

## THE CASE OF 'AUTISTIC': PEJORATIVE USES AND RECLAMATION

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In addition to its descriptive uses, 'autistic' — originally a medical label — is also used pejoratively (against ingroups and outgroups), and has recently been proudly reclaimed, especially in connection with neurodiversity movements. This phenomenon raises interesting questions for the philosophical debate on pejoratives. In this paper, we focus on two such questions: (i) Is 'autistic' a pejorative term? And (ii), How is 'autistic' being reclaimed? As for (i), we argue that 'autistic' doesn't look like a prototypical slur, nor like a prototypical ESTI (Ethnic/Social Term used as an Insult), nor like a derived pejorative, but displays a mixed behavior that approximates these kinds of terms. Our observations point towards the need for a broader conception of oppressive speech, beyond the most standard instances. As for (ii), we illustrate the analogies and disanalogies between the reclamation of 'autistic' and that of prototypical slurs. What's peculiar about reclaimed uses of 'autistic' is that they do not merely respond to derogatory uses of the term that abuse ingroups, but they (also) react to the introduction of alternative expressions (like 'person with autism') that are perceived as offensively euphemistic. This work adds to the contemporary literature in social philosophy of language, by encouraging scholars to make room for terms that can be used pejoratively and display a peculiar mixed behavior. Moreover, it highlights a further function of reclamation that goes beyond repurposing pejorative labels, which is to reject certain euphemistic expressions by representing some ways of being and living as positive and legitimate.

**Keywords:** slurs; ESTI; autism; neurodiversity; hate speech; social philosophy of language; identity-first vs. person-first; reappropriation; pride

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## 1. Introduction

The word 'autistic' has a medical origin, being mainly used in biomedical contexts to diagnose and refer to people on the autism spectrum, as it appears in the diagnostic psychiatric manual DSM-5-TR (APA 2022). The term has also started being used pejoratively against autistic and non-autistic people and, interestingly, has recently been proudly reclaimed in certain contexts, especially in connection with neurodiversity movements. Many neurodiversity proponents question the biomedical approach to autism, according to which autism should be seen as exclusively a pathological mental condition and regard it instead as a socio-political category and a marginalized identity (Botha and Frost 2020; Chapman 2020; Craine 2020).<sup>1</sup> The dynamics of 'autistic' pose many interesting issues for the recent debate in social philosophy of language on pejoratives and their reclamation.<sup>2</sup> In this paper we focus on two such questions: (i) Is 'autistic' a pejorative term? (And if so, of what kind? Can the existing categories adequately capture the functioning of this expression?); and (ii) How is 'autistic' being reclaimed? In addressing these issues, we compare 'autistic' to other terms that display a similar behavior, and treat it as a case study to theorize about expressions that do not neatly fit the existing categories of pejoratives. The plan of the article is the following.

In §2, we explore whether 'autistic' is a pejorative term—as it would *prima facie* be suggested by the fact that it is being reclaimed—by contrasting it with prototypical slurs and two other classes of expressions associated with bigoted and prejudiced attitudes, i.e. ESTIs (Ethnic and Social Terms Used as Insults—see Castroviejo, Fraser, & Vicente 2021), and “derived pejoratives” (i.e., a label introduced by Bolinger 2021 to account for mental illness-based pejoratives like 'schizo,' 'paranoid,' etc.). We argue that 'autistic' ultimately does not match the set of defining features of either of these categories and rather calls for a reconceptualization that accommodates terms displaying a mixed behavior. Our observations point towards the need for a broader conception of what oppressive speech is, beyond the most paradigmatic instances of pejorative language. We leave it open whether the phenomenon to which we point deserves the intro-

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1. There are important differences within neurodiversity proponents regarding their view on autism and its compatibility with treating it as a biomedical condition. Singer (1998), for instance, sees autism as an identity category, akin to race or gender—an approach which seems to run contrary to framing it as a biomedical condition. Dwyer (2022) regards autism as a product of the interaction between the individual and the environment, which seems compatible with seeing it as both as an identity and as a biomedical condition. Chapman (2020) views autism as a social category of people that are disabled in relation to specific material and social contexts, as opposed to for biological reasons. We do not engage further with this issue in this paper.

2. In this work, we focus on the language-related questions and will not engage, among other things, with the 'disease' debate, but see Mole (2017) for a discussion of whether calling autism a disease is appropriate and why.

duction of a brand-new category of terms that can partake in hate speech, or whether it merely suggests that the divide between different classes of pejoratives should not be taken too rigidly.

With this conclusion about the hybrid nature of ‘autistic’ in mind, in §3 we look at its reclamatory uses. Since ‘autistic’ is not a prototypical pejorative term, we may expect its reclamation to be peculiar too. Reclamation is usually characterized as the practice whereby speakers (typically ingroups) employ a pejorative term in a way that subverts its standard derogatory uses and challenges its default negative associations. Reclamatory uses often express pride, solidarity, intimacy, and camaraderie (see Tirrell 1999; Brontsema 2004; Bianchi 2014; Croom 2014; Ritchie 2017; Anderson 2018; Jeshion 2020; Cepollaro & Zeman 2020; Cepollaro & López de Sa 2023). Reclamation is a process that takes weapons away from abusers. Is this what happens with ‘autistic’? On closer scrutiny, it turns out that the reclamation of ‘autistic’ does not merely respond to derogatory uses of the term that abuse ingroups. Interestingly, it (also) reacts to the introduction of alternative expressions—like ‘person with autism’—that are perceived as offensively euphemistic, no matter how well intended. The reclamation of ‘autistic’ thus vindicates the idea that since there is nothing bad in *being* autistic, there is nothing bad in being called (or identified as) ‘autistic’ either.<sup>3</sup> This case highlights yet a further function of reclamation, which is not exactly about repurposing pejorative labels, but rather about rejecting certain circumlocutions by representing some ways of being and living as positive and legitimate. This observation on how ‘autistic’ is used has the potential to illuminate further subtleties of what is going on with the reclamation of prototypical slurs.

## 2. Is ‘Autistic’ a Pejorative Term?

The term ‘autism’ has a long history of descriptive changes, beginning in the early 1900s. Initially introduced by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler around 1911 to refer to a cluster of symptoms related to schizophrenia, the term underwent several formulations and changes in the 1970s and following decades, as can be witnessed in the various nosological descriptions adopted over time (Evans 2013). The DSM-5-TR characterizes autism as a spectrum condition through the diagnostic label ‘Autistic Spectrum Disorder’ and describes it by appealing to deficits in social communication and interaction, and restrictive and repetitive patterns of behavior (APA 2022).<sup>4</sup> Since its origin in psychiatric diagnosis, the

3. In Jorba, Petrolini & Cepollaro (2024), we discuss the metaphysical and linguistic implications of identity-first and person-first approaches to autism.

4. Kapp and Ne’eman (2020) additionally stress the crucial role played by self-advocacy groups—such as the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN)—in the diagnostic revision of autism

notion of autism has further evolved from being characterized as a mental illness to a cognitive and neurodevelopmental condition (Evans 2017).

Before delving into the question whether 'autistic' is a pejorative, let us clarify what we mean by 'pejorative.' Pejoratives are linguistic devices that, on their typical uses, systematically derogate their targets.<sup>5</sup> Jeshion (2021: 211–214) helpfully distinguishes *pejorative lexical items* (what we call 'pejoratives' here) from *pejorative uses* of words.<sup>6</sup> Pejorative lexical items (or pejoratives) include words whose typical uses convey something negative: a negative attitude, evaluation, or stance. A paradigmatic example of pejoratives are slurs, i.e., derogatory terms that target people and groups on accounts of their belonging to a certain category (typically related to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and so on). A pejorative *use* of a word, on the other hand, concerns the way a term is used on a particular occasion, regardless of its status as a pejorative. To better appreciate the distinction between pejorative words and pejorative uses of words, take a slur like 'wop' and an everyday term like 'cook.' On their typical uses, the slur is used to derogate Italians, while 'cook' is not systematically associated with any derogatory attitude. We thus say that 'wop' is a pejorative, and 'cook' is not. This said, each of them may have non-typical uses. For instance, the slur may be used, on occasion, to convey solidarity rather than contempt: suppose that a group of Italian-Americans use it among themselves in jest. This special use does not turn the slur into a non-pejorative term; rather, it exemplifies a non-pejorative use of a pejorative term. Conversely, 'cook' could, in the right context, be used to convey contempt: suppose it is used to humiliate someone who aspired to become a chef but failed and now cooks in a mediocre restaurant chain. Once again, this special use does not turn 'cook' into a pejorative term: the example exemplifies a pejorative use of a non-pejorative term.

In light of these distinctions, the question thus becomes: Is 'autistic' a pejorative term? The fact that 'autistic' is currently being reclaimed may prima facie suggest that it is a pejorative term, since reclamation typically involves slurs:<sup>7</sup> but is the term 'autistic' a slur? To address this question (§2.2.), it is useful to distinguish two main ways in which this label is used pejoratively (§2.1). As we said, we treat 'autistic' as a case study, and in §2.3 we locate it in the broader landscape of expressions that do not precisely fit the existing categories of pejoratives.

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in the DSM-5. Others stress that autism as a concept has expanded and contracted over time due to a host of factors, including economic, educational, and institutional needs (Evans 2017).

5. For the sake of brevity, we will sometimes talk about terms (like 'autistic') as doing things (like derogating), when in fact we aim to refer to what speakers do by using such terms.

6. See also Swanson (ms) about slurring uses of terms vs. conventionalized slurs.

7. Typically, but arguably not necessarily: see Cepollaro (2017) about how the initially pejorative terms for certain poets ('neoteric') and painters ('impressionist') were then defiantly used as positive terms and appropriated, until they became the standard and descriptive way to refer to those groups. This shows that the process of reclamation may involve terms that are not standard slurs.

## 2.1 *Two Pejorative Uses of 'Autistic'*

'Autistic' seems to be employed pejoratively in two main ways. One is meant to derogate ingroups, (i.e., the members of the group), the other meant to insult outgroups.

When it targets an *ingroup*, this use of 'autistic' derogates a particular individual *because of* their neurodivergence, thus aiming to derogate the whole category at once. This is what we observe in accounts like this on Reddit:

My friend keeps poking at me for being autistic ... When I try to say something he's like 'shut up autistic' and doing the autistic screeching thing.<sup>8</sup>

Someone insulted me today by saying 'You really are autistic.' ... I remember another jackass calling me 'a depressed autistic.'<sup>9</sup>

We find similar reports on blogs:

I come from a time where that word, 'autistic,' had — still has — a negative meaning. It's offensive. When someone refers to my son as 'the autistic,' I *cringe* at that word; I get ready to defend him.<sup>10</sup>

This kind of uses, according to some people, is reminiscent of slurs:

I am utterly amazed at how much society has normalized hatred against people on the spectrum. ... No one ever calls someone out for using 'autistic' or 'autist' as a slur. I've seen supposedly woke leftists do it, again and again and again. ... I am not, in fact, inferior. I don't deserve their kneejerk, socially sanctioned hatred. Society needs to do better.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to this ingroup-directed derogatory use, 'autistic' is also used as an insult for outgroups. When it is used to insult an *outgroup*, the underlying mechanism is different from the one we have observed for ingroups and is reminiscent of Jeshion's (2013a; 2013b) "G-extending" uses of slurs.<sup>12</sup> In such cases,

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8. [https://www.reddit.com/r/autism/comments/fbojaj/my\\_friend\\_keeps\\_poking\\_at\\_me\\_for\\_being\\_autistic/](https://www.reddit.com/r/autism/comments/fbojaj/my_friend_keeps_poking_at_me_for_being_autistic/). Accessed 03/10/2025.

9. [https://www.reddit.com/r/aspergers/comments/miotu8/someone\\_insulted\\_me\\_today\\_by\\_saying\\_you\\_really/?rdt=57799](https://www.reddit.com/r/aspergers/comments/miotu8/someone_insulted_me_today_by_saying_you_really/?rdt=57799). Accessed 03/10/2025.

10. <https://www.autistichoya.com/2011/08/significance-of-semantics-person-first.html>. Accessed 03/10/2025.

11. [https://www.reddit.com/r/aspergers/comments/miotu8/someone\\_insulted\\_me\\_today\\_by\\_saying\\_you\\_really/?rdt=57799](https://www.reddit.com/r/aspergers/comments/miotu8/someone_insulted_me_today_by_saying_you_really/?rdt=57799). Accessed 03/10/2025.

12. 'G' refers to 'group': "In G-extending uses ... the speaker applies the term to someone he knows to be outside the group referenced by the term's neutral counterpart. In G-extending uses,

the term is used to insult an alleged non-autistic subject by ascribing to her the negative properties stereotypically associated with autism.<sup>13</sup> These uses assume and thus suggest that these properties are negative and undesirable, and that it is shameful to display them, at least for neurotypicals.<sup>14</sup> This resembles the misogynistic practice of insulting men by ascribing feminine characteristics to them in an attempt to diminish their worth (Jeshion 2013a: 324; Bolinger 2021): e.g., when 'like a girl' is used as an expression that is supposed to demean a man. In both cases, it's unclear whether the traits at stake are presented as negative *simpliciter* or as shameful for a specific group of people—e.g., neurotypical individuals or men. Just to give a sense of how 'autistic' is used to target (allegedly) non-autistic people, consider these exchanges from the gamer forum NeoGAF. In a comment to a post, a user dismisses something the original poster (OP) said by replying, 'OP is autistic.'<sup>15</sup>

As we have remarked, in this example 'autistic' does not derogate its target *because* of their non-typical cognition and behavior; users rather attempt to insult presumed neurotypicals (the original poster) by calling them 'autistic,' ascribing to them the negative properties stereotypically associated with autism. When 'autistic' targets outgroups, thus, it conveys the idea that there is something wrong with the person and presents autism as a negatively connoted condition that people would not want to apply to themselves. In this dialogue, again from the NeoGAF forum, a guy who has just lost his mom shares his difficulties in handling and expressing his confusing feelings. He says, "Am I doing this whole bereavement thing incorrectly? I feel like I'm autistic or something." Another user reassures him by saying "I think that you are acting perfectly normal considering your situation and that this time you aren't being autistic."<sup>16</sup> Once again, 'autistic' stands for something from which people would want to distance themselves.

By distinguishing ingroup-directed and outgroup-directed uses, we don't assume that speakers always *know* whether their interlocutors *are* autistic.

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the range of application is often to individuals that the speaker regards as having characteristics encoded in stereotypes of the group referenced by the neutral counterpart" (Jeshion 2013b: 238).

13. These out-group-directed uses—or G-extending uses, in Jeshion's terms—can involve slurs as well as their non-slurring counterparts: e.g., a straight guy may be called 'faggot' or 'gay' for crying, a straight woman may be called 'dyke' or 'lesbian' for being a feminist, etc. The mechanism at play is similar to the one we have illustrated. By using a slur or its counterpart as insults for outgroups, speakers attempt to derogate their addressee by ascribing them the negative properties that the bigoted stereotype associates with a certain group, even if the target doesn't belong to it.

14. In this paper, we employ the label "neurotypical" to describe individuals with typical neurological development or functioning.

15. <https://www.neogaf.com/threads/walsall-super-dad-spent-13-hours-glued-to-eight-screens-to-secure-ps5-for-son.1578683/#post-261274473>. Accessed 03/10/2025.

16. <https://www.neogaf.com/threads/my-mom-passed-at-2am-this-morning.1576211/#post-261050847>. Accessed 03/10/2025.

People can very well be wrong about whether their addressee is neurotypical or not, and yet their use of ‘autistic’ as an insult would still be *intended* as against an ingroup or outgroup,<sup>17</sup> thereby exemplifying the two distinct mechanisms we have just described. This sarcastic dialogue reported (or created) by a blogger exploits precisely the ambiguity between these two kinds of derogatory uses:

- “Oh my god are you fucking autistic”
- “I’m actually in the process of being diagnosed, but thanks for making a joke out of it, asshole”.<sup>18</sup>

The first speaker means to use ‘autistic’ as an outgroup-directed insult, but their interlocutor reveals that she’s offended by this pejorative use *qua* ingroup.

After showing that ‘autistic’ is indeed used pejoratively in some contexts targeting either ingroups or outgroups, we proceed to spell out analogies and disanalogies with slurs, ESTIs, and derived pejoratives to shed further light on its distinctive features.

## 2.2. ‘Autistic’ vs Slurs, ESTIs, and Derived Pejoratives

‘Autistic’ surely resembles prototypical slurs in that it targets ingroups because of their group membership and contributes to the group’s dehumanization. But how can we establish whether ‘autistic’ is a slur? Defining slurs, and distinguishing them from other pejoratives, is no easy task. As Stojnić and Lepore (2025: 5) put it: “(T)he line between slurs and general pejoratives might be more difficult to draw, and not so much linguistic, but rather socio-historical or cultural.” But one of slurs’ most distinctive feature is so-called *projection*.<sup>19</sup> Take again a slur like ‘wop.’ The Italophobic content conveyed by unembedded predications such as ‘she’s a wop’ survives when the term occurs under semantic embedding, e.g., in utterances like ‘she’s not a wop,’ ‘is she a wop?,’ ‘she might be a wop,’ ‘if she’s a wop, she eats spaghetti’: all these utterances still convey some derogatory content towards Italians. That is, the semantic operators such as negation, conditional, question, modals, and so on cannot “seal” the pejorative content of

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17. Something similar happens with terms like slurs, ESTIs, and derived pejoratives too, as we shall see below.

18. <https://amayaisokay.tumblr.com/post/633735610677526528/oh-my-god-are-you-fucking-autistic-im-actually> Accessed 03/01/21.

19. See Hom (2008), Potts (2005, 2007), and Bolinger (2017). Camp (2018: 39) talks about “hyper-projectivity,” for slurs’ derogatory content tends to scope out of all sorts of embeddings.

slurs, which scopes out of its embedded position. Projection characterizes slurs since not all pejoratives display it. For instance, particularistic insults such as 'asshole' or 'jerk' seem to lack projection.<sup>20</sup> Take a derogatory utterance like 'He's an asshole.' If we embed the term under an operator like negation, the utterance ceases to be derogatory: 'He's not an asshole' conveys no derogatory content because nothing bad is said of the referent of 'he,' nor does the utterance target anyone else.

How does 'autistic' behave with respect to projection? Assessing the question is quite tricky, for—unlike slurs—not all typical uses of 'autistic' are derogatory in the first place. If we restrict our focus to derogatory uses, we observe that the derogatory content of 'autistic' seems to project out of semantic operators. In fact, the pejorative content towards ingroups survives when this term occurs under negation, as in the example we mentioned above, 'you aren't being autistic.' Similarly, it would have retained its disparaging flavor toward group members, had the original poster in the example put his thoughts in the form of a question ('Am I being autistic or something?'). However, this projection pattern does not extend to all uses of 'autistic,' but only concerns the derogatory uses.

This leads us to the many respects in which 'autistic' departs from prototypical slurs. First, as we have said, it doesn't seem to show the same projection patterns as prototypical slurs insofar as many of its standard uses are not derogatory in the first place, but seem merely extensional, e.g., in utterances like "[a] recent qualitative investigation into 'camouflaging' in *autistic adults* distinguishes masking and compensation as two sub-components of camouflaging" (Livingston & Happé 2017, our emphasis) (and of course, all the uses in this very paper). On the one hand, the labels that a linguistic community recognizes as derogatory do not usually crowd the pages of medical and academic books without quotation marks; on the other hand, slurs hardly have merely extensional uses and tend to be derogatory across contexts. Authors like Diaz-Legaspe (2020: 1403) would thus exclude that 'autistic' is a slur, for "[u]nlike non-offensive terms occurring in slurring speech, slurs are *always* offensive. They are so even when used in sentences not intended to belittle or disparage" (our emphasis).<sup>21</sup> In contrast, 'autistic' can, but need not, be used pejoratively, which is what happens with many terms that refer to social groups without systematically conveying derogatory contents. Overall, the negative connotation of

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20. See Cepollaro, Domaneschi, & Stojanovic 2021; Domaneschi, Cepollaro, & Stojanovic 2025 for experimental investigation on particularistic insults such as 'jerk.'

21. Swanson (ms), whose account is based on slurs' power to cue ideologies, may say that 'autistic' is a non-conventional slur or at least that it can be used as a piece of slurring language, for he believes that the act of slurring can be performed without conventionalized slurs.

'autistic' seems to arise from the context (encompassing widespread assumptions, background facts about the participants to the conversation, tone, prosody, or emoji and emoticons), rather than from the lexical item *per se*.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike standard slurs, it is not the specific term that is conventionally and systematically associated with pejorative contents, but rather it is how autism is conceptualized, collectively represented, and contextually used, that gives 'autistic' the potential to be employed as an insult.

Relatedly, 'autistic' lacks a neutral alternative, which slurs typically possess ('Italian' for 'wop,' 'lesbian' for 'dyke,' etc.), for the term itself can be used merely descriptively.<sup>23</sup> When speakers choose to use slurs over their neutral counterparts, they convey a pejorative content that they would not have conveyed otherwise (Bolinger 2017; Nunberg 2018). When 'autistic' targets ingroups and conveys pejorative contents about them, it does *not* do so *in contrast* with a discarded non-charged alternative (Bolinger 2017).

All in all, 'autistic' seems to diverge from prototypical slurs on several grounds. Yet, the fact that 'autistic' is used to target outgroups reminds us of another class of pejorative terms, recently characterized by Castroviejo, Fraser, and Vicente (2021) as 'Ethnic/Social Terms used as Insults' (ESTIs). Castroviejo and colleagues make the case for a class of pejoratives that is to be differentiated from slurs, focusing on Spanish ('*portera*' – literal tr., 'doorwoman' – conveying the idea that the target is especially inclined to gossip, '*camionero*' – literal tr., 'truck driver' – conveying the idea that the target is rude or crude). What characterizes ESTIs is that they have an extensional and neutral use, that is, they are directed at *ingroups* in a *non-evaluative* way: We can say 'Hubert is a Nazi' to describe the fact that he belongs to the Nazi movement, without insulting anyone. But in addition, ESTIs also have a *pejorative* use directed at *outgroups*: we can say 'Hubert is a Nazi' to mean that he exhibits the negative properties that are stereotypical of Nazis (e.g., he's very strict, cruel, etc.). Take the sentence 'Antonio è una portinaia' (literal tr., 'Antonio is a doorwoman'). When 'portinaia' is used pejoratively, it insults Antonio by ascribing him properties such as being especially inclined to gossip. But in addition, it also derogates doorwomen, by conveying the idea that doorwomen are especially inclined to gossip. By using 'portinaia' as if it were an insult, the speaker suggests that there is something bad in being a doorwoman.

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22. As said before, and unlike most slurs, 'autistic' doesn't seem to preserve its derogatory content when it is quoted. This suggests, among other things, that 'autistic' is not a swear word, while many slurs are thought to be so (see e.g., Rappaport 2019; 2020).

23. Not everyone agrees that slurs have a neutral correlate (e.g., see Ashwell 2016 and Foster 2023). Nor does everybody assume that slurs and their neutral counterpart have the same extension (see, e.g., Hom 2008 and Neufeld 2019).

The question then arises: Is 'autistic' an ESTI? On the one hand, it surely resembles ESTIs in that it has extensional uses that do not convey derogatory content, but, in addition, it can also be employed as an insult directed at outgroups, via the mechanism just described above. On the other hand, it departs from prototypical ESTIs in that it is also employed to abuse ingroups as such. In these cases, it derogates people *because* of their neurodivergence. Interestingly, the fact that 'autistic' is employed to demean ingroups may explain the fact that 'autistic'—unlike prototypical ESTIs like 'portinaia,' 'camionista' and the like—is being reclaimed by ingroups.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, another promising candidate is the notion of 'derived pejorative,' introduced by Bolinger (2021) to account for how mental illness-based pejoratives like 'schizo,' 'paranoid,' etc., work.<sup>25</sup> In her view, derived pejoratives (i) are typically used in a derogatory way when they are directed at outgroups, they (ii) represent them as temporarily deserving a negative treatment for manifesting the stereotyped property of a (typically marginalized) group to which they do not belong, and (iii) represent the invoked group as stably possessing these properties that justify their exclusion from (or subordination within) the relevant moral, political, or epistemic community. The outgroup-directed uses of 'autistic' resemble derived pejoratives in that they insult their target by ascribing them properties that are stereotypically associated with autistic people, assuming and suggesting that this is shameful for neurotypicals. However, one reason for us not to adopt Bolinger's terminology to qualify 'autistic' is that she understands derived pejoratives to be used in a derogatory way when they are directed at outgroups, while we want to account for the way in which 'autistic' can be used to derogate ingroups too. A further reason is that Bolinger (2021) includes in the category of derived pejorative both a term like 'retarded' and a term like 'paranoid.' In our view, the two are very distinct: while 'retarded' lost its descriptive use and is nowadays systematically derogatory, 'paranoid,' just like our case study 'autistic,' still has one.

So, we find that Bolinger's description of how derived pejoratives work fits well with the outgroup directed derogatory uses of 'autistic,' but we resist the adoption of the notion of 'derived pejorative' to classify 'autistic.' As we shall see

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24. A question that naturally arises is whether, if some ESTIs were in fact used against ingroups, they would then constitute an adequate model for 'autistic.' Our tentative answer is positive: if ESTIs were such that they were also used to demean (rather than simply describe) ingroups, then this would be the same phenomenon we observe for 'autistic.' This, however, does not seem to be the case, for 'doorwoman' is not used to humiliate doorwomen, 'truck-driver' is not used to derogate truck-drivers, and so on.

25. Please note that Bolinger's use of 'pejorative' here is not the same that we have adopted in this paper (following Jeshion 2021): Bolinger seems to be using 'pejorative' for words whose typical uses may but do not necessarily carry a negative evaluation or stance. We hope that this is not too confusing for readers. One way to avoid the confusion is to rebrand Bolinger's notion of 'derived pejorative' as 'derived pejorative uses of terms.'

in §3, what makes the case of ‘autistic’ interesting is that people are not trying to expunge the pejorative uses by “implor[ing] speakers to refrain from using the terms pejoratively,” as Bolinger (2021: 401) puts it. They are rather reclaiming it, i.e. owning it with pride, to sabotage the very possibility of using ‘autistic’ in a disparaging way, against ingroups or outgroups.

### 2.3 Terms with a Mixed Behavior: Locating ‘Autistic’ in a Broader Landscape

Is ‘autistic’ a slur? Is it an ESTI? Is it a derived pejorative? It seems reasonable to conclude that ‘autistic’ does not exactly behave like either of these classes of terms. Another upshot of our discussion might be that distinctions between these classes should not be drawn too strictly. The defining features of slurs, ESTIs and derived pejoratives, as well as the divide between them, is not that clear-cut, and there may well be terms that do not exactly fit the prototypical features of either, but rather display an interestingly mixed behavior. ‘Autistic’ is not the only term exhibiting such mixed behavior: other *prima facie* candidates are ‘Gypsy’<sup>26</sup> in English (and ‘*gitano*’ in Spanish and ‘*zingaro*’ in Italian),<sup>27</sup> ‘*ebreo*’ (i.e., Jewish) in Italian and many others.<sup>28</sup> What characterizes these terms is that they have both pejorative and non-pejorative uses. Their pejorative uses are roughly of two kinds, against ingroups and outgroups. Both kinds of uses end up derogating the whole group, but do so via crucially distinct mechanisms, as we have illustrated in §2.1. When these kinds of terms are used as insults directed at *ingroups*, they are associated with pejorative contents concerning the targeted group, just like slurs and unlike prototypical ESTIs like ‘*portera*’ and derived pejoratives like ‘*paranoid*.’ Unlike most slurs, however, they lack a neutral alternative. When, on the other hand, these terms are used as insults directed at *outgroups*, they ascribe to their target negative properties that are stereotypically associated with ingroups.<sup>29</sup>

26. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2015/04/roma-in-europe-11-things-you-always-wanted-to-know-but-were-afraid-to-ask/#:~:text=Is%20it%20OK%20to%20call,of%20their%20country%20of%20origin>. Accessed 03/10/2025.

27. See Zeman (2022) on “identificatory uses” of the Romanian slur ‘*țigăni*’ (‘Gypsy,’ in English).

28. Interestingly, Castroviejo, Fraser, and Vicente (2021: 9143–9151) analyze many of these examples as ESTIs, by focusing on their outgroup-directed uses. We agree that, just like ESTIs, these terms have extensional uses and are used as outgroup-directed insults too. But, as we mentioned, we think that these terms are also used to derogate ingroups, just like slurs. This also explains why people are coming up with alternative ways to refer to these groups to avoid passing for prejudiced (e.g., ‘Roma’ substituting ‘Gypsy’).

29. However, the ascribed properties are not those that a stereotypical member of the group would have for sure in the real world, but rather those (mostly negative) features that, according to a prejudiced stereotype, a person would have in virtue of belonging to a certain group. We can

Wrapping up, we conclude that 'autistic' is not a pejorative term, but it has widespread pejorative uses. In such uses, it displays features that approximate those of slurs (especially when directed at presumed ingroups) and features that resemble those of ESTIs and derived pejoratives (especially when directed at presumed outgroups). 'Autistic,' just like other words that we do not analyze in this paper (such as 'Gypsy' in English, or 'ebreo' in Italian), displays a mixed behavior, falling in a gray area between different kinds of pejorative terms. How should we locate these terms in the landscape of pejorative language? We leave room for the possibility that, if there is a significant number of relevant cases, scholars will feel the need to postulate a new class of terms that behave along the same lines as our case study 'autistic' (i.e., having neutral extensional uses, but also derogatory ones, such that the latter can be either ingroup- or outgroup-directed, along the mechanisms we described). We have mentioned a few such candidates in a few languages, and we expect more to emerge.

Yet, going as far as postulating the existence of a new class of terms that display a mixed behavior between slurs and ESTIs might seem unwarranted, especially based on a few examples. If this is the case, then our discussion in this paper would call for a less radical move, which involves relaxing the boundaries of the classes of pejoratives currently discussed in social philosophy of language and linguistics, like slurs, ESTIs, and derived pejoratives. If we refrain from taking the distinctions between these categories too rigidly, we can more easily account for expressions that—like 'autistic'—display mixed behavior. Moreover, this more fluid view of these classes can account for cases of transition from one category to the other. If the ingroup-directed derogatory uses of a term displaying a mixed behavior become more and more common, the term can easily become a slur, and a new expression would then be introduced to neutrally refer to the group.<sup>30</sup>

The way in which words are perceived changes over time, so whether an expression counts as a pejorative term is often relative to a given moment (and a place, or context, in general). For instance, the terms that display mixed behavior typically start as allegedly neutral expressions. We put forth the hypothesis that terms like 'idiot,' 'moron,' 'retarded,'<sup>31</sup> and so on, may have initially had

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easily see this in the following example: If one calls their Austrian colleague who is always late, speaks loudly, and gesticulates wildly, a "wop," the properties they are ascribing them are not the *actual* properties that most Italians share (like 'speaking Italian,' or 'having an Italian passport'). It is just the properties that a prejudiced stereotype associates with Italians' alleged nature or character that are mobilized.

30. For instance, we suspect that this is what happened to the term 'handicapped,' at least in English and Italian.

31. Notice that authors like Diaz-Legaspe (2020) exclude that a term like 'moron' could be a slur, for, as we mentioned, "[u]nlike non-offensive terms occurring in slurring speech, slurs are always offensive. They are so even when used in sentences not intended to belittle or disparage."

a similar history to that of ‘autistic.’ Introduced as scientific descriptive terms since at least the 1910s (Doll 1936), they started being used (also) as pejoratives that could either target ingroups (i.e., people with developmental or intellectual disabilities), or outgroups (i.e., people with no developmental impairment, but regarded as being stupid, unintelligent, etc.). When they targeted outgroups, they could do so using the mechanism we illustrated for outgroup-directed derogatory uses of ‘autistic.’ After a time of displaying mixed behavior, their descriptive/medical use had been challenged and finally faded. The rise in pejorative uses can explain why the use of such terms is sometimes abandoned in favor of new and less problematic alternatives. The more the association between certain words and pejorative contents gets conventionalized (in the direction of slurs and insults), the more a speaker needs to find a new expression that does not carry pejorative content. This is in line with Pinker’s (1994) “Euphemism Treadmill,” i.e. the process through which an initially neutral term gradually takes on negative connotations (either because its referent is negatively valued or because the word is used as an insult), and is thus replaced with a new one. The new expression—called an ‘euphemism’—initially lacks negative connotations but will eventually undergo the same process as the previous word: it will acquire negative connotations and ultimately require replacement.<sup>32</sup>

Pinker suggests that this is a possibly infinite cycle where the new term is doomed to eventually become offensive and be substituted again, in a vain and endless search for non-pejorative expressions. However, while ‘moron’ or ‘retarded’ did not undergo a reclamation process and—as a result—their derogatory use is the only one that survives nowadays, the case of ‘autistic’ shows that reclamation processes can aim at breaking down the euphemism treadmill, by challenging the very need for alternative expressions (e.g., ‘person with autism’), as we shall see in the next section.

### 3. The Reclamation of ‘Autistic’

With these observations in mind about the derogatory uses of ‘autistic,’ we now turn to its reclamation. The reclamatory uses of ‘autistic’ share many features with reclaimed racial and homophobic epithets (see Tirrell 1999; Kennedy 2002; Brontsema 2004; Croom 2013). As we mentioned, reclamation is a coping strategy to react to the use of pejorative language. It is a subversive act: speakers steal a

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See Cousens (2020) for an interesting discussion of whether ableist insults like ‘moron’ should count as slurs. Many of his observations provide interesting insights into the case of ‘autistic,’ which, once again, differs from the others because of the reclamation process it is undergoing.

32. See also Bernstein (2022), Detterman (2010), Huntington (2018), and Pinker (2002).

verbal weapon from their abusers and refuse to surrender to discrimination and prejudice. They turn away from being just suffering victims and instead resist by subverting linguistic practices.

Experimental studies in psychology back the philosophical observations on reclamation with some empirical data. For instance, the seminal works by Galinsky et al. (2013), show that self-applying a slur makes people feel—and perceived as—more powerful. Recalling a situation where one's group was in a position of power also makes people more willing to self-ascribe a slur (that is, the relation between slurs self-ascription and group power is reciprocal). Different experimental works with different designs and in different languages (Galinsky et al. 2013; Whitson et al. 2017; Bianchi et al. 2024; Puchała et al. 2025)<sup>33</sup> show that reclamation has the potential to diminish the negativity of the label in the eye of ingroups and outgroups.

As for 'autistic,' we see that its reclamation attempts to reinforce identity against stigma, as well as to signal solidarity and intimacy among group members (i.e. what reclaimed slurs are often taken to convey—Bianchi 2014). Reclaiming the label 'autistic' is a way to present autism as a central part of one's identity: It is not that someone 'has autism,' but rather, "autism is me" (Botha, Dibb, & Frost 2020; Jorba, Petroloni, & Cepollaro 2024). At the same time, reclamation characterizes autism positively, which is a way to take control of one's group narrative (Jeshion 2020; Popa-Wyatt 2020) and vindicate some traits or features as identity-defining in a positive way. Indeed, the reclamation of 'autistic' counteracts pejorative uses of this term by attempting to underscore overlooked advantages of the condition (e.g., attention to details, intense and focused interests, and so on).

Reclaiming 'autistic' as a positive way to characterize oneself and others aims at undermining the very possibility of using it in a disparaging way, but seems to give rise to different kinds of reclamation depending on whether it reacts to outgroup or ingroup-directed uses of this term. This said, the proud use of 'autistic' is peculiar on several grounds. For one thing, as we have already said, it reclaims a term that is not even a slur in the first place. Were it to be seen as an ESTI or a derived pejorative, it would be an exceptional case too, as these expressions do not typically undergo processes of reclamation, possibly because they do not directly target those who would be in the position to reclaim the term.

What's interesting about the reclamation of 'autistic' is that it does not only react to the pejorative uses of the label—as most reclaimed slurs do. It also counters the allegedly politically correct uses of 'person with autism,' which are perceived as euphemistic expressions suggesting that there is something intrin-

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33. English for Galinsky et al. (2013) and Whitson et al. (2017); English and Portuguese for Bianchi et al. (2024); Polish for Puchała et al. (2025).

sically bad in being called ‘autistic.’ Such a reaction initially developed within the neurodiversity movement (Sinclair 1999/2013) but found further expression in recent empirical work that explores metalinguistic practices surrounding autism (Botha, Dibb, & Frost 2020; Kenny et al. 2016). As Sinclair (1999/2013) already emphasized, no one seems bothered when identified by means of positive labels (‘handsome,’ ‘brilliant’) or even neutral terms (‘librarian,’ ‘neighbor’). Moreover, our common linguistic practices suggest that salient features of individuals are usually expressed through adjectives—e.g., ‘female’ as opposed to ‘person with femaleness’—or through nouns—e.g., ‘parent’ as opposed to ‘person with offspring’: “It is only when someone has decided that the characteristic being referred to is negative that suddenly people want to separate it from the person” (Sinclair 1999/2013: 2). On this view, ‘person with autism’ seems to be rather an unnecessary and offensive euphemism that perpetuates a condescending way to address and treat autistic people, and reclamation challenges the idea that there would be anything undesirable with identifying as autistic (see Jorba, Petrolini, & Cepollaro 2024 for an extended discussion of such language policies and their relation to reclamation projects).

If indeed the reclamation of ‘autistic’ also reacts to the introduction of condescending and euphemistic expressions whose aim is to avoid calling people ‘autistic,’ we are looking at a very special linguistic practice, where at least two different phenomena open up a path to the proud self-ascription of this label. The first phenomenon is very typical of reclamation: A term is used in a pejorative way and this motivates the need for speakers (usually ingroups) to react against verbal abuse by repurposing the same term with pride. The second phenomenon is more specific to ‘autistic’ but highlights yet a further function of reclamation that is not exactly repurposing pejorative labels, but rather reacting against the euphemistic use of ‘person with autism’ and the pejorative connotations that it allegedly carries. Despite having been introduced precisely with the intention to mark the speaker’s respectful attitude, these politically correct alternatives have ended up raising concerns and dissatisfactions. Note that we can observe similar tendencies in the Deaf community, where many people prefer to be called ‘Deaf’ (with capital letter—cf. ‘Black’) rather than ‘people with hearing loss’ or ‘people who are deaf,’ for similar reasons as the ones we illustrated for ‘autistic’ (APA 2020; Dunn & Andrews 2015). Or think of the reclamation of ‘mad,’ by those who challenge the pejorative labeling of people as ‘mad,’ and the pathologization of altered states of mind (Beresford 2020; Garson 2022). This further suggests that these linguistic changes do not entirely depend on the specificities of ‘autistic,’ but rather exemplify a more general (and interesting) tendency. In this paper, we focus on ‘autistic,’ for it challenges the existing taxonomies and widespread assumptions about pejorative language, derogation, and reclamation, but we by no means take it to be a unique case. On the contrary, we hope that our work will

open the path for future studies on further examples (possibly terms like 'schizophrenic,' 'sociopath,' 'psychopath,' or 'narcissist,' among others).

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper, we explored the pejorative uses of 'autistic' and looked at the reclamation of this term. We observed that, although 'autistic' doesn't look like a prototypical slur, ESTI, or derived pejorative, it displays features that approximate all these kinds of pejoratives. Thus, our discussion is an invitation to make room for terms that, like 'autistic,' display mixed behavior. Our observations pointed towards the need for a broader conception of what oppressive speech is, beyond the most standard instances of pejorative language. In this paper, we left it open whether the phenomenon to which we point deserves the introduction of a brand-new category of terms that can partake in oppressive speech, or whether it merely suggests that the divide between different classes of pejoratives should not be taken too rigidly. At any rate, we also underlined how the case of 'autistic' is peculiar because the proud uses of 'autistic' are not prototypical examples of reclamation, but they nevertheless display analogous features to the reclamation of derogatory epithets. What's interesting about these uses of 'autistic' is that they are not only a reaction to the pejorative uses of the term (which is very typical of reclamation), but also a protest against alternatives like 'person with autism', which are perceived as euphemistic and further stigmatizing.

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