n-word

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Abstract:

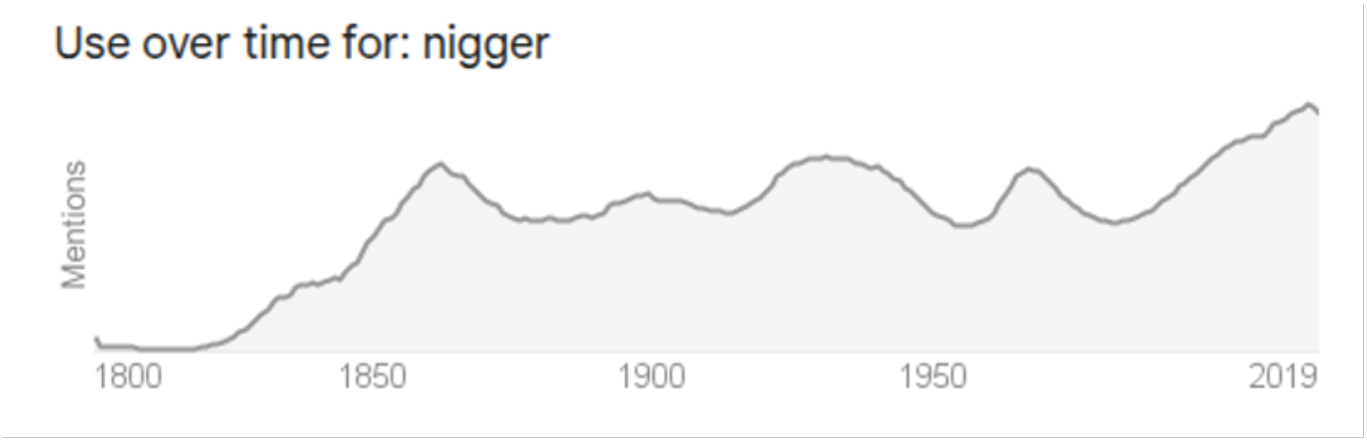
*La '**N-word**' è un termine di **origine latina** ('**niger**') che ha subito una significativa **evoluzione storica**. Un tempo era solo un modo per descrivere il **colore** della **pelle**, mentre oggi è un grave **segno** di **pregiudizio** e **discriminazione** legato alla **schiavitù** e alla **segregazione** dei **neri**. Oggi questa parola ha due significati. Nelle comunità di **origine africana** e nella **musica rap,** spesso simboleggia una forma di **riappropriazione linguistica** per esprimere **fratellanza** e **identità**. Tuttavia, il suo **uso** al di **fuori** di questi **contesti** è una espressione **discriminatoria** e **razzista.** In **Italia,** tra i **giovani**, l'uso di questo termine varia. Alcuni lo usano per **seguire** le tendenze **hip-hop**, mentre altri lo criticano come **un'imitazione superficiale** (se non una **appropriazione culturale**) **priva** della **necessaria consapevolezza storica**. Al di fuori del gruppo di **appartenenza,** l'uso di questo termine è sanzionato, e ciò riflette una tensione continua tra il suo **uso** come **slang identitario** e il suo potere di **emarginare** e **offendere**.*

The '**N-word**' is a term of **Latin origin** ('**niger**') that has gone through a significant **historical evolution**. Once, it was just a way of describing **skin colour**; now it's a serious sign of **prejudice** and **discrimination** linked to **slavery** and the **segregation** of **Black people**. Nowadays, this word has two meanings. In **communities** of **African origin** and in **rap music**, it often **symbolises** a form of **linguistic reappropriation** to express **fraternity** and **identity**. However, its use **outside these contexts** is a **discriminatory** and **racist expression**. In **Italy**, among **young people**, the use of this term varies. Some use it to **follow hip-hop trends**, while others criticise it as a **superficial imitation** (if not a **cultural appropriation**) lacking the necessary **historical awareness**. Outside the in-group, the use of the term is sanctioned, thus reflecting an **ongoing tension** between its use as **identity slang** and its power to **marginalise** and **offend**.

Etymology:

The '**n-word**' comes from from the **Latin** '**niger**', meaning '**black**'. It later passed into the Romance languages: in **Spanish** it became '**negro**', and in French '**nègre**'. Between the **16th** and **17th centuries**, it also entered the **English language**, initially only referring to **Black people**, without any **offensive meaning**.
In the **United States**, between the **17th** and **19th centuries**, in the context of **African slavery** and then **racial segregation**, the term began to be used in a **derogatory manner**. From the **description** of **skin colour**, it became an expression of **prejudice** and **discrimination** against people of African origin.
In the **20th century**, a **variant** of the **word** emerged **within** some **African-American communities** – '**nigga**'. This form is often used in **informal contexts** among **friends** as a **greeting** or to **express closeness.** It represents a form of **linguistic reappropriation**. However, it can still be seen **as offensive** within **Black communities**.
Green's Dictionary of Slang states that the **n-word** is used as a **derogatory term** regardless of **race** or **skin colour**

(https://greensdictofslang.com/search/basic?q=Nigger).



Google ngram viewer
https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=nigger

Cultural specificity:

While **Italy** lacks a **historical legacy** of the **Transatlantic Slave Trade**, it currently navigates **complex integration hurdles** as it **transitions** from a **traditional land of emigration** to a **primary European gateway** for **diverse migratory flows**, often struggling to reconcile **systemic labor needs** with **social inclusion** and **legal frameworks**.

We should not forget to acknowledge the **historical markers** and **parallels** traced by the **Italian diaspora** in **America**. During the **late 19th** and **early 20th centuries**, **Italian immigrants** in the **US** were frequently **outside** the boundaries of the **white racial category,** which was then defined by the **WASP establishment**.

Italian immigrants were **poor** and worked as **laborers**. Hence, **they** were commonly **referred to** by degrading terms like "**white n****rs**." Moreover, it has also been documented at **Ellis Island** that **Italian immigrants** were not **categorized** as "White" but rather as "**Southern Italian**" and were considered **racially inferior.** After the **Civil War in the US** (1861-1865) and the **abolition of slavery**, **Italian immigrants** were employed in the **cotton fields** of the South to **replace Black laborers** (Gugliermo & Salerno, 2003).

In **Italy**, as to **workplaces**, **corporate environments**, **public administration**, and the **media**, the use of **racial slurs** results in **immediate termination**, **significant reputational damage**, and **severe sanctions**. Unlike the United States, where the use of the term by **older generations** can occasionally be attributed to **historical inertia** in **specific subcultures**, such usage is virtually **non-existent** among **older Italians**. In Italy, the term is viewed almost exclusively as a **marker** of **aggressive hostility** or **extreme marginalization** against **migrants** from everywhere except Europe **rather than** a **relic** of **old-school vocabulary**.

Legal Standing

Article Three of the **Italian Constitution**, written after World War II and the Fascist Regime (approved in 1947 and entried into force on Jan. 1st, 1948), states that **all citizens** have **equal social dignity** and are **equal before** the **law**, **without** distinction as to **sex**, **race**, **language**, **religion**, **political opinion**, or **personal** and **social circumstances**. By affirming such principles, the **Italian Constitution** makes a neat **stance against** all forms of **discrimination** and **racism**.

The ***Mancino Law*** (Law 205/1993) maintains a **rigorous legal stance** against **hate speech**:
● **purpose**: it is the **primary legislative tool** against **racial**, **ethnic**, **national**, or **religious discrimination** and **violence**.
● **international context**: for an international audience, it is important to note that the *Mancino Law* **criminalizes** the **propagation** of i**deas based** on **racial** or **ethnic superiority**
● **prosecutory merit**: the use of **racial slurs** is not just a social faux pas; it carries **legal weight** as an **aggravating**

circumstance under Article 604-ter of the Penal Code. This means that if a **crime** (such as **defamation** or **assault**) is **committed** with "**racial hatred"** as a **motive**—evidenced by the use of slurs—the **prison sentence** is **increased** by up to **one-half**.

Usage of the n-word among young people

There is a **linguistic shift** happening among **young Italians**, especially those who are deeply into **North American hip-hop** and **trap culture:**
● **reclamation vs. imitation**: young people use the English '**n-word**' as a colloquial term for '**friend'** or '**peer'**, stating that they are **reclaiming** the **word** to **take away** from its **derogatory meaning**
● **the critique**: such a **practice** is viewed **negatively** by **sociologists** and the **Afro-Italian communities.** They claim that since **Italy** does not have the same **domestic history** of **segregation** as the United States, **non-Black Italians** using this word **cannot reclaim** a **struggle** that they **never went through**. Instead, they are '**cosplaying**' **another culture**, ignoring that the **violent history** of this word **cannot be washed away** by changing **one's accent** or genre of **music** (Mazzetti, 2017; Barro, 2020; Bianchessi, 2020; Forte, 2020; Attolino, 2022).

To **understand** better **these points** we decided to **interview** two friends of us.

First interview.

K.N. is a 15 year-old Black boy of Ghanaian origins who lives near Turin, Italy. He plays basketball and tells what he thinks about the n-word.

Interviewer: Hi K, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed, even though I imagine the topic isn't comfortable. First of all, what do you think of the work we're doing?

K.N.: Hi, don't worry about the topic, I'm just happy to hear it. I've read what you've written so far and really enjoyed it. I didn't find it discriminatory at all, and it allowed me to discover new things about the n-word.

Interviewer: I'm very happy to hear that. Moving on to a more personal topic, how do you feel when you're called a ni***r? Obviously, you can decide not to respond or to respond partially.

K.N.: Well, I consider myself more tolerant than some of my friends in this regard, but maybe I shouldn't. In any case, when another Black person calls me with the n-word, it doesn't make me angry, but if a white person who isn't even my friend calls me n****r, I might get angry. Fortunately, I've never gotten into a fight over being called the n-word, but I really don't understand why some people do it, as if it's just what sets me apart from them or defines me as a person.

Interviewer: Thank you so much K. for your help and the beautiful testimony, see you next time!

K.N.: Thank you! It’s been a pleasure.

Second interview

J. O. is a 19 year-old Black student of NIgerian origins who lives in Turin. He tells his opinion about the n-word.

Interviewer: Hello J., it's a pleasure to ask you these questions, thank you for your full cooperation notwithstanding the unsettling topic. First, tell us more about your opinion about the word n****r.

J. O.: Thank you for these questions. First of all I think that this word is used in different ways with different exceptions and some people might mask their intentions with these said exceptions. In fact, the word itself comes from the word 'nigg', worker. This word was used for workers who worked in cotton fields, people who were treated badly even if they worked a lot. Then the word evolved and it became 'n****r' as we know it today. It really depends on the use.

Interviewer: Now let's move on to the next question. Does it bother you if someone close to you calls you by the n-word?

J. O. No, it doesn't bother me. I hear it from both friends and unknown people. If it's the latter case it shows that it's a problem, while my friends say it a lot because they know it doesn't bother me. If someone I don't know comes up to me and calls me with the n-word I would look at them badly and walk away but rather than being angry with the word itself I'd worry about the people who use it.

Interviewer: I agree with you, that's true. Do you have a particular memory about someone using this word against you that struck you?

J. O.: In middle school, there was a group of boys who found enjoyment in bullying others, me included. They would come up to me and talk trash, usually including the n-word and it would happen often when teachers weren't around.

Interviewer: How was the first time hearing someone calling you with the n-word?

J.O.: It felt very personal, like it really resonated inside me. As I said before, I really felt sorry for them because insulting someone because of their ethnicity was a complete waste of time, they weren't even better than me in school so it was pointless. I think that it's most important to worry about the people who use it because it doesn't make sense to use such words in a discriminatory way.

Interviewer: That's all with the question, thanks for turning in even if the topic was personal.

J.O.: No problem, it was good sharing my personal thought and ideas with you.

The usage of the n-word within the context of Italian Rap and Trap Music

The use of the n-word within the **Italian musical context** is a **complex** and heavily **discussed issue** that **differs** greatly from the American experience due to the specific **historical experience** with **colonialism** and **current migration**. In the Italian context, this issue is discussed with reference to '**Second Generation' (G2) Italians**, i.e., Italians who are the **children of immigrants** and have been **raised** or **born** in Italy and are using **music** to define themselves.

The context of usage within Italian Rap

1. Reclamation by Afro-Italian Artists

Ghali
https://www.rockol.it/artista/ghali/foto

Tommi Kuti

https://www.nigrizia.it/notizia/tommy-kuti-pioniere-afrobeats-italiano-debutta-al-cinema

Bello Figo
https://www.rollingstone.it/cultura/libri/bello-figo-libro-frasi-governo-dello-swag/411708/

For **Black Italian artists** such as **Ghali**, **Tommy Kuti**, or **Bello Figo,** the **context** and **purpose** of using the n-word within their **rap music tracks** is **similar** to the American experience:

- **the goal:** the **artists** are attempting to **reclaim a word** that was used to **degrade** and **subdue Afro-Italian people** by **Italian colonialists** and **xenophobes**
- **the nuance**: the **Italian word** for the n-word, '**negro'**, directly translates to "**Black**" and "**Latin**" and is **widely used** within the context of **rap** and **dance music** to create a **sense of belonging** and create a **rhythmic**

effect. By using this word within the context of rap music, the artists are attempting to state their **presence** within a **country** that does **not consider** them '**fully Italian**'.

2. The 'Americanization' of Italian Trap
In recent years, several **non-Black Italian rappers** started using the n-word within their songs (Mazzetti, 2017; Barro, 2020; Bianchessi, 2020; Forte, 2020; Attolino, 2022).

- **the motivation**: the word is **not viewed** by many of the **younger artists** as a **racist term**, but rather as a term denoting a **style** or **genre**. In fact, the word is used as a synonym for '**brother**', '**peer**', as being heavily influenced by American rap
- **the controversy**: this has led to a **huge controversy** in the **Afro-Italian communities** and **activists**, who claim that **non-Black Italian rappers** who use the word are **not respecting** the **historical context** of **racism**, **discrimination,** and **violence against African people**. Therefore, there is a **growing understanding** that only the **group** who was **originally targeted** by this word **can reclaim** it, and hence, there is a shift away from **non-Black Italian rappers** who are moving toward **more inclusive language** within the **genre**.

3. The use of the word 'n*o'**
It has also to be noted that the word '**n***o**' (the Italian word that corresponds to '**n****r**') has often been **used** as a **derogatory** and **discriminatory word** for people coming from the **South of Italy**. It happened, for example, to to the artist **Marracash**, who is of **Sicilian descent**, and who has been **bullied** since he was a **kid** for his **skin color**.

Marracash

https://www.rollingstone.it/digital-cover/marracash-e-differente/483512/

TV programme

Boondocks **is** a **satirical animated series** that began airing in **2005** in the **US**. It is based upon a comic series that also actually created a tremendous amount of controversy. An animated series following **two African American brothers**, **Huey** and **Riley Freeman**, who transfer to the relatively quieter neighborhood of Woodcrest to stay with their grandfather.
In **Italy**, it began broadcasting in November of the year **2006** on MTV Italia. Due to the **subject matter** and **complex cultural references** involved in its storyline, it was initially only shown at **late-night** viewing hours and then **moved** to **other channels** like Sony Entertainment Television on Sky. While **Uncle Ruckus** symbolizes internalized racism, the show ironically **targets** the absurdity of **white supremacy** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Boondocks_(TV_series)).

Problematization:

The '**n-word case**' is a really interesting one because it shows that words are not just words, they have a lot of **history** and **power** behind them. The word has been **used** in **different ways** by **different people** in **different situations**. For example, in the **first decades** of the **20th century**, those in power used this word in **newspapers**, **media**, **caricatures**, **cartoons, advertising** and **movies** to **stereotype**, **dehumanize** and **discriminate** Black people (Baptiste, 2023), while **police** and other **institutions** used it to **oppress them**.

https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/caricature/more/nigger-and-caricature-gallery-01.htm#d19e256-29

Nigger Milk

https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/caricature/more/nigger-and-caricature-gallery-01.htm#d19e256-48

https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/caricature/more/nigger-and-caricature-gallery-01.htm#d19e256-20

To know more about how **representation** shapes **discrimination** and **violence**, please visit virually - and, possibly, in-person - the ***Jim Crow Museum*** (https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/index.htm), a free and open space that **uses** objects of **intolerance** to **teach tolerance** and which also features many **anti-Black** and **racist imageries** throughout the decades, including images of **new racist forms** of the **21st century** and white suprematist items.

"Ethnic Cleansing" Video Game

https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/newforms/new-forms-image-gallery-01.htm#d19e276-21

The museum also provides the **historical timeline** about the ***Jim Crow character***, who was not a real person, but a **fictional, racist figure created** in **1828** by the **white actor** Thomas D. Rice who became famous by performing in **blackface makeup** as 'Jim Crow,' an **exaggerated**, **highly stereotypical Black character**. (https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/timeline/jimcrow.htm).

Black artists and **communities** are trying **to take back** the n-word and use it as a way to show **who they are** and how **to stand together**. This is still a **controversial issue**, and the question remains: **who uses this word**? **to whom**? in **what context/situation**? **why**?

When used by an **external party** to the **Black community**, this term is universally regarded as **aggressive**, **racist**, and **discriminating** given its long history of **power** and **oppression**.

In the US, there exists a **large divide** within the **Black community** itself. In fact, the **older generations** who grew up during the **Civil Rights Movement** believe that the word itself is **unfixable** and evoke **racism** and **trauma** (Wiggins, 2011; Southern Freedom Movement, 2015).

It all gets **more complicated** when we look at how this word is used in **different countries**. In **Italy, France** or **Latin America** people use this word in **rap music**. In such **contexts**, it **does not mean** the same thing as it did before, when it was deliberately used by those in power to **degrade** and **dehumanize Black people**. For instance, in **Italy** if an **Afro-Italian artist** uses the **n-word** to speak about how they **have been treated**, it is **different** from **white kids** using it just because **they heard** it in a **song**.

The problem is that the **n-word** moves from **one place** and **one context** to **another**, denoting **different intentions** and **acquiring different meanings.** Yet, its **history stays the same**. If we forget what this word really means we **forget** the **harm** it has **caused** throughtout the ages.

Subversion:

1. The Aesthetic Subversion (Europe & Asia)
For places **without** a **history** of ***Jim Crow*** (see above) there emerges a different use and definition of this term, largely as a means of aesthetic expression.

- **the trend**: for many **youth** in **Europe**, **East Asia,** and the **Maghreb**, this term has become a means to **affiliate** with **street culture** and '**coolness**'.

2. Regional Counterparts and Overlaps

Global subversion is not exclusive to the **English word**, and there are **regional counterparts** that, like the English

word, have gone through **similar transformations**:

- **Latin America**: words like 'negro' or 'negrito' can be **affectionate nicknames** for **friends**, even **among whites**. However, there is a chance for cultural conflict, particularly with the **global ban** on the n-word.

South Africa: similar to the US, the **history of apartheid** is reflected in **language use** in South Africa. **Rappers** can use the **n-word**, but also the **k-word**.In South Africa, the '**k-word**' refers to ***kaffir***, an **extremely offensive** and **derogatory racial slur** used to **dehumanize Black South Africans.**) The word is so prohibited that the **use** can be **legally sued**.

3. The Digital Subversion (Internet Culture)
On the internet, the word is often subverted in the form of **memes**.

- **the mechanism**: the word is often used in absurd or unconventional situations to **'prove' digital intimacy** or **closeness** also **among white people** as a **peer-jargon**
- **the risk**: yet, the **anonimity** of the Internet makes it **ambiguous** about who is **actually using** the word, with the risk of making its **use acceptable**.

4. The Reclamation Move (Global Hip-Hop and Rap)
As seen above, all throughout times and countries, people have taken a **word** that was traditionally used to **control** and **oppress** and flipped it to become a term of **identity** and **belonging**.

- **the logic**: the group that was traditionally referred to with this term are **claiming** it as **their own**
- **the result**: as a result, there emerges a **chasm** in global terms, depending on wheter it is used by the **in-group** or the **out-group**. **Within** the **Black community** this term means **warmth** and **camaraderie**, but when used by outsiders it is a strong signal of **discrimination**
- **the younger generation's use**: it is important to understand how the **n-word** is used in **rap** and **hip-hop**. The term is used in all forms of these musical genres, and it can be considered a way of **reclaiming Black identity** and **ethnicity**.

The term is also used to **strip off** its original **slur** and use it as a **casual term** for '**friend**', '**peer**', or '**person**'. As hip-hop is a part of **pop culture,** it is considered a significant part of **modern artistic expression**, although it is **controversial** due to its relation to **racism** (Julius, 2015; Wilson, 2020).

The Evolution of Usage

● **The 1970s**: in the early stages of **hip-hop** (**block parties** and **park jams**), the **n-word** was used as a **colloquial term** or **street slang**. The term appeared in **live performances** and in early music as a way to **refer** to a **friend** or a **partygoer**. It is a reflection of the way people spoke in the Bronx and other cities

● **The 1980s**: **rap music** became a **recorded art form** in the 1980s. In this period, **Public Enemy** and **N.W.A**. used the term to **refer** to the **harsh realities** of the **street** of Black America

● **The 1990s**: In the 1990s, the **n-word** became a common term in **hip-hop music**. The term appeared in the music of rappers such as **The Notorious B.I.G**. and **Tupac Shakur** to refer to **brotherhood** or '**being authentic**'. In this period, the **debate** on **reclamation** became a **national debate** as the music reached a **huge audience** across the **globe**.

For the evolution of usage, please refer to:

- Use of Nigger in the Arts: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Use_of_nigger_in_the_arts
- The Journal of African American History: https://www.jstor.org/journal/jafriamerhist
- The National Museum of African American History and Culture: https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race

Example of nowadays songs for each main language

Lacrim - *T'es pas prêt*: "Que ton c** serait à découvert et qu'il était pas prêt/À encaisser ma grosse b*** de nègre" (https://genius.com/Lacrim-tes-pas-pret-lyrics)

Kanye West, Jamie Foxx - *Gold Digger:* "(She give me money) Now, I ain't sayin' she a gold digger/(When I'm in need) But she ain't messin' with no broke niggas" (https://genius.com/Kanye-west-gold-digger-lyrics)

Artie 5ive - *Ready Rock* (2/3): "Oh, fra' (Oh), questo negro parla un sacco (Yeah) (Ah-ah)/Bet tra due anni lo ritrovano in un sacco (Ah) (Oh fra')"

Anuel AA - *Intocable*: "El sacamostro', ¿oí'te, cabrón?/Mera, dime Negro, ¡brrr!/27, J-80, ¿oí'te, cabrón?" (https://genius.com/Anuel-aa-intocable-version-oficial-lyrics)

● **Linguistic reclamation and normalization**: in the context of the **Kanye West** and **Artie 5ive examples**, the term appears to be a colloquialism for '**man'**, '**peer'**, or '**guy'.** This aligns with the **in-group definition,** in which the

term has been **reclaimed** and **normalized** as a noun in the **context** of **hip-hop culture**, **regardless** of the country of **origin**.

● **Shock and provocation**: the **Lacrim lyrics** use the term in an **aggressive**, **hyper-masculine**, and **provocative manner**. Here, the term is paired with graphic content and intended to convey a **sense of power** and **intimidation**.

● **Cultural exportation**: the appearance of the **Italian artist Artie 5ive** and the **French-Algerian artist Lacrim** indicates that **African American Vernacular English (AAVE)** has been **exported** and **incorporated** into **international contexts**.

● **Nicknames**: in the **Anuel AA** example, '**negro**' appears to be a **direct address** or a **nickname**. In **Spanish-speaking cultures** in the Caribbean, 'negro' can vary from a reference to a **person's physical appearance** to a term of **affection**, though its use remains a **thorny issue**.

Discussion:

- What was the most surprising fact you learned today?
- How can we apply these perceptions in everyday life?
- Have you ever witnessed someone use this word? How did it make you feel?
- Is banning the word enough, or do we need to change how people think?

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