

“Sew those lips and dig, Elf!” - Is the term *elf* used as a slur in the TV series *The Rings of Power*?

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Certain expressions in the English language change in their meaning depending on their social rather than lexical meaning. Derogatory words prove to be one of those instances, specifically slurs. Researchers still argue over the definition of what makes a derogatory term a slur, however, many studies define it similarly.

Slurs themselves are “plain vanilla words” (Nunberg 2018) until they are not; what that means is that in order for a slur to become socially accepted as a slur, the speaker uses it to “derogate or dehumanize” a certain group of common race, sexuality, religion, etc. (Jeshion 2013). Furthermore, Liu (2021a,b) describes two different properties of a slur: Derogatory force and offensiveness. A slur can remain offensive, as well as be derogatory without being offensive.

In our talk we will investigate whether the term *elf* is used in a slurring fashion in the 2022 TV series *The Rings of Power*. For that we extracted all instances in which *elf* is used from five episodes and analyzed the utterances according to relation the speakers are in and other contextual factors such as intonation and power relation.

Jeshion (2013) explains that neutral counterparts of slurring terms can be used as weapons in the same way a slurring term would, marking it with contemptuous intonation. In our contribution we examined the neutral descriptive term *elf* and its uses with negative connotation in the TV series *The Rings of Power* and analyzed whether it can be labeled as a slur in its individually given context.

(1) “Sew up those lips and dig, Elf^C!” (Episode 3, Rings of Power, 2022)

(2) “Yao Ming is Chinese^C.” (Jeshion, 2013)

(Italics were used to indicate intonational stress and the superscript C stands for contemptuousness.)

When a speaker uses the species of the person where the name of the person would be more appropriate it seems as if Grice's Maxim of Manner is being violated. Since it is assumed that speakers behave according to the Cooperative Principle the hypothesis can be made that by using the species-term instead of the name, the speaker is doing so because of their negative attitude towards elves. By using *elf* instead of the addressee's name the speaker is reducing that person to their species. In a way they are dehumanizing them by projecting the stereotypes they have of the species onto an individual.

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