

## What's in a name: Ethnophobic Terms as Key to English Speaker's Conceptualisation of Arabs

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**Abstract.** The article explores ethnic slurs used in Modern English that denote Arabs. The research reveals significant simplification of this category: in the naive language picture of the world, “Arabs” are conceptualised both as an ethnic and a racial group. The analysis of ethnophobic terms uncovers a variety of sources to coin new lexemes to refer to Arabs that include words formed with English morphemes as well as borrowings from Arabic. The imagery of the sample provides with the evidence that English speakers are familiar with Arab culture primarily through mass media exposure.

**Keywords:** *ethnic slur, language picture of the world, conceptualisation, categorisation, culture.*

**Introduction.** Until the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, the world was quite penetrable and cross-cultural communication flourished in all imaginable forms facilitated by virtual space without almost any borders (except those introduced by so-called “totalitarian” states) and real travelling that was relatively easy. As a result, migration was one of the features of the world demography and multiculturalism came to be recognized as a fact true for most, if not all, English-speaking states. Though mixing people, worldviews and ideas promises great breakthroughs and insights in science and culture, the exposure to differences also breeds prejudice, xenophobia and racism that may in the long run lead to ethnic conflicts and tension within a multicultural society as well as between states.

Racist ideologies and discrimination are inevitably expressed in language, so examining race discrimination through its verbalization helps to better understand what causes interracial tension and xenophobia as well as to find ways to ease these destructive social phenomena. Ethnic slurs are those language means that provide researchers with a chance to look at an ethnic group or a race “through their haters’ eyes” because it is usually quite easy to get to the core of the motivation that underlies insulting coinages.

**Literature review.** The research assumes the anthropocentric nature of language, which was first put forward by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Benjamin Whorf, Anna Wierzbicka, etc. (see, for example [3; 4; 10; 15; 17]). The anthropocentric paradigm in linguistics has laid the foundation for modern cognitive and cultural linguistics that explore pictures of the world as they are verbalized in different languages [2; 17; 14].

Ethnic slurs (also known as ethnophobic terms and ethnophaulisms) belong to the set of ethnonyms, i.e., names used to refer to an ethnic group, nation, tribe or people [25]. From the point of view of stylistics, ethnonyms may be divided into two groups:

- 1) stylistically neutral lexemes and
- 2) stylistically marked lexemes that typically classified as slang and point out some peculiarity of the nominated ethnic group.

It is stylistically marked ethnonyms that make up ethnic slurs (or ethnophaulisms) “typically utilizing the caricature of some identifiable feature of the group being

derided, often physical features” [20]. It should be borne in mind that stylistic colouring or stylistic neutrality are not permanent qualities: stylistic meanings of words may veer throughout the history of a language. This happened, for example, to the words *black*, *colored* and *Afro-American* at different stages in American English. *Black* and *colored* were neutral, then moved to politically incorrect vocabulary, yet nowadays, when race awareness and race identity are gaining in importance and start outweighing the universalist ideology, these lexemes have become acceptable and even preferable, which is supported by the very name of the anti-discrimination movement *Black Lives Matter*.

The research into ethnic slurs is carried out by a number of linguists such as Antonchenko [1], Gorshunova [7], Honta [5; 6], Kennedy [23], Kushch [9], Liashenko [13], Mullen [26; 27], Skidanova [16], Tsebrovskaya [18], etc. The scholars look into various aspects of ethnophobic terms, starting from their purely linguistic features (morphology and word forming patterns) up to their cognitive, cultural peculiarities and communicative value. Thus, exploring structural and semantic features of ethnophaulisms gives an insight into their motivation and tendencies of semantic change as well as facilitates classifying them into groups according to their morphology. Studying ethnic slurs from the point of view of cultural linguistics sheds light onto social phenomena that conditioned these coinages as well as onto the picture of the world and stereotypes typical of speakers who coin these words.

**The objective** of the research is to study ethnic slurs that function in modern English to refer to representatives of the Arab ethnicity in order to uncover those components that make the referent “identifiable” for English-speaking communities and, as a result, identify English speakers’ “cultural assumptions” and “background knowledge” about Arabs and their culture.

**Material and methods.** The sample is made up of 62 ethnic slurs that are defined in the sources as words referring to Arabs. The material was selected by means of continuous sampling from the two online databases, *List of Ethnic Slurs* [24] and *Racial Slur Database* [28], and two online dictionaries [25; 31].

The further research involved such methods as descriptive analysis, conceptual analysis, componential analysis, and etymological analysis.

**Results and discussion.** It should be noted that even a quick look at the sample is enough to see that ethnic slurs verbalize naïve perception of the ‘Arab category’.

First, the research has uncovered the lack of clear differentiation between the notions of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ (which is obvious even in the names of the sources that imply viewing Arabs both as a race and as an ethnicity), though they seem to be quite distinct in sociological studies. ‘Race’ refers “to a category of people who share certain inherited physical characteristics, such as skin color, facial features, and stature” [19, p.331]. Hence, race draws on biological peculiarities. Ethnicity, in its turn, is based on “shared social, cultural, and historical experiences... that make subgroups of a population different from one another. ...an ethnic group is a subgroup... with a set of shared social, cultural, and historical experiences; with relatively distinctive beliefs, values, and behaviors” [19, p.334-335]. ‘Race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are interrelated indeed and they are both relevant when applied to the material from the sample.

As we will see, for naïve consciousness, people’s physical features (e.g., skin colour) are as relevant as their cultural features (e.g., clothes or culinary preferences) if one needs to refer these people to an ethnic group. In case with Arabs, representatives of this group may be quite diverse both in terms of their physical features (e.g., Arabs from Sudan look different from Lebanese Arabs) and in terms of their cultural habits such as food, clothes, etc. The matter gets even more complicated because, for the average English speaker, the ‘Arab category’ correlates with Muslims that make up a religious group, but, since Islam is one of the world religions, not all Muslims are Arabs just like not all Arabs are Muslims. As a result, ethnic slurs for ‘Arabs’ expose how naïve consciousness handles the complex social reality and manages to categorize complicated phenomena.

The ethnic slurs to denote Arabs may be divided into several groups.

1. Some lexemes are slang modifications of stylistically neutral words, e.g., *Rab* (a clipped word from *Arab*), *Bara* (*Arab* only read backwards), *Naffer* (a blending of *North African*, which distorts the reality because Iraq, Lebanon and Syria are Arab states located in Western Asia).

2. Some lexemes point out the skin colour, e.g., *demi-nigger*, *double D* (*desert darky*), *mocha*, *off-white*, *peanut butter brother*. The words reveal an obviously racist ideology that categorizes people into two groups, namely the white and the black. Viewed from this perspective, Arabs are intermediate between the two. It should be noted here that the lexeme *nigger* has definitely undergone a semantic change. It originates from the Spanish *negro* to refer to the black colour, yet *nigger* possesses a remarkable word building capacity that has transformed this lexeme into a politically incorrect morpheme similar to *man* in *policeman*. While in such ethnic slurs as *farm nigger*, *field nigger* and *house nigger* the second part means ‘a black person’, there are such ethnic slurs as *rice nigger* and *squint nigger* to refer to Asians, *taco-nigger* and *river nigger* to refer to Mexicans and *salmon nigger* and *tundra nigger* to denote Native Americans. These coinages cannot but show that *nigger* in these cases has

nothing to do with a skin colour but rather means ‘a representative of a despised non-white ethnic group’.

3. A number of ethnic slurs have appeared to refer to the assumed connection between Arabs and terrorism. These stereotypes became particularly strong in the USA and the West in general after the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001 and a number of suicide bombings. The ethnic slurs based on these references are created with antonomasia, e.g., *Atta* (the first name of the 9/11 terrorist who flew a plane into the World Trade Centre) and *Bin Laden* (also *Osama*), a founder of al-Qaeda; there is a borrowing from Arabic (*Jihad*) as well as compounds (*Bomb Builder*, *Firecracker*, and *Land Torpedo*). Here also belongs the ethnophaulism *cave nigger* that refers to Osama bin Laden, who allegedly was hiding in Tora Bora cave complex in Afghanistan.

4. Arab culture has interfered to a certain extent into English-speaking communicative space, since the sample contains 24 lexemes to denote Arabs that draw on the average English speaker’s knowledge about the culture of this ethnic group and the average Westerner’s idea of the Arab world in general. Here belong

- proper nouns *Abdul*, *Fadi* and *Muhammad* used as ethnic slurs to refer to a man who looks like an Arab. *Habibi*, an Arabic word used as a friendly form to address a man, also functions as an ethnophaulism. Another Arab lexeme, borrowed into English and used to refer to an Arab male, is *Hajji/Hadji/Haji*, yet while in English the meaning of the word is pejorative, in Arabic, *hajji* is a honorific used to address a man who has completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. Interestingly, the sample does not contain any female name to refer to an Arab female, though there are proper female names to address women from some other ethnic groups (for example, *Natasha* and *Guidette*). Another noun, *Alphabet*, which is a regular English word, may mean ‘an Arab’ due to its phonetic similarity with the Arabic language: the first syllable *al* resembles the Arabic article;

- proper nouns *Aladdin* and *Ali Baba*, the characters’ names from the famous Arabic fairy tales, have been popularized by Western mass culture and Walt Disney Pictures in particular and started to refer to members of the ethnic group. The ethnophaulisms *carpet pilot* and *rug rider* also originate from the fairy tale about Aladdin and here it also was the film industry that contributed to their popularity;

- lexemes coined through a metonymic transfer: they depict Arabs as inhabitants of certain territories, e.g., *Abi-Dabi* (the distorted form of Abu-Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates). Most ethnic slurs, however, depict Arabs people from the desert, *desert* being verbalized metonymically through the *sand* component (*sandy*, *sand monkey* / *moolie* / *nigger* / *rat* / *scratcher* / *snigger* (a blend of ‘sand’ and ‘nigger’)) or *dune* (*dune coon*);

- ethnic slurs as *Oil Baron* and *OPEC* are based on the average speaker’s idea of Arab states’ economies, though only six out of 13 members of the OPEC are Arab states;

- ethnophaulism *Mozzie/Muzzie*, despite being a shortening of *Muslim* and categorizing a person as a member of the religious group, is defined in the database “Arabs” [28]. Ethnic slurs *dirty knees* and *sand kisser* used to refer to Arabs show that the English speaking

community is also aware of the posture and gestures a Muslim makes while praying (i.e., kneeling and prostrating with the forehead, nose, knees, palms and toes touching the ground);

- ethnic slurs *diaper head/rag head/towel head* show that male Arabs are also recognized by English speakers for their traditional clothes (though turbans are also worn by Sikhs) when it comes to men. Specific clothes make Arab visible: their traditional dark shapeless garments have produced such ethnophaulisms as *BMO* (abbreviation of 'black moving object') and *Pajama Mama*.

5. There are eleven ethnic slurs in the sample that are generated at the crossroads of several cultures: Arab culture and Western mass culture. Here belongs, for example, *camel cowboy* (a mix of two concepts: the former is the key one for the Arabian countries, while the latter is culturally important for the USA). Another ethnophaulism, *Ahab*, appeared after the 1962 song by Ray Stevens *Ahab the Arab* that portrayed a sheik "of the burning sands" called Ahab [29]. Mass media products, films and TV in particular, have produced such 'cultural blends' as *Batman* used to refer to a veiled Arab woman dressed in

black. Another film that has provided two new slang names for Arabs was *Star Wars*: the tribes of *Jawas*, completely hidden behind their robes and living in the deserts of Tatooine, and *Ewoks*, wearing headdresses that resemble those worn by religious Muslims, have lent their names to Arabs. In the 1990s, the US *Saturday Night Live* show introduced American audiences to *Iraqi Pete*, the character played by Adam Sandler. This character's name has become a common noun and got to refer not only to Iraqis or people of Iraqi descent but to all Arabs.

**Conclusion.** The analysis of English ethnic slurs used to denote Arabs reveals that the ethnophobic terms are coined with the means of the English language (English morphemes or phonemes), yet the sample also contains borrowings from Arabic. Conceptualisation of this ethnic group in naïve consciousness of English speakers lacks consistency in that it does not differentiate between race, ethnicity and religion and taps information and imagery from mass media and mass culture. The ethnophaulisms of the sample verbalize English speakers' ideas of typical 'Arab shape', 'Arab ways' and 'Arab faith' and ignore the diversity within each of these features.

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