derogatory and offensive. Young people in South Africa would surely be exceptional – possibly even abnormal - if they were not aware of the negative connotations of the word. The perpetrator certainly did not cite this as a mitigating factor during the disciplinary hearing, which suggests that this is the least likely of all the suggested explanations to hold water.

We will never know whether this taboo word was an act of pure racism, deliberately used and mirroring strong prejudice lurking beneath the surface, or whether it was used out of habit, having been acquired in a social context where it was regarded as normal. We can also not be sure if the word was used unintentionally because of being drunk and uninhibited, or whether it was a type of 'membership badge", displayed to show off to friends, not can we explore the shock value of the word for the perpetrator, or his personal social background. The final answer as to what lay behind the outburst will never be fully understood, given the sensitive and confidential nature of the incident, and the humiliation and embarrassment associated with it, but it is probably true to say that all the factors probably played a role to a greater or lesser extent, with the possible exception of the last one.

Final comments

Regardless of what triggered his behavior, the young man was blamed harshly and swiftly, and no effort was made to explore underlying motivation of any kind. The University's solution to the problem was a swift and public censoring of the individual culprit, who was found guilty, and forced to apologise to the family in person. The collective group, who were part of the incident and neglected to challenge the abuser or to come forward when publicly called upon to do so, were not called to account for their behavior.

McEnery (1996) traces the cyclic occurrence of 'moral panics' through the ages where upright defenders of society have taken it upon themselves to blame society's ills (one of them being swearwords) on particular scapegoats, Is this what happened on the Rhodes campus? Did the enlightened defenders of liberal views take it upon themselves to blame the University's ills on one particular scapegoat, and find him guilty as a message to the rest of the university community? In retrospect, it is a pity that the incident was not used more proactively as an opportunity to discuss racist terminology openly and critically, and possibly for the institution to admit to some responsibility and to share some of the shame that was occasioned, as was done in 2008, when the University, led by the Vice Chancellor, made a formal public apology, openly acknowledging its shameful and regrettable actions during the apartheid period and unreservedly apologizing to

all those who were wronged or hurt as a result. Other precedents exist; Australia has admitted collective responsibility for the deeds perpetrated against the indigenous people and in South Africa the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the early 90s made huge strides in terms of openly discussing past wrongs and seeking forgiveness rather than retribution (de Klerk, 2008). In Professor Banda's words at the time, achieving a post-racial South Africa consists in a series of often isolated personal struggles … Anti-racialism is a doctrine that we must knead into the dough of our daily politics about human identity, dignity, democracy, and all those other values that underpin genuine human civilisation" (Banda, 2009: 5). But his request that the incident be used to show students how to fight racist behaviour by confronting them with the evidence of its existence on campus was possibly not taken far enough.

I chose the title of this paper ("A nigger in the woodpile" - a figure of speech which is now regarded as highly offensive and pejorative in USA, and which was formerly commonly used to mean that some fact of importance has not been disclosed) very deliberately because, I have argued, there are a number of factors relating to the use of this word which were not discussed or explored at the time this incident played itself out on campus. Whatever the underlying causes that led to the incident, in a University community of highly educated and socially aware people where critical thinking is encouraged and where diversity is valued, it should be regarded as a duty – indeed, a moral imperative – to use such incidents more proactively to try to influence views and challenge prejudices, and my office is partly to blame for not doing so at the time.

One of the major principles that is commonly accepted by scholars of race is that "race-related judgments and behaviors involve a complex interplay of automatic and more motivated, deliberative processes" (Towles-Schwen and Fazio, 2006: 699; Plant and Devine, 1998). Late adolescence is not too late to challenge prejudices, and get students to unlearn stereotypes, be they racist, gender-based or religious, and question the myths and misinformation that have been disseminated and perpetuated through social and cultural institutions, including language (Kivel, 2005). By focusing on conceptualizations of discrimination and issues of power, in context, one can challenge institutionalized racism and prejudice, and it is not unreasonable to argue that any concerted effort to 'unfreeze' institutional culture will have an effect, even if limited (Robinson-Armstrong et al., 2009). Interventions in terms of racial prejudice at Rhodes during the past 3 years include careful mixing of all racial groups in residence, drama productions which involve critical audience discussions, a TRC hearing (de Klerk, 2008), workshops and training for student leaders and first-years. Diachronic analysis of attitude surveys over this time has already produced heartening indications that positive change is being achieved through these interventions (de Klerk and Radloff, 2009).

This paper has shown the impact of the utterance of a single expletive on several role-players: the offending young man, his 'partners in crime', the witness who came forward, the students in his residence (who must have discussed the matter heatedly), the university community and readers of local media. Hopefully, the public outcry against the use of this one word strongly discouraged other, similar acts of the devaluation of others – at least for a few months, and hopefully for longer. This published paper aims to serve as further impetus for critical discussion of this incident on campus, as yet another way to challenge the normalization of whiteness and raise awareness about the equal value and importance of all groups represented on campus

Postscript

What has happened since? In 2010, Professor Banda accepted a position at an American University, and left Rhodes. During that time, the perpetrator's social life spiraled out of control, marked by an apparent gambling problem which caused mounting debt, continued substance abuse problems and signs of rejection by his peers in the residence. He was involved in another unpleasant incident when he and his friends shouted abuse at a white female staff member. His academic career also took a dramatic turn for the worse: the year after the incident he failed all his subjects mid-year and was put on academic probation; he proceeded to miss so many classes that he was not permitted to write the exams for 3 of his subjects, and he failed those that he did write outright – one with 9%. He became a social outcast in his residence, and has subsequently been excluded from the University on academic grounds. The saying "sticks and stones may break your bones but words can never hurt you" clearly does not hold true.

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