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“You’re too thick to change the station” – Impoliteness, insults and responses to insults on Twitter

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Abstract

This paper aims to propose a typology of replies to insults based on data retrieved from Twitter, which is ripe with offensive comments. The proposed typology is embedded in the theory of impoliteness, and it hinges on the notion of the perlocutionary effect. It assumes that what counts as an insult depends primarily on whether or not an utterance is evaluated as offensive by the insultee. The evaluation can be signalled behaviourally or verbally and includes expressed replies as well as so-called silent replies. The insults, regardless of the presence or absence of an insulting intention of the insulter (potential insult), that are not rendered as offensive by the target are only attempted insults, while those that are experienced as offensive amount to genuine insults. The analysis has illustrated select types of reactions and has shown that potential, attempted and genuine insults may be further divided into: in/direct insults, explicit/implicit, non-/pure, and non-/vocatives, whilst reactions can be subsumed by three overarching strategies: agreeing, attacking and rejection.

Key words

impoliteness, insults, Twitter, social media, offensive language, illocution, perlocution

1. Introduction

The paper aims to propose a typology of replies to insults based on data retrieved from Twitter. As social media is ripe with offensive comments, and Twitter in particular, tweets were chosen for the analysis. The proposed typology hinges on the notion of intentionality in insulting and assumes that what counts as an insult depends to a large extent on whether or not it is evaluated as offensive by the insultee. The evaluation can be signalled behaviourally or verbally, and includes expressed replies as well as so-called silent replies. The insults, regardless of the presence or absence of an insulting intention of the insulter, that are not rendered as offensive by the target are only attempted insults, while those that were experienced as offensive are genuine insults. In what follows, there are several cases illustrating varying types of (attempted or genuine) insults and (verbal or silent) reactions retrieved from Twitter (section 5, 6). The notion of insulting (section 3) will be embedded in the theoretical approaches of a broader term, namely impoliteness (section 2), and against this backdrop, a typology of reactions to insults will be put forward (section 4).

2. Impoliteness and offensive language

The terms impoliteness and offensive language are used here as umbrella terms that span multifarious forms of discourtesy or verbal attack illustrating anti-social and morally inappropriate behaviour. In linguistic scholarship, a plethora of terms have been put forward to typify varying embodiments of impolite, deprecating and demeaning verbal behaviour, such as, *inter alia*: abuse, insults/insulting, harass/harassment, rudeness, aggravation, incivility, vituperation, swearing, using taboo words, flaming,

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trolling, cyberbullying, slurring, slander, cursing, name-calling, taunting, conflict talk, vilification, sully, besmirching, etc. (e.g. Lachenicht, 1980; Feinberg, 1985; Gabriel, 1998; Jucker, 2000; Avgerinakou, 2003; Bousfield and Locher, 2008; Culpeper, 2009; Hardaker, 2010; Danet, 2013; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017). Whilst a number of them clearly overlap, they cannot be used interchangeably. Firstly, some are technical/linguistic terms (e.g. *impoliteness*, *slander*); others are typically deployed in popular parlance (e.g. *taunting*, *cursing*). Secondly, some terms describe concepts at a sociocultural level¹ (e.g. *incivility*), others at speech act and personal level (e.g. *insulting*, *abusing*, *slurring*) or by focusing on behavioural practices (e.g. *trolling*, *cyberbullying*, *flaming*), while still others reveal the stylistic means of realization (vehicle) of impolite behaviour (e.g. *name-calling*, *taboo words*). Despite the fact that interest in conflict talk launched over a decade ago, the terminological inconsistency is still far from resolved and has only gained momentum over more recent years (Hardaker, 2010). The main source of this problem resides in the fact that most of these terms exemplify synonyms or pairs of words whose meanings tend to conceptually overlap in varying degrees, and thereby, it is impossible to sever neatly one category from another. Pinpointing the distinctive features and core senses, or even just their approximations, is thus not only conceptually strenuous but also methodologically challenging. A systematic and comprehensive ontology of any form of verbal offence has not been offered so far, even though Culpeper (2009, p. 67) bewailed the situation more than a decade ago. It is only recently that some promising attempts have been reported based on corpus-based studies and machine learning methods (Culpeper and Haugh, 2021; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al., 2021). One of the reasons for this may be that these terms all denote some kind of purposeful criticism with the intention to hurt the addressee or audience; however, they emphasize different aspects of such an activity.

Various forms of verbal offensiveness have been discussed to date by scholars endorsing miscellaneous approaches to research into incivility or conflict talk, such as broadly understood impoliteness theories (e.g. Culpeper, 2009; Bousfield, 2008), and in particular discursive approaches (Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003), the interactional approach (Haugh, 2014), the sociocultural approach (Mills, 2017), the socio-pragmatic approach (Culpeper 2011a), the relevance-theoretic approach (Christie, 2007; Mateo and Yus, 2013; Padilla Cruz, 2019), the gender approach (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010), as well as humour theory (Attardo, 1994; Brzozowska, 2006; Dynel, 2016), irony theory (Obana and Haugh, 2021), identity theory (Hardaker, 2016), corpus linguistics (Culpeper, 2009; Hardaker, 2016), Natural Language Processing (Zampieri et al., 2019; Poletto et al., 2020; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al., 2021), translation theory (Mateo and Yus, 2010), a psychological viewpoint (Chetty and Alathur, 2018) or a social psychological stand (Gabriel, 1998). While they will not be entirely revisited in this paper because of space constraints, it is necessary to mark core features of the key terms related to insulting, which will be elaborated in section 3.

Studies into hostile language (e.g. Terkourafi, 2008; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017) can be traced back to studies on impoliteness (e.g. Culpeper, 1996; Kienpointer, 1999; Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 2011) that have been conducted for over two decades now, and which were a reaction to politeness studies (Brown and Levinson, 1978). Culpeper (1996, p. 350) defines impoliteness as “social disruption” that is designed to attack face, i.e., the “concept of the self”, and uses the term to cover all types of (negative) behaviours that are contrary to what one expects (2011, p. 23). This broad definition will be adopted here to treat impoliteness as a blanket term to span both milder forms of offensiveness, i.e., discourtesy, uncivil or discrediting measures, as well as various forms of

¹ Sifianou (2019) explains in detail the difference between (im)politeness and (in)civility seeing the distinctive feature of the latter (despite some obvious affinities) in references to the historical development of the cultural concept of civilization, such as civil society, ethos, norms, citizenship, and only later to courtesy. In/civility is also a concept strongly affiliated with political connotations and democracy (Orwin, 1992; Papacharissi, 2004), using language to exert power and control over interlocutors (Chen, 2017), along with some socio-cultural aspects, such as stereotypes (Papacharissi, 2004; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017; Sifianou, 2019). Mills (2017) proposes using the term incivility to denote impoliteness at a social level and the term impoliteness to designate such behaviour at an individual level. This is contrary to Muddiman (2017), who, with reference to the political sphere, proposes personal-level impoliteness (e.g. insults) and public-level incivility (based on a lack of compromise) both being types of incivility. In this paper, impoliteness is understood as offensiveness at a personal level.

hostile, disparaging, insulting and abusive language, whether analysed at an overt level (literal meanings of impoliteness) or covert level (e.g. ironic meaning).

On a more general note, while offence is essentially a face-inflicting behaviour which hinges on negative evaluative comments that breach the expected moral behaviour (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2019), in some contexts, it may be ascribed to other, even reverse functions. A number of scholars (de Klerk, 1997; DeCapua and Boxer, 1999; Gregory, 2006; Stapleton, 2010, p. 297; Drasovean and Tagg, 2015; Zappavigna, 2014) noticed that cursing may derive from the need to mark one's community affiliation and reinforce group identity. Among members of a group or a community of practice² (CfP) as well as close friends, bad language may be utilized to accomplish solidarity and bonding (Norman, 1994; Daly et al., 2004; Vandergriff, 2010, p. 237, Mateo and Yus, 2013), to demonstrate power (Schnurr et al., 2008), as well as to seek in-group acceptance through alignment to verbal behaviour of the CoP (Cheshire, 1982; Trudgill 1974; Beers Fägersten, 2001; Daly et al., 2004; Stenström, 2006; Baruch and Jenkins, 2006). Other, somewhat puzzling aims of using offensive language feature praising or encouragement (Mateo and Yus, 2013), complimenting (Slugowski and Turnbull, 1988), expressing solidarity through teasing, nipping, or biting in particular (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Schnurr et al., 2008), couching friendship (Fine 1981, p. 84; Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2011, p. 266) and affection (Bernal, 2008; Pavlenko, 2008, p. 148) or even intimacy (Hasund and Stenström, 1997, pp. 127-129). Humorous effects executed through ribbing, i.e., laughing at somebody in friendly and/or threatening jokes (Kotthoff, 1996, pp. 305, 317), bantering (Culpeper, 1996), swearing (Andersson and Trudgill, 2007, p. 197) and roasting comments (Dynel and Poppi, 2019) are also quite common in social media and in real-life interactions alike. Mock impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996) is impolite only on the surface as it is not used to cause offence but as a form of banter. All these contexts are beyond the scope of the current study, whose purpose is to investigate the primary role of verbal offence as illustrative of anti-social, defamatory usages deployed over a large audience online. Finally, the present study does not consider contexts wherein foul language is used in emotional self-talk to manifest frustration, anger, surprise or even happiness (Jay, 2000), with a cathartic function (Wajnryb, 2005, pp. 26, 33), typically encoded by stand-alone expletives (Biber et al., 1999).

A much-debated issue in connection with impoliteness is intentionality. It is seen as inherent in impoliteness for Bousfield (2008, p. 72), who articulates that "impoliteness does not exist where one, but not both of the participants (...) intends/perceives face threat". Moreover, impoliteness is delivered purposefully with "deliberate aggression", and is "unmitigated" (Bousfield, 2008, p. 72). For other scholars (e.g. Gabriel, 1988; Culpeper 2005, 2011a, b; Culpeper and Haugh, 2021; Terkourafi, 2008), in turn, both intentional and unintentional types of impoliteness are allowed. Gabriel (1998, p. 1329) notes that intentionality is not a requirement as "some insults are the result of misunderstanding or accident". Similarly, Terkourafi (2008, pp. 61-62) contends that impoliteness creates a threat to one's face that is accidental and may be the consequence of incompetence, ignorance or cross-cultural miscommunication, and thus it is not intentional. Culpeper (2021, pp. 6-7) holds that with growing evidence from research, the early thesis that impoliteness must be intentional has become untenable, and thus he concludes that "not all impoliteness is intentional" (Culpeper, 2021, p. 7). He identifies three possible circumstances for impoliteness to occur: (i) the speaker attacks face intentionally, (ii) the hearer perceives or constructs the speaker's behaviour as an intentional face threat or (iii) both options occur (Culpeper, 2005, p. 38). Thus, the intention of inflicting somebody's face and hurting may be viewed from the perspective of the speaker, who has (or has not, see details below) the will to hurt, or from the perspective of the hearer/reader, who interprets the uttered words as intentionally hurtful (or ironic, humorous, etc.). Interestingly, Terkourafi (2008) juxtaposes impoliteness with rudeness, which she understands as intentional face-threatening activity. Contrary to this view, Culpeper (2005, p. 63) conceives of rudeness as unintentional as a result of "relational mismanagement" (Culpeper, 2008, p. 31). The role of intentionality in classifying impolite or rude behaviours is thus still debatable.

² Community of practice refers to social groups wherein "Members of the same professional practice share the same understanding of their enterprise, norms of mutual interaction and repertoire of capabilities" (Law et al., 2018, p. 98), and a group of people who "come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 464).

The problematic issue is that messages on social media give an analyst minimal access to information on speakers' objectives, and thus "recognising intentions is highly problematic" (Culpeper, 2005, p. 39). Even in real-life situations, the speaker's intentions cannot be fully reconstructed (Culpeper et al., 2003, p. 1552). Since intentions are "private, hidden events, not open to direct observation", they "must be inferred from conditions that both precede and follow" the act of insulting (Baron, 1977, p. 8), to allow for stretches of discourse not only larger than turns within the same discourse but even flowing "across different discourse contexts which take place at later points in time" (Mullany 2011: 137). Leaving aside the preceding and following contextual clues, in internet communication, intentions can be analysed insofar as comments are explicitly verbalized, implicitly verbalised but are inferable from the post, or if nonverbal clues (e.g. gestures or emoticons) give clear evidence of the hearer's reaction.

Culpeper (2011a, p. 254) and Bousfield (2007, p. 2187) acknowledge that for an impolite remark to be deemed offensive, the condition of *perceiving* it in categories of offence must be met, i.e., the message is seen as contrary to what the receiver expects and wants it to be (Culpeper), and the receiver understands that the speaker wants to damage his/her face (Bousfield). Hom and May (2018, p. 116) take a more radical position by saying that "a term is not offensive if no offense is taken"; thus, the remark must be not only perceived but also *experienced* as offensive. Put differently, this stand makes offence legitimate only if the perlocutionary effect occurs. Supportive of this view, Jucker (2000, p. 377) holds that "an insult is a perlocutionary effect. An utterance is only an insult if the target feels insulted" (more on the problem of perceived vs experienced insults in section 3)

Evaluating an utterance as offensive or non-offensive by the target or an analyst is a challenging task. As observed by Kadar (2013, p.171), the subjective and real-time (emic) perception of impolite language by the addressee necessarily involves a retrospective narrative when reported to a researcher. Thus, the perception is no longer direct; it is related as if by a third party, i.e., seen from the outside. The target, originally a participant, becomes a "semi-observer", who, in hindsight, may re-evaluate the situation, and so it is no longer genuinely emic. To make things more complicated, the evaluation by other members of the in-group who do not participate actively in the act of offending, dubbed "onlookers" by Kadar (2013, p.172), may differ from the participant's and semi-observer's stand alike. The observer's viewpoint (the etic perspective), who does not belong to the group and so is an outsider (e.g. a researcher), is still another stand that may be at loggerheads with the participant's, semi-observer's and onlookers' perspectives. Endorsing this stipulation, an insight into the target's reaction is hardly possible, and makes the researcher's perspective and the ensuing analysis, at least to some extent, vulnerable to (target's or researcher's) subjectivity. To reconcile this problem, Mills (2003) argues for a controversial approach which assumes that the researcher is a part of the community of practice, i.e., a participant in an interaction, or at least that s/he knows their norms well and aligns to their perspective. This approach, however, has triggered critical voices (Terkourafi 2005; Haugh 2007), for example that the analyst does not need to be directly involved in the interaction s/he analyses and thus that first-order impoliteness cannot be the only source of data for evaluation. Eventually, the discursive approach to impoliteness (Watts, 2003; Mills, 2003), which is the second wave in impoliteness studies, has been replaced by a gamut of approaches that together contribute to the so-called third wave of impoliteness theory (e.g. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010; Haugh, 2013; Haugh and Culpeper, 2018³), which assumes both the interactants' perspective as well as the researcher's. Still, having complete insight into the insultee's mind is just not possible, and thus all analyses of insults, regardless of the perspective one adopts (whether the sender's or the hearer's and the discursive or the socio-pragmatic) rest on some conjectures, and are doomed to some degree to uncertainty and ambiguity. Any study of insults remains speculative to some extent, and so is, by necessity, the study presented in the remainder of this paper.

³ The (socio-interactional) approach represented by Haugh (2014) is more participant-oriented, however, than the (socio-pragmatic) approach proposed by Culpeper (2011), who gravitates more towards the observer, and even more than the genre-approach postulated by Blitvich (2010) (see Haugh and Culpeper, 2018, p. 218).

3. Insults

In general terms, insults are words used “to assert or assume dominance, either intentionally claiming superiority or unintentionally revealing lack of regard” (Neu, 2008, p. vii). They have “abusive power” and are meant to hurt the addressee (Wajnryb, 2005, p. 19) or to damage the reputation of the addressee, and they are “perceived as inappropriate and demeaning by the target” (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, pp. 71-73). Etymologically, the word “insult” stems from the Latin “in” and “sultare”, which means to jump on, so originally insulting referred to a physical action of attacking the target (Ilie, 2001, p. 238; Culpeper, 2011, p. xiii), which later developed into its metaphorical sense meaning to taunt or ridicule (Culpeper, 2011, p. xiii). Today, it is used primarily in the verbal sense. Insults are thus verbal or behavioural acts (Neu, 2009, p. 3; Archard, 2014), which are typically conveyed by swear words (Wajnryb, 2005, p. 19) or through name-calling (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, p. 85), and which usually are not claimed, as opposed to for example slanders, to be truth-conditional statements (Jucker, 2000, p. 375).

Historically, insults derive from so-called ritual insults (called initially “flyting”) that date back to ancient Germanic and early Anglo-Saxon people (bards and chiefs) and continued till the 15th century. Rooted in games, flytings were competitions of teasing, threats, curses and boasting about past deeds based on strict rules, which might lead to physical violence (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, p. 75). Later they shifted to entertainment, particularly in Scotland, which involved using insults to provoke their opponents to strong reactions; in this way, the contestants could “let off steam” (Wajnryb, 2005, p. 166). The contestant who outperformed his rivals in insulting was the winner. Insults were popular in Early Modern English literary works, while in a non-fiction context, the first written form appeared in the 15th century (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, pp. 71, 83). Today they are also found in African-American communities, where they are known as “sounding”, “playing the dozens”, “verbal dueling”, “joning”, “sigging”, “cutting”, “signifying” or “woofing”;⁴ they “are not intended as factual statements” (Labov, 1972, p. 332), and are played by adolescent males (Labov, 1972, p. 297; Lefever, p. 1981) and adults (Dollard, 1939), to displace aggression towards white society (Lefever, 1981; Ilie, 2001, p. 239), for amusement (Lefever, 1981; Ilie, 2001) when used by middle-class blacks (Cole, 1974), or to show verbal prowess (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, p. 75). Ritual insults, along with personal insults, are distinguished *inter alia* by Goodwin (2006) and Kadar (2013). Goodwin (2006) notes that ritual in-group insults used by teenage girls can, paradoxically, help overcome potentially conflicting situations as they are used to relax the atmosphere by relying on statements that the group members perceive as obviously untrue. They illustrate a form of mock impoliteness and see the “interaction as playful, with each participant building upon the prior speaker’s action” (Goodwin, 2006, p. 96).

Distinguishing insults from other types of verbal offensiveness is an arduous task, as the concept is both broad and fuzzy (Jucker, 2000, p. 375). Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000, p. 73) are of the opinion that in order for an utterance to be dubbed an insult, it needs to contain some characteristics of the target, e.g. epithets through which the source addresses the target. Similarly, Jeshion (2013) claims that an insult should refer to personal features or behaviour. Archard (2014, pp. 129-130) further details that insults are directed at what the insultee possesses, e.g. beliefs, achievement, bodily features, job, family, etc. In other words, a predication that does not contain any information about the addressee cannot be regarded as an insult. Archard (2014, p. 129) also notes that insults may be not only verbal but also behavioural (e.g. facial expression, body movements).

Insults can be occasioned at word/phrase level or speech act level (Meibauer, 2014; Sennet, 2016; Jeshion 2021). For example, calling somebody a *slut* is explicitly insulting even at word level. On the other hand, a neutral word *weasel* becomes offensive when used metaphorically to mean a sneak (Jeshion 2021, p. 213), and *genius* used ironically conveys the opposite meaning and thus is offensive. Therefore, insults can be realized implicitly through insinuations or ironic and cynical comments about others or self (Hill and Öttchen, 1995, p. 22). Similarly, at the propositional level, greeting somebody with *Good morning, Mrs President* when the target has lost a presidential campaign is inappropriate and insulting. Finally, if the insulter does not hurl an insult at any target (and thus has no intention to hurt)

⁴ Even though these terms are often used synonymously, they do not mean exactly the same thing. As noticed by Labov (1972, p. 307) “*sounding* is used (...) for the initial exchanges, *signifying* for personal insults, and *the dozens* for insults on relatives”.

but resorts to expletives or swear words for self-expression purposes (e.g. to release strong emotions), the target may also feel offended if s/he perceives using these words in his/her presence as disrespectful behaviour (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, p. 75).

There is no consensus whether insulting content is anchored in a word whose meaning is inherently offensive (like *slut*) or whether its meaning derives from some rhetorical reconceptualization of the originally neutral word (like *pig*), such as metaphorization. Berkovski (2017, p. 671) holds that an insult has no neutral counterpart, while Mateo and Yus (2013, p. 88) propound that it has (giving the example of a *pig*). Seeing the insulting load in the semantic properties of a word is typical of the semantic approach (Hornsby, 2001; Hom, 2008). Contrary to this essentialist viewpoint, the pragmatic approach (Frege, 1956) and contextualism determine the insulting meaning based on contextual cues (Kennedy, 2003; Parvaresh and Tayebi, 2020). Other approaches to insults afford further interpretations. For example, insults occur only when the insulter uses them with the intention to insult or the attitude s/he expresses is intentionally insulting, which is what suggests the attitudinal view (Bolinger, 2015) and expressivism (Jeshion, 2013, 2016). Alternatively, the main criterion of determining whether an utterance is assessed as insulting may be “the addressee’s *experience* of an insult” (Milić, 2014, p. 544), as an insult occurs when the target has an emotional reaction to it (Berkovski, 2017, p. 670). This postulate is favoured by subjectivism (Meibauer, 2014; Berkovski, 2017; see also Jucker, 2000). Finally, in line with objectivism, insults may be determined by the standards of the pertinent community of practice that are “independent of both the insulter and the insultee” (Milić, 2018, p. 547), which is coterminous with culture-dependent norms (Neu, 2008; Milić, 2018) (for an overview of the approaches see e.g. Croom, 2014; Milić, 2018). Staying midway between subjectivism and objectivism, in turn, is captured (yet not subscribed to) by Milić in what he dubs adverbialism (2018, pp. 546-547). The study presented in this paper resonates most with the contextual approach on the one hand and subjectivism on the other. What should be borne in mind, however, is the obvious limitation of subjectivism that what counts as an insult depends on personal standards⁵ (Milić, 2018, p. 545), and the intensity of emotional response may differ across individuals (Ilie, 2001, p. 256; Milić, 2018, p. 545). Therefore, to redress the balance, some considerations of general standards for a CoP (such as social media as such, followers of a particular pop singer on Twitter or offensive aim of sounding) could provide a point of reference for the researcher’s evaluations, thus adding some objectivism.

Another unresolved problem is whether or not insults are truth-conditional (at a propositional level) or factual (at a lexical level). A number of scholars permit insults to be either non-factual or factual (e.g. Jucker, 2000; Neu, 2008, p.17; Archard, 2014). Archard (2014, pp. 129-130) stresses that “an insult can be strictly false” (p. 129) and that insults need not be even remotely plausible; however, it usually does make reference to what is to some degree true, so it can “distort, exaggerate, embellish, and wrap what is true” (p. 130), thus it bears some relation to the insultee.

There are several typologies of insults. For example, Feiberg (1985, pp. 221-226) distinguishes four subtypes of insults, three of which allow some factuality. Calumnies, which aim at damaging someone’s reputation by mainly using false statements to the extent they may be believed, factually based put-downs, which capitalize upon truth by stressing one’s defects (e.g. *You’re a cripple*), symbolic dominance claims, which exploit the inferior status of the target relative to the insulter, and pure insults, which encode what no one can believe to be true (e.g. name-calling, abusive invectives, etc.: *You son of a bitch*). Incidentally, for Archard (2014, p.130), pure insults should be referred to as invectives or abuse. Feiberg’s typology thus affords (to some degree) factual insults (calumnies, factual put-downs, symbolic dominance claims) and non-factual insults (pure insults). In the analysis presented below, all types of insults, including the abusive ones, the degree of their factuality regardless, are labelled with the umbrella term of insults. It is useful to dub insults which are not “pure” with the label “non-pure insults” overarching calumnies, put-downs and dominance claims.

⁵ Incidentally, a similar claim was voiced by Grundy (2000, p. 151) with reference to politeness, according to whom politeness is realized insofar as “actions, including the way things are said, match addressees’ perceptions of how they should be performed”.

Culpeper (2011, p. 135) proposed four structures in which insults typically occur, all of which refer to individuals: *you* followed by an adjective and a noun (e.g. *you fat pig*; personalized negative vocatives), *you* followed by a verb and an adjective (e.g. *you are so stupid*; personalized negative assertions), *your* followed by an adjective and a noun (e.g. *your stinking body*; personalized negative references) and a personalized third-person negative reference, such as a noun premodified by an adjective (e.g., *the daft bimbo*). Intensifying modifiers are of particular importance as they stress the impoliteness of a predication, e.g., *you're so stupid* (Culpeper, 2011, p. 141). To this typology of vocatives and non-vocatives, non-personal negative assertions could be added, and these in turn span what Haugh (2014) proposed in his typology of jocular mockery (see below), i.e., object-directed, place-directed or situation-directed (as in e.g. *your body is stinking*).

There is no agreement on whether insulting requires insult perception, experiencing offence or both. As already indicated, according to Jucker (2000, p. 377), an insult may be treated as such only with the proviso that the addressee actually feels offended, i.e., “if the target exposes wounded feelings”. Thus, for Jucker, insults are considered on the perlocutionary level; to use Jucker’s wordings, “insults are primarily perlocutionary” (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, pp. 76-77). Milić (2018, p. 546) also places the point of gravity on perlocution as he holds that the act of insulting is “a phenomenon which *results* from performing illocutionary acts”. On the other hand, Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000, p.73) affirm that a predication is an insult if the target *perceives* an utterance’s inappropriateness and demeaning character while experiencing face-threatening is seen as non-compulsory. The effect of insulting thus remains at the illocutionary level. Gabriel (1998, p. 1332) reconciles the two options as, for him, a remark can be dubbed an insult if it is “registered or experienced as one”.

Taken together, on the reception end of impolite interaction, two levels of reactions are permitted (along with silent reaction, i.e. no verbal reaction): foul language perception and its experiencing. The fact that the target perceives an insulting tone in a message does not necessarily entail the targets’ feeling/being⁶ insulted. Reactions may be limited to the sheer perception of an insult and assessing a predication as inappropriate. In this study, we endorse the premises voiced by Gabriel (1998), Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000, p. 73) as well as Mateo and Yus (2013) that experiencing the words by the target as face-threatening and intentional, i.e. achieving the perlocutionary effect, is not a necessary requirement to qualify a predication as an insult.

Detailed taxonomies of insults have been proposed by Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000) and Mateo and Yus (2013). Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000, p. 74) analyse insults at five levels: formal (ritual vs creative, typified vs ad hoc), semantics (truth-conditional vs performative), context-dependence (conventional vs particular), speaker attitude (ludic vs aggressive, intentional vs unintentional, irony vs sincerity), reaction (in kind vs denial, violence or silence). Ritual insults are rule-governed as opposed to creative ones, which are not limited by any external rules. Semantics-based division of insults allows the authors to distinguish between slanders and slurs, which Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000) see as subclasses of insults. Hardaker (2010) also engulfs flaming and trolling as forms of insulting. In reactions “in kind”, inherent in ritual insulting, we deal with inverse insulting wherein the target becomes the attacker and the attacker receives the status of the target. Denial exemplifies defensive action as a reaction to insults. By “violence” the authors mean physical attacks. They are central to ritual insulting (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, p. 90). Flytings may end “in silence, with which one of the contenders admits his inferiority” (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, p.76). Apart from flytings, other subtypes of insults recognized by these authors comprise: sounding, flaming, name-calling, slurring, and its stronger versions dubbed slandering (Jucker 2000). These forms of insults are all explicit, yet implicit insults are equally frequent and can be enacted through, for example, irony, similes and plays on words.

⁶ In this paper, no distinction is made between feeling insulted and being insulted; however, some scholars discriminate between the two notions. Whereas feeling insulted, according to Kampf (2015), belongs to the cognitive realm (and is anchored in illocution and felicity conditions), being insulted is a part of the social or political realm (and involves perlocutionary effects entailing changes in social or political practices). Feeling insulted is subjectively evaluated whereas being insulted is an objective notion, and it is the latter that Milić (2018) gives priority to (in line with his objectivism). Interestingly, Neu (2008, p. 12) notices that one can be insulted “without being aware of it and so without feeling insulted”. While Kampf (2015) allows feeling insulted only at the illocutionary level, here it is treated at the perlocutionary level.

Ilie (2001, pp. 253-257) put forward a similar taxonomy of reactions to insults but reduced them to three, namely: ignoring the insult “or dissociating oneself from the target of the insult”, castigating the author, or reciprocating with a counter-insult. Importantly, in both proposals, reaction is understood as either a verbal riposte or lack thereof. Dissociating and ignoring the insult are conflated by Ilie into one category, yet it is not clear what these measures exactly entail. It seems that both presuppose at least noticing that an insult has been hurled, but they may also mean perceiving and experiencing before ignoring or dissociation take place. Labov (1972, p. 335), on the other hand, permits denial, excuse and mitigation. In a similar vein, Jucker (2000, p. 375) propounds that personal insults (as opposed to ritual ones, which are created for amusement) are always serious, and they “require a denial, an excuse or counter-abuse”. Feinberg (1985, p. 226), in turn, distinguishes two types of responses: provocation, which arouses anger, and challenge, i.e., “a formal invitation to combat”. All these reactions seem to be possible responses to a proposition evaluated (whether subjectively by the target or objectively by social norms) as offensive. Incidentally, Mateo and Yus (2000) allow an insulting predicate to have both the function of causing offence as well as not causing any offence (but creating social bonds or praising, etc.).

As the reaction to insults may be ignoring them, as claimed by Ilie (2001), a taxonomy of silent replies can be proposed. No reaction may flow from the fact that the target has not noticed the message (*no reaction A*), noticed but did not understand the insult hurled at him and thus ignored it (did not perceive the insulting load; *no reaction B*), noticed and perceived the insulting load but did not feel insulted and thereby ignored the attack (*no reaction C*), or noticed the insult, perceived the insulting load, felt insulted but for some reason decided against his retort (*no reaction D*). Only the first option describes silence in Ilie’s sense, whereas the concept of ignoring may take the form of one of the three allowable incarnations dubbed here as reactions B-D (see Table 1). These subtle distinctions of silence and ignoring are neither considered in Ilie’s proposal nor in Jucker and Taavitsainen’s. As already mentioned, silence is understood by Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000) in terms of admitting one’s inferiority. The feeling of inferiority presupposes a mental state of the target who noticed an insult, perceived its insulting load and experienced humiliation. Inferiority, however, does not seem to be the only possible reason for expressing no reaction, as the decision to stay silent may stem from varying other reasons, for example, a lack of time to reply, no clever idea of how to reply, or a lack of feeling that a reply should be given, which may result from the conviction that the attack is not worth dwelling on, which in fact may display a feeling of superiority. In the social media scenario, silent reactions B, C and D may also be signalled by emoticons or other multimodal resources (e.g., images).

Table 1. Subtypes of “silent reactions” to an insult

J&T (2000)	Ilie (2001)	Here	Noticed	Perceived (the insulting load)	Felt insulted (experienced)	Verbal reaction
Ø	Ø	Silent reaction A	-	-	-	-
Ø	Ignoring or	Silent reaction B	+	-	-	-
Ø	dissociating	Silent reaction C	+	+	-	-
Silence		Silent reaction D	+	+	+	-

Mateo and Yus (2013) take into account both linguistic and cognitive behaviour and divide insults into two main categories of conventional and innovative. They take into considerations illocutionary and perlocutionary effects by putting forward three parameters: intention (offence, praise, social bond), interpretation (well understood/misunderstood) and reaction (with reaction/no reaction). Altogether, these parameters make 24 configurations that typify insults. For the present paper, of interest are insults which cause offence, are well understood or misunderstood and induce reaction or not in the target; one of them is illustrative of conventional (example after Mateo and Yus, 2013, p. 102: “*you are an asshole*”) and one of innovative insults (example after Mateo and Yus 2013, p. 105: “*If I were married to you, I’d put poison in your coffee*”).

4. Reactions to insults: a classification proposal

Considering both verbal reactions and silent reactions, as well as the intentionality of the sender, the following tentative configurations of reactions to insults can be proposed:

Table 2. Types of reactions according to the criterion of intentionality

Interactants Types of reactions	Sender Intention	Noticed	Target's reaction		Verbal reaction
			Perceived	Experienced	
1	+	-	-	-	-
2	+	+	-	-	-
3	+	+	-	-	+
4	+	+	+	-	-
5	+	+	+	-	+
6	+	+	+	+	-
7	+	+	+	+	+
8	-	+	+	+	+
9	-	+	+	+	-
10	-	+	+	-	-
11	-	+	-	-	-
12	-	+	-	-	+
13	-	+	-	+	+

On a general note, types 1–5 illustrate attempted insults as they assume the intention to insult, but the fact that the target does not feel insulted is suggestive of failing to offend him/her. By analogy, types 6–7 manifest genuine insults, whereas 8–9 and 13 evince situations wherein the addressee feels insulted even though the sender had no intention to offend. Contexts 10–12, in turn, present a lack of intention and offence.

More specifically, reaction 3 involves a verbal reply even though the target does not feel offended and does not recognize any offensive load in the producer's attack, unlike configuration 4, where the addressee notices the negative and insulting charge but does not feel touched and leaves the insult with no reply. In 7, the hearer not only notices the message and its offensive character but also experiences offence and verbally reacts to it. In 8, the target takes offence because s/he evaluates the message as insulting and replies to it regardless of the fact that the speaker had no intention to insult the addressee. For a multimodal study, configurations 4, 6, 9, 10 and 11 should provide revealing information (images, emoticons). From the above table it transpires that, contrary to early definitions of impoliteness, intentionality is not necessary for offensive language to occur if one accommodates the recipient's perspective.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that other studies into types of reactions within pragmatic accounts may be a valuable contribution to the reaction types to insults propounded above. For example, reactions to insults have been recently analysed by McVittie et al. (2021), who identified several response types based on tweets posted on a single Twitter user (a British pop singer James Blunt). Their typology spans strategies of dealing with offensiveness, linguistic structures used in replies and rhetoric devices.

On the other hand, of interest for this study are reactions to teasing analysed by Drew (1987) and to jocular mockery elaborated by Haugh (2014). Drew described a number of possible responses and is known for introducing the type of response he dubbed “po-faced”, which is what he means by a humourless, solid-faced reply (Drew, 1987, p. 251). He distinguishes several types of reactions, such as going along with the tease (e.g. by expressing agreement), ignoring it, elaborating, etc., which were later adapted by Haugh (2014, p. 9) in his typology of responses to mockery. The typology proposed by Haugh (2014) subsumes rejection (through laughing or po-faced reply), going along with mockery (by appreciation or acceptance laughter), elaborating mockery (e.g. extending it to banter by other interactants), reciprocating it (through self-directed jocular mockery), countering it (via other-directed jocular mockery), and not attending to it verbally or “in any audible way”. Along with the other-directed response, third-party directed and object/place/situation-directed replies were also allowed (and identified in corpus data) in all the above cases. The typology is rich and multi-faceted and will be partially applied to the analysis below to add detail to the discussion, although with some modifications.

Three main types of reactions to insults used in this paper can be distinguished along these lines: rejection, attacking or agreeing. Rejection can be occasioned by po-faced reaction, which is, however, difficult to verify in Twitter posts (unless some emoticons are present), and no reaction (no verbal or no behavioural response), as well as verbal rejection (the insultee defending him- or herself without attacking the insulter). Attacking (reciprocating) can be enacted by a self-directed attack (an insultee criticizes him- or herself), other-directed attack (an insultee criticises others, mainly the insulter) or, less seldom on Twitter, other participants may initiate it. Attacking can also be non-reciprocating when the addressee is aware of the sender's lack of intention to hurt, but still the former reacts by attacking. Finally, agreeing is "going along with" an insult, as suggested by Haugh (2014), and can be realized by explicit accord (e.g. saying "yes", etc.), a partial accord that may entail some repetition of an insult or other (creative) strategies (e.g. providing excuses, etc.).

5. Twitter

Twitter, founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, is a form of online interaction⁷ covered by the term social media. According to the most recent definitions (Wyrwoll, 2014, p. 20; Hoffman, 2017, p. 6), social media are understood very broadly and comprise message boards, discussion fora, blogs, microblogs, social network sites, media-sharing sites, question and answer platforms, rating and review platforms, and even instant messaging services, such as SMS, WhatsApp, Skype, etc. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) add some less apparent cases to these forms of social media, such as content communities, virtual game worlds and virtual communities.

Twitter is traditionally categorized as unstructured interaction (Chen, 2013), which is a form of microblogging (Zhao and Rosson, 2009; Marwick and boyd, 2010; Gilpin, 2011; Dürscheid and Frehner, 2013; Wyrwoll, 2014; Zappavigna, 2017; Graham and Hardaker, 2017), along with *inter alia* Tumblr, Jaiku or FriendFeed. Thus, it instantiates the broader category of blogging, but by some scholars it is also seen as an example of social network sites (SNS) (Zappavigna, 2012, pp. 2-5; Bredle et al., 2014, p. 198; Scott, 2021), such as Facebook or Instagram. The ambivalent status of Twitter has been reconciled by Dayter (2014, pp. 89-91; 2016, p. 75), who holds that the SNS exemplified by Twitter is a subtype of microblogging, as "Twitter is a microblogging service" that "has grown to a popular social network" (Dayter, 2016, p. 75). In sum, whilst by assigning Twitter to the class of microblogging, a monologue-oriented, narrative form of communication and author-centredness are stressed (the Twitter user only informs the audience about some events), placing it under the rubric of SNS emphasizes its conversational nature (there is some interaction between the Twitter user and the imagined audience).

Like any other form of communication on the Internet (Graham, 2008, p. 287; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017, p. 13; Hardaker, 2017), Twitter is notorious for messages containing language aimed at attacking verbally (McVittie et. al., 2021), and this is why it has been used here as a source of data for the analysis of insults. One of the possible causes for tweets being ripe with offensive talk is that in online communication on social media, the author of criticism and its recipient essentially enjoy anonymity and (physical) distance, which may unlock a wave of verbal abuse for two reasons. The sender often does not specify the recipient of the post and, by default, messages are public, and the addressees encompass all potential "tweeters" (Wyrwoll, 2014, p. 24). Reactions to such comments, on the one hand, are often delayed (asynchronous), reposted and available to multiple (ratified) recipients (i.e. audience) at the time when the author of castigation may no longer be online and when the addressee of the offence may be offline at the time when the message is being posted. The author may thus eschew direct exposition to possible mean retorts. The lack of direct and physical contact typical of face-to-face interaction practically guarantees impunity. Internet users may feel exempt from taking responsibility for their own words. For many internet users, such communication conditions trigger an unrestrained will to manifest scathing criticism that they would otherwise, most probably, never have the courage to voice.

⁷ By interaction we mean here, following Landert (2017, p. 31), a sheer "exchange of messages between participants", which, as opposed to participation does not convey direct associations with the power of changing social organization and processes.

Secondly, expressing strong negative evaluations of others in the sea of internet data is hardly controllable (despite the filtering work of moderators) due to rapid sharing and the consequent snowball effect. Multiple re-postings and adding more and more comments referring to the original message and other comments make a post grow and evolve as well as spread immediately and fast. As a corollary, the point of gravity often shifts from the author/recipient configuration to the derogatory content of the message itself, as the post starts to live its own life, or to the new self-nominated senders or commentators. The process of sanctioning new recipients by other (originally unaddressed) readers resulting from snowballing extends the readership to a vast, undefined “audience”⁸ (Marwick and boyd, 2010; Litt, 2012), yet the audience is no longer the target. The status of the original interactionist, i.e. the author/writer in Bublitz’s (2012, p. 26) terminology or producer in Culpeper’s (2011), may become increasingly nebulous, as through reposting unaddressed (but ratified) readers gain the status of secondary senders (transmitters), who are not authors but animators, to use Goffman’s (1981, p. 144) parlance. The participation framework thus gradually revamps from the original intention of communication between the producer and the addressee who coincides with the target, to a collective sender and a collective addressee. The authorship of the primary writer may gradually be pushed to the background or cause deindividualization (Kiesler et al., 1984, p. 1126; Douglas, 2019). Thus, the writer of the offensive post may expect to shun retaliation, which may reinforce the feeling of remaining unpunished. This argument is valid not only for Twitter but also for exchanges on other social media, in particular forums and SNSs (e.g. Facebook, Instagram); however, the reciprocity in communication on Twitter is much lower than in the case of Facebook (Dayter, 2014, p. 75), and thus the insulter is less likely to be penalized on Twitter.

Thirdly, the nature of Twitter allows one to express criticism towards some target (e.g., through insulting) without addressing the person directly when a so-called handle⁹ is used, i.e. “@” followed by the target’s name (e.g. “@Rihanna”). By so doing, the message posted on the sender’s account can also be seen on the target’s account (it automatically feeds), so the target is in a way informed about a message about him/her, yet the message as such is sent to whoever is on Twitter and notices it, i.e. to a mass, co-present, imagined audience. The target is aware of the posted tweet and the producer of the target’s awareness of it. The target’s status in the participation framework is thus no longer an individual addressee, but s/he becomes a part of a ratified collective addressee. The target is attacked indirectly but is not disaffiliated from potential interaction. This form of indirect interaction may be, and often is, reinforced with indirect language, for example, by referring to third parties (see example in Figure 5, “some Granny said that @Rihanna is ...”) instead of turning straightforwardly to the person an insult is being hurled at. The producer attacks the target indirectly by “quoting” the third party. Such double indirectness often entails strong criticism and disparaging language on Twitter.

Finally, another reason for Twitter being one of the most hateful-speech-infested social media platforms may partially stem from restrictions imposed on the length of messages. The maximum number of characters allowed to be used in one tweet was truncated to 140 characters (Yus, 2011, p. 155; Wyrwoll, 2014, p. 23) until the end of 2017; now 280 glyphs are allowed.¹⁰ Consequently, the posted messages tend to be very shallow (Dayter, 2014, p. 76) and succinct, keeping a lot of information at the implicit level (Yus, 2011, pp. 139-140), and leaving little space for polite phrases, hedging, mitigation or disclaimers that could make a post courteous. In reality, tweeters do not always take advantage of the 140 characters (Coeseemans and De Cock, 2017). Thus, tweets tend to be highly saturated with outspoken comments that are prone to topic volatility. Writers are inclined to produce messages encoded straightforwardly, and these may instigate pesky comments with spiteful and mocking overtones

⁸ The “imagined audience is the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating” (Litt, 2012, p. 331). The term imagined audience used here embraces both “invoked audience”, i.e. the audience “called up or imagined by the writer”, and “addressed audience” makes reference to “those actual or real-life people who read a discourse” (Ede and Lunsford, 1984, p. 156).

⁹ The handle should not be confused with username, which could be the same, but does not have to be. For example, Ellen DeGeneres is the username but the handle is “@TheEllenShow”.

¹⁰ <https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/counting-characters>

(e.g. through irony¹¹ or sarcasm¹² encoded by, among others, hyperbole, understatement, metaphor). More explicit forms of offensive language, such as aggressive and rude reactions, can also easily creep in and escalate hostility, especially because cruel comments are attention-grabbing and are used by some as a way to gain instant popularity on the net with relatively little effort (Chetty and Alathur, 2018). Moreover, since much meaning must be retrieved from implicit information, a message may be easily misinterpreted.

The imposed brevity of posts and their indirectness,¹³ combined with a feeling of impunity, may be the reasons why tweets are imbued with blunt comments and high emotions. Incidentally, for space constraints, they are conveyed not only by dint of words but also via visual signals, such as repeated typed characters (e.g. exclamation marks) and emoticons. These forms of communication sanction users to circumvent the imposed brevity of messages and make tweets genuinely multimodal on the one hand, and create a particularly fertile ground for offensive language on the other.

6. Research results

The analysis presented below substantiates some of the reactions to insults elaborated in Table 2 with the intention to offer a thumbnail sketch of the typology. The so-called silent replies, wherein the reaction is either behavioural or non-verbal, rarely become the subject of research, at least in (socio-)pragmatic publications, yet they may also illustrate the thesis put forward in the theoretical part of this paper that the pivotal aspect in studying insulting language is the target's reaction to them, including no reactions, hence they will be the focus of the analysis below. Some examples of verbal responses to insults will also be provided for demonstration purposes. The contexts discussed below illustrate various fine-grained aspects of offence that were not mentioned in the general typology of insults, which refer to their structure and form as well as their content.

In Figure 1, the sender (Ellen DeGeneres, a well-known homosexual American TV presenter infamous for workplace bullying and a mobbing scandal) advertises one of her talk show episodes on her Internet website (ellentube.com). The episode advertisement, posted on the 13 of February, is to get the collective audience “into the Valentine’s Day spirit”.

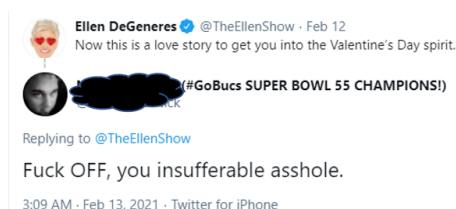


Figure 1. Tweet no 1



Figure 2a. Tweet no 2

¹¹ Irony is understood here as “reversal of evaluation”, i.e. “saying the opposite of what you mean”, wherein the literal reading is contrary to the expected reading (Burgers et al., 2011).

¹² Without delving into the intricacies of the term, sarcasm is treated here as a subtype of irony (Rockwell, 2000), which is a strong contemptuous remark that is both overt and intentional (Haiman, 1998, p. 20), where the target is directly addressed (Partridge, 1957; Leggitt and Gibbs, 2000).

¹³ What is meant by indirectness here is not indirect speech acts (Searle, 1979) but not addressing a target straightforwardly, i.e. not by using second-person singular (e.g. *you are...*), but instead resorting, for example, to third-person singular, using quotations, etc. In this paper, indirectness (and indirect insults) is not the same as implicitness (and implicit insults); the latter refers here to some concepts (objects, places, situations, notions) that make background assumptions deployed when addressing the target which allow the sender to frame the target from some perspective (this can be achieved by, e.g. presuppositions, implicatures, entailments), and make the reader/hearer infer the presupposed content (what is meant) through the interpretation of what is said (see the tweet in Fig. 7 for an example).



Figure 2b. Tweet no 3



Figure 3. Tweet no 4



Figure 4. Tweet no 5



Figure 5. Tweet no 6

Resulting from a workplace misconduct scandal and the outrage on social media it provoked, Ellen DeGeneres has become one of the most hated celebrities on Twitter. Consequently, negative replies to advertisements of her programmes are massive and frequent. In the cited exchange (Figure 1), the author of the tweet, who represents the non-addressed ratified audience, hurls an explicit insult at an individual target (Ellen). It is doubtful that the tweeter pounced on Ellen due to an inappropriate inference of the hostile intention of the sender. Given the social outrage, in all likelihood, the emotional and highly offensive name-calling (*asshole*), with a negative epithet (*insufferable*) and a swear word (*fuck OFF*), flow from external factors (a general negative aura around Ellen in social opinion) rather than the verbal expression inherent in her message. The insultee discounts the aggressive posts altogether. The screenshot in Figure 1 was taken on the 14 of February 2021, right after Ellen posted the tweet about St. Valentine. In March, there was no trace of all the disparaging comments about her. It is common among celebrities to delete tweets that denigrate them; hence it is challenging to capture the insulting ones. The fact that she deleted some tweets, however, shows that the insultee has familiarized herself with them, i.e. she noticed them, perceived and probably experienced them as hurtful. This context illustrates reaction type 6 (see Table 2), i.e., the insultee noticed an insult but did not react to it verbally, even though, in all likelihood, perceived it and felt offended.

Deleting insulting posts from one's Twitter account is a radical way of dealing with offence, yet it may take even more extreme measures, such as in the case of Figure 2a, where a former UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) parliamentary candidate, Peter Bucklitsch, known for his anti-immigration views, decided to delete his Twitter account altogether after a barrage of attacks by Twitter users (reaction type 6). Right after the tragic death of a three-year-old Syrian boy in 2015, Alan Kurdi, the son of Kurdish refugees who tried to reach Vancouver, Canada, through Europe during the European immigration crisis, in a tragic attempt to escape the war in Syria, Bucklitsch criticized the refugees posting a provocative tweet accusing the parents of greed, and the boy's death as "queue jumping costs". The image of the boy lying dead ashore in west Turkey made headlines globally and triggered international outcry and concern over the immigration crisis. The situation evoked massive condemnation expressed by an overwhelming number of Twitter users. At first, the target rejects the criticism levelled at him by replying with a defensive explanation that Turkey was a place sufficiently safe for refugees and thus there was no need to insist on fleeing to Europe ("Predictable unthinking outrage. Turkey is not a place where the family was in danger. Leaving that safe place put the family in peril"). Bucklitsch apologized¹⁴ for his words the next day yet, he avowed that his post was "inelegant", which was received by the Twitter public as a huge understatement. Soon after that,

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-34145378>

Bucklitsch deleted his Twitter account. Even after deleting his account, there were still posts attacking him (Figure 2b).

Figure 3 exemplifies a self-initiated insult (“Call my fkn phone u stupid retard asshole”), which is a personalized negative vocative wherein two offensive adjectives premodify a vulgar noun. This presumptuous insult is left with no reply by the target (Eminem), which may indicate that the target has shocked himself into silence, but more probably, that the target remains calm, without any signs of being disconcerted by this insult. The context thus illustrates reaction type 4 wherein the target, in all likelihood, noticed the tweet (as it was labelled “@Eminem”) and perceived its pejorative and highly offensive load (it is hard to seek any playfulness in the post) but did not experience offence; otherwise, one would expect some reaction from the target. As it is a self-initiated insult, which does not follow from any prior posts and is not followed by any reply, mapping contextualism or even the speech level theoretic framework on the insulting act is hardly possible here. What works in such short contexts is resorting to essentialism, expressivism and the attitudinal approach to insults. At the word level, *stupid*, *retard*, and *asshole* are strong, deprecating words, and the use of the premodifying *fucking* (“fkn”) and the imperative used speak to the negative attitude of the author towards the addressee.

The tweet in Figure 4 shows no reply to a blatant insult, this time, it was a reaction to what the target wrote before on his Twitter account. Piers Morgan, a British journalist and a television personality, made a comment supporting Brexit, which provoked numerous insulting comments by Twitter users (in this context, the following one: “Fuck off Piers you massive bellend!”). This pure insult, instantiating a personalized negative vocative, is abusive, yet the target did not reply to it and did not delete it. As no reaction occurred, one may speculate that the target did not experience strong emotions about the attack, so in line with the typology of replies, it can be classified as reaction 4.

In Figure 5, the insultee (Rihanna) leaves no doubts that she has read the tweet (“Some granny said @Rihanna is on drugs ahahaha her cunt is dry as desert Grandpa give her some cock.”), i.e. noticed it, as she decided to retweet it (“RT”), leaving it without any comment, presumably to show to other Twitter users how unbelievably rude and vulgar Twitter users can be. As a result, a number of positive posts about Rihanna (the animator) appeared in response to it defending her and criticizing the insulter. Rihanna’s reply is verbal but contains only the request to retweet the message, it is expressed through the conventional two letters “RT”. This context thus illustrates no reply but not no reaction (the reaction was more behavioural than verbal). In terms of reply typology, the example seems to illustrate reaction type 4, provided that the insultee was not offended by the comment. This cannot be stated here with certainty due to insufficient non-verbal clues. However, while type 6 (experienced offence) cannot be completely excluded, what speaks for perceiving it but not taking the insult (type 4) is the fact that sharing such an offensive comment with the audience required courage, high self-esteem and self-assurance of her high value, which do not seem to be disturbed by the single critical remark. Otherwise, the insultee would probably not subject herself to potential further public criticism. After retweeting the insulting tweet, the insultee must have expected comments criticizing the insulter rather than herself. By so doing, she shifts the audience’s attention from the target to the vulgarity of the producer, who becomes the salient element of the tweet, contrary to the insulter’s intention. Analysing data available through written discourse only, however, can never furnish researchers with unquestionable evidence of how an insult affected the insultee’s emotions and well-being, and thus to some extent, it remains speculative, illustrating primarily the etic perspective in impolite studies (second-order impoliteness). The proposition is illustrative of a direct, implicit insult with object-directed negative assertion.

The insults presented in Figures 1–5 typify silent reactions. The contexts in Figures 6–11, in turn, manifest witty verbal replies wherein the target certainly has perceived the intended insults but little or no symptoms of being affected by them surface in the responses. The strategies of replies involve (ironic) agreement with the insultee, strengthening the insulter’s argument, reversing the insulting content on the insulter, ridiculing the insulter or taking advantage of criticism.



Figure 6. Tweet no 7



Figure 7. Tweet no 8



Figure 8. Tweet no 9



Figure 9. Tweet no 10



Figure 10. Tweet no 11

In Figure 6, the addressee, James Blunt, a British pop singer, ironically agrees with the insult (“no one really likes James Blunt right?”) and even adds an espoused argument to the offence, thus strengthening it (“Yeah, I bought those 20 million albums myself.”). The reply is built on explicit accord (“Yeah”) followed by an ironic statement that “endorses” the claim with a preposterous argument. It is hard to say whether the insultee actually felt insulted or not. Since he decided to answer the question asked by the insulter, even though ironically, it may speak for being affected or upset by the comment to some degree, which would illustrate reaction type 7. The message is posted without the handle, so Blunt is not its direct addressee (the post did not automatically feed to his account), rather a ratified member of the imagined audience (a part of the addressed audience rather than invoked). The fact that being the target of an overheard insult but not the direct addressee (he took the trouble to find this post himself¹⁵), he still decided to reply to it, may also indicate that he did not stay indifferent to this implicit insult. The reply is object-directed (albums), and it exemplifies the “go along with” type of reaction expressed through initial agreement and followed by insult elaboration. The insultee’s reply is thus non-offensive (illustrating agreement).

A divergence from criticism and a shift to a false favour is presented in Figure 7 (“Does anyone still care about James Blunt?”, “Thanks for asking.”). The insult is implicit and indirect in its structure, as it does not address the insultee directly (through the second-person singular form); instead, it is addressed to an imagined audience. The insult expresses an assertion between the lines that Blunt is disliked by everybody (which is encoded by an interrogative). The insultee mitigates the insult by reducing its illocutionary force, focusing on the form of the insult in his reply rather than its content, and thereby shifts the point of gravity from offence to the act of asking, creating a humorous effect. Blunt thus seems to wish to demonstrate that the insulting comment has no effect on his well-being by treating

¹⁵ In his book recently published, Blunt (2020) openly admits that for him Twitter is a place of mutual humiliation and even though he tried at first to ignore the rude comments about him, he decided to post replies with the hope to conquer the hate and thus “win the internet” (p. 6), hence his ample replies to posts, whether with or without a handle.

the questions at the literal level, as a sheer interrogative rather than an attempt at belittling his merits through questioning his value as an artist, which was the obvious aim of the author (reaction type 5).

In Figure 8, the insulter directly addresses the insultee by a personalized negative vocative (“@MerriamWebster why don’t you just add “funner” to the dictionary you monsters”), to which the Merriam-Webster (M-W) dictionary replies (“Why don’t you look words up before complaining to the dictionary?”) resorting to a similar syntactic structure of a question. Such mirroring of syntactic structure in reply to offensive language is sometimes dubbed syntactic echoing (McVittie et al., 2021). The reply does not contain any explicit insult, but it is rebuking and clearly shows at least some irritation of the person answering on behalf of the M-W dictionary, which stems from the erroneous spelling of the word that, according to the insulter, should be in the M-W dictionary (it should be spelt “funnier”, not “funner”). This speaks for the perception of the offensive load of the post as well as the mental state of irritation, i.e., the feeling of being touched by the accusation (hence the categorization of this reaction as “experienced”). Overall, the verbal reply mirrors reaction 7 in our typology. Contrary to the context presented in Figure 7, here the insultee mildly attacks the insulter (other-oriented attacking), whereas in the previous example, the target (James Blunt) went along with the insulting tone (partial accord agreement).

Implicit criticism is visible in tweet nine posted during the Covid 19 pandemic (4 of April 2020). The insulter compares James Blunt’s music to the situation caused by coronavirus, juxtaposing it with lockdown and evaluating it as even worse (“As if isolation couldn’t get any worse, @JamesBlunt just came on the radio.”). Isolation, caused by lockdown, becomes unbearable for the insulter if Blunt’s music is played on the radio. In reply to this indirect and implicit insult, the insultee attacks the insulter (other-directed insult) by resorting to a pure insult expressed through personalized negative assertion “Worse must be realising you’re too thick to change the station.” This reply is rather emotional so it is suggestive of taking offence by the target or at least of being irritated by the critical comment (reaction type 7).

Finally, in the last context, the producer is also indirect in referring to the discount chain Aldi. However, a lack of the sender’s intention to insult may be sensed (Figure 10). The sender shares her negative feelings about her failed exam and the possible unambitious future job the event may entail (“Bad exam. Going to end up working in Aldi”), which she sees in working for Aldi, a discount chain supermarket. The problematic issue in this sentence is whether the word “Aldi” is used here to denote exactly this supermarket chain or whether the word “Aldi” is only (possibly humorous) a generalization and stands for a generic concept of an unambitious, mundane job, probably in any similar chain (discount) shop. Depending on which option one adheres to, the utterance may be interpreted as an (intentional) offence or may be tantamount to a complaint (unintentional offence). Some humorous overtones can also be sensed in this post. What seems to endorse the second reading is the fact that there is no “@” symbol in front of “Aldi”, thus, allowing for Twitter conventions, the producer does not invoke this specific company in the sentence. This may suggest that the supermarket was used solely instrumentally for descriptive purposes of the sender’s apparent plight. In reaction to this confession, ALDI CUST CARE hurls a strong insult at the sender by referring to her poor intellectual skills (“We don’t think so thicko”) and mentions the (high) competencies one needs to have in order to work for ALDI (“you need a minimum of a degree just to clean the toilets out love, try McDonalds.”). The reply discloses surprisingly strong criticism conveyed through an implicit insult and, embedded in it, a direct, ironic term of address (“love”) hurled at the sender, which is left without a reply. The attacking response, however, is humorous, despite the fact that it ridicules the author of the previous post. At first glance, ALDI CUST CARE did not only notice the post but also, as one may expect, perceived it as carrying a pejorative, offensive load targeted at Aldi supermarkets and probably experienced offence. On this view, the context could illustrate reaction 8. Contrary to the first impression, however, ALDI CUST CARE is not the Aldi customer-care Twitter account but only its parody. The description of this account on Twitter says (in small letters): “Customer service as it should be. No bullshit, just saying it how it is. (Not connected with our retailing hero Aldi in any way). parody”, and its full name (provided in the right margin as peripheral information) is actually “ALDI CUST CARE not”, with “not” dangling six spaces after “CARE”, which creates a misleading first impression. The logotype of this account is confusingly similar to the logotype of the real supermarket ALDI, yet what it says below the letter “a” in the logotype is not Aldi but “Aldildo”, which, through obvious sexual connotations, creates a humorous amalgamate of “Aldi” and “dildo” suggesting a substitute customer

care account. Given this information, it is doubtful that any insulting load was perceived or experienced by whoever hides behind the fake Aldi account and that the insult in the reply was not hurled for reasons other than the entertainment of the imagined audience. The producer's comment was probably not meant to be insulting either (unintentional insult), but rather a playful way of describing her situation. It also seems reasonable to expect that the target of the initial post was probably an anonymous imaged audience rather than Aldi supermarket. The reply, in turn, does contain offensive content, as it ridicules the sender's intellectual abilities, but it is rather a humorous insult than a pure insult, whose aim was to ridicule the target (the author of the original post) in a playful manner for the entertainment of the imagined audience. The tweet could be classified as a type of insulting that Haugh (2014) calls jocular mockery inasmuch as both the author and the target write their posts for the sake of playfulness and entertainment, as Haugh defines mockery as a subtype of teasing (Drew, 1987). The reply is left without any reaction of the original author; thus, it is impossible to assess how it was received (if noticed at all), whether as a jibe or a joke. If the original statement was unintentional and the "target" only used it for entertainment, i.e. did not feel offended, then the context would illustrate reaction 12, i.e. a potential insult. Even though ALDI CUST CARE does not seem to be offended by the original post, it could be felt insulting by other hearers in the imagined audience, in particular by the real Aldi customer service itself, and so it is a potential insult.

7. Conclusions

The analysis has shown how different reaction types are enacted on Twitter, and it revealed some more fine-grained features of these contexts, i.e. both about the reaction types as well as the insults themselves. Within the silent reactions, for example, it is possible to distinguish reactions that are silent replies, i.e. non-verbal (Figure 3, 4), a reaction that was a border case of verbal and silent reply (Figure 5), wherein retweeting was typed and forwarded with a copied text, as well as purely behavioural reactions, where the insultee deleted the whole thread with insulting comments (Figure 1) or even the Twitter account (Figure 2). Some insults were directly attacking the target (Figure 1, 3, 4, 8), while others were more descriptive and veiled, through non-personal implicit comments (Figure 5, 9, 10). More details about the reaction types analysed here are summarized in Table 3, below.

Table 3. Summary of types of insults and reactions to insults analysed in this paper

Tweet	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Context	Ellen	Peter B.- Immigran	Eminem	Piers M.- Brexit	Rihanna	J. Blunt- 20 mln	J. Blunt- question	M-W dictionary	J. Blunt- radio	ALDI
Reaction type	6	6	4	4	4	7	5	7	7	12
In/direct insult	D	-	D	D	I	I	I	D	I	I/D
Explicit personal insult (Vocative, Assertion Reference)	V	-	V	V	-	A	-	V	-	R
Non-personal implicit insult place/ object/ situation-directed)	-	-	-	-	O	-	-	-	S	S
Reaction: Agreeing, Attacking, Rejection	R	A	R	R	R	Ag	Ag	At	At	At
Reaction: Behavioural	B	B	S	S	S/V	V	V	V	V	V
Silent										
Verbal										
Self-initiated (S)/provoked (P)	P	P	S	P	S	S	S	S	S	P
Non-/pure	P	-	P	P	P	-	-	P	-	-

The research has aimed to propound a working typology of possible reactions to insults, whether potential insults, attempted or genuine. Of the three types of reactions deployed (agreeing, attacking, rejection), all have been illustrated here. As Twitter allows one to analyse only the written mode of discourse (including multimodal elements), in some cases, it was not possible to define with full certainty the type of reaction a tweet occasioned, in particular, whether the target was actually offended by an insult (even if the reply was silent or demonstrated jocular overtones) or just perceived its offensive load. This is a limitation of this study; yet, on the other hand, all analyses of any interaction based solely on written text are burdened with the same problem and thus can offer only some approximations of the actual state. This limitation notwithstanding, the study has hopefully shown that whether an insult is offensive or not depends primarily on whether the target takes offence.

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