

The pragmeme of insult and some allopracts

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This chapter examines linguistic insults in seeking to identify the contextual parameters that characterize the perception of insult from the points of view of insulter, victim, and onlooker/overhearer in order to identify what characterises a certain kind of behaviour as insulting. Examined are the conditions that apply to the speaker or writer who intends to insult a victim; those that apply to persons who believe themselves to be victims of insult; and the aspects of those conditions that might persuade an onlooker (side participant) to report what is said or written as an insult. I hold that the behavioural act of insulting is determined by the context in which the act occurs. Verbal insult depends in large part on the language used because the insult arises from its perlocutionary effect. An agent's intention to create this effect – the agent's perlocutionary intention – is evidence of a malicious intent to wound, and that intention is universally regarded as more reprehensible than unintended insult. To gain perspective on insult I also discuss the nature of banter (comprehending teasing and ritual insult) and how it differs from true insult. Banter is competitive verbal play in circumstances where it is mutually understood that there is no serious attempt to wound or belittle the interlocutor.

Keywords: insult, banter, dysphemism, perlocutionary intention, perlocutionary effect, context

Insult is dysphemistic (Allan & Burridge 1991, 2006). To set the ball rolling I define *insult* in terms of the verb from which nominal and adjectival senses can readily be derived:

- (1) To assail with offensively dishonouring or contemptuous speech or action; to treat with scornful abuse or offensive disrespect; to offer indignity to; to affront, outrage – perhaps by manifest arrogance, scorn, contempt, or insolence. (Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*)

As a sample of insult, here is a woman complaining about insults from her husband:

- (2) [H]e called me a slut, cunt, worthless bitch, I slapped him at some point, then he followed me to the porch, where I'd gone to cry, to tell me how I spread my legs for anyone who walks by, and

how I have no respect for myself because no one taught me to respect my body when I was a teenager. [...] This is not the first time he's called me a slut/whore/cunt/bitch/etc. He accused me of cheating 2 weeks ago (I'm not, nor will I ever because of family history with cheating) with a coworker. [...] I put a hand out and said "If you lay one finger on me, I will scream and call the police." This is when he proceeded to call me a f*cking cunt, bitch, and a piece of shit (he'd called me worthless earlier in the week, again not for the first time). (<http://forums.thenest.com/discussion/12002898/husband-called-me-a-c-t-b-ch-sl-t>, September 2013)

I will discuss this in more detail below. In this essay I seek to identify what characterises a certain kind of behaviour as insulting. Insult takes many forms that I will deem allopracts of the insult pragmeme, defined below in (4).¹

As linguists we think of insults in terms of language expressions that cause offense, but on more careful consideration what is offensive is the behaviour that accompanies and/or is embodied in the language expression; indeed insulting behaviour may be nonverbal. For instance, the wife complaining in (2) was also insulted by the fact that her husband is concomitantly drinking alcohol, though he has agreed not to drink. Furthermore she was incensed by his physical aggression and as Mey 2001: 227 says: 'As integral parts of pragmemes, body moves are naturally part of, and may naturally represent, the whole pragmatic act which realizes a particular pragmeme.'

The pragmeme of insult is what is general to acts (practs) of insult, i.e., instantiations of insult. These practs are the behaviours, described in (1) and defined in (4), that accompany and/or are embodied in the language expressions that cause offense. Mey 2001: 221 describes pragmemes in terms of situational prototypes and this needs to be accommodated with (1). Kecskes 2010 has criticised Mey² for focusing on the situation of utterance to the exclusion of the socio-cognitive attributes of pragmemes:

This [socio-cognitive] view unites the societal and individual features of communication and considers communication a dynamic process in which individuals are not only constrained by societal conditions but they also shape them at the same time. Speaker and hearer are equal participants of the communicative process. They both produce and comprehend relying on their most accessible and salient knowledge expressed in their private contexts in production and comprehension. (Kecskes 2010: 2890)

¹ The term *insult* extends to trauma of the physical person; although this can be subsumed to the pragmeme of insult I shall not discuss it further.

² I am grateful to Mohammad Salmani Nodoushan for reminding me of this.

I doubt that Mey would dispute the importance or relevance of Kecskes' account of pragmemes. I certainly incorporate within my own notion of 'context' both Mey's situational and Kecskes' socio-cognitive aspects of a speech event (or other communicative act), and most definitely regard context as an essential ingredient for the proper interpretation of language expressions, see Allan 2015 (unpublished). It is the agent's behaviour in context that is evaluated as insulting or not.

Context κ is (a) the world spoken of, constituted by the topic of discourse revealed by expression ε 's co-text (what is and has been said); it is also (b) the situation in which utterance v (such that $\varepsilon \subseteq v$) is expressed, which includes what is known about the speaker/writer and the perlocutionary effect of this and similar uses of ε – we might call this situation of utterance 'the world spoken in'; finally, (c) there is a corresponding situation of interpretation in which the hearer/reader seeks to understand $\varepsilon \subseteq v$. Each 'world' is in fact part of a world-time pair, such that the word *world* invokes a paired time. Because worlds spoken of are revealed through language, they all have some association with the world the speaker/writer inhabits, the world spoken in.³ The world spoken of is a mental model of an actual or recalled or imagined world; it is a possible world accessible from the world spoken in.⁴ A model of the world (and time) spoken of is the content of a mental space which can be readily associated in a variety of ways with other worlds (and times) occupying other mental spaces. Awareness of context constitutes a part of dynamic common ground and awareness of the insult pragmeme is part of static common ground (see Allan 2013).

Verbal insults can occur in all styles of language from frozen to intimate (Joos 1961). Insults are normally intended to wound the addressee or bring a third party into disrepute, or both. This is what makes them intrinsically dysphemistic. Insults typically pick on and debase a person's physical appearance and mental ability, character, behaviour, beliefs, and/or familial and social relations. Thus insults are sourced in the target's supposed ugliness, skin colour and/or complexion, over or undersize (too small, too short, too tall, too fat, too thin), perceived physical defects (short-sight, squint, big nose, sagging breasts, small dick, deformed limb), slovenliness, dirtiness, smelliness, tartiness, stupidity, untruthfulness, unreliability, unpunctuality, incompetence, incontinence, greediness, meanness, sexual laxness or

³ You see the effect of this if you compare, e.g., the science fiction of H.G. Wells with one of today's SF writers.

⁴ By 'possible world accessible from the world spoken in' I mean one susceptible to human understanding, not one that is necessarily realistic or (strictly speaking) logical.

perversion, sexual persuasion, violence towards others (even self), ideological or religious persuasion, social or economic status, and social ineptitude. And additionally, supposed inadequacies on any of the grounds just listed among the target's family, friends and acquaintances.

Insults may compare the target with an animal conventionally ascribed a behaviour despised by the insulter, e.g. *bat, cat, fox, vixen, sow, pig, cow, bitch, cur, dog, mongrel, swine, louse, dove, hawk, coot, galah, chicken, turkey, mouse, rabbit, bull, ox, goat, ape, monkey, ass / donkey, mule, rat, snake*, etc. Names of female animals can normally be used only in naming or addressing women and male homosexuals: e.g. a *cat* is typically a “vicious and/or scratchy woman”; but a *pussy* is used (mostly in America) to insult a male for being “effeminate, homosexual” and occasionally of a female for having a “weak character”; a *bitch* is a “(usually nasty) woman held in contempt”⁵; a *vixen* is a “cunning, perhaps sneaky, woman. Some animal names are typically used of men: *mongrel, cur* or *swine* denotes a “vicious, nasty fellow, held in contempt” (comparable with *cat* and *bitch* of women); a *fox* denotes a “cunning man”, compare *vixen* (*foxy lady* is a compliment to the sexiness of a woman); a *bull* is for a “big, often rather clumsy, man”. A *louse* is “someone unpleasant, irritating, that one wants to be rid of”. An *ape* is “someone uncouth”; while a *monkey* is “someone mischievous”, usually a child – it is a tease rather than an insult. A *snake* is “untrustworthy, sleazy, someone who will spread poison about other people”. *Worms* and *toads* have always been despised, even loathed, perhaps because of their association with dirt and decay, perhaps because they are unpleasant to touch. Applied to humans the words *worm* and *toad* imply “someone who is loathsome, who crawls, is sycophantic”; hence *toadyism*. Similar meaning attaches to *creep* and *crawler*, terms which derive from animal behaviour. An *insect* is “someone insignificant, beneath contempt”; a *parasite* is “someone who lives on others”; and *vermin* “someone loathsome and contemptible.” Neither *dove* “peace-worker, someone who is anti-war” nor its contrary *hawk* “someone who favours the military” is intrinsically dysphemistic, but they are used dysphemistically by those of opposed ideology. Verbs based on animal nouns that have dysphemistic overtones are *ape, badger, bitch, dog, ferret, fox* and *outfox, weasel one's way in, whiteant* “undermine”, *wolf down food*. Summing up: dysphemistic uses of animal names take some salient unpleasant characteristic from the folk concepts about the appearance and or behaviour of the animal which is then

⁵ Among American children *bitch* is the favourite insult from girl to girl and used proportionately more often than by boys (who also target girls with it, of course); cf. Jay 1992: 60–67.

metaphorically attributed to the human named or addressed. We see a variety of kinds of insult and ways of insulting.

There are many insulting epithets derived from tabooed bodily organs (e.g. *asshole*, *prick*), bodily effluvia (e.g. *shit*), and sexual behaviours (e.g. *fucker*, *poofter*, *arse-licker*, *dipshit*, *cock-sucker*, *wanker*, *whore*, *slut*, *slapper*, *slag*). Where terms of insult comment on sexual persuasion, perversion, or practice the words used in the insult are intended to be taken literally instead of figuratively (even when this is known not to be the case in reality). Thus it is just as insulting to call someone a *penis sucker* as a *cock-sucker* (even if the latter is the norm); the same is true of *masturbator* vs *wanker*, *behind licker* vs *arse-licker*, *fornicator* vs *fucker*, *homosexual* vs *poofter*, *prostitute* vs *whore*. It is true that the slang term is more vivid and probably more effective as an insult; but the alternative will also work well enough. When terms like *wanker* and *fucker* are used figuratively (respectively “despised and ineffectual” and “despised, strongly condemned”), the more orthophemistic alternatives are inappropriate. Although attitudes to homosexuality have changed towards the positive in recent years, it is still an effective insult to accuse a man of sexual dalliance with other men. The long history of (men and women) insulting women, as in (2), by accusing them of promiscuity or prostitution seems to persist despite a two generations of feminism.

Certain insults use dysphemistic epithets that pick on real physical characteristics that are treated as though they are abnormalities: *Fatty!*, *Baldy!*, *Four-eyes!*, *Short-arse!*. Epithets like these merge into racist dysphemisms, and dysphemistic epithets based on behaviours that the speaker disapproves of, such as homosexuality. Terms like *cripple*, *paraplegic*, etc. are normally ascribed to someone who has been physically inept in some way or another; similarly with a question like *Are you blind?*, which can be dysphemistic about someone’s visual perceptiveness; just as *Weakling!* can be dismissive of their physical prowess. Although we now say *Shit on you!* instead of *A pox on you!*, we still call someone a *poxy liar*; and also *pest*, a word derived from the French word for “plague” (cf. English *pestilence*). Also in current English we figuratively call someone a *leper* meaning “a person who is shunned”. It is hardly surprising that the diseases utilized in curses are smallpox, bubonic plague, leprosy, cholera – all disfiguring and deadly, which brings to mind the exhortation to *Drop dead!* Disease metaphors turn up in racist insults, too (Dawidowicz 1975: 54, Sontag 1979).

There are many insults invoking mental subnormality or derangement: *Airhead!* *Silly!* *Retard!* *Moron!* *Idiot!* *Cretin!* *Kook!* *Loony!* *Loopy!* *Nincompoop!* *Ninny!* *Fool!* *Stupid!*

Halfwit! Nitwit! Dickhead! Fuckwit! Fuckhead! Shithead! The last three are doubly-dysphemistic in that they not only ascribe mental derangement, but do so using a dysphemistic locution which unscrambles as “your wits are (your head is) fucked (deranged)” etc. *Shithead!* has much the same meaning as *Shit for brains!* where the figure is made explicit.⁶ All these insults reflect the stigma attached to mental subnormality, which requires euphemisms for the genuinely subnormal. *Cretin* began as a Swiss-French euphemism *crétin* “Christian” (a charitable recognition in a Christian country that even the mentally subnormal are blessed, and therefore Christians); however *cretin* has sunk to dysphemism (a similar fate was suffered by the adjective *special* applied to someone with a mental or physical abnormality in the late 20th century; indeed colloquial terms for the mentally subnormal regularly start out as euphemisms and degenerate; *mentally disabled* went the same route to dysphemism as its forerunners, being replaced by *mentally challenged*). It is notable that *silly* once meant “blessed, blissful” (cf. modern German *selig*) and then changed to “innocent, helpless, deserving of pity”; hence Chaucer’s *sely wydwe* “unfortunate widow” (*Nun’s Priest’s Tale* l.4565). It is a short step from “helpless, pitiable” to the current, only mildly dysphemistic, meaning of *silly*. Expressions like *He’s a jerk*; *It’s spaz / spastic*; *I was spastic* all suggest the jerky movements of true spastics, who until recently were all presumed to be mentally retarded as well as physically abnormal; hence these expressions all mean “no good, useless, stupid”. The mental abnormality dysphemisms implicit in insults like *maniac*, *crazy* and *nutter* have been usurped as terms of praise among certain macho hooligans: their antisocial behaviour is decried by society in general, but they adopt such epithets as badges of honour in consequence of their revolt against the social norm. This is comparable with the use of *nigger* as an expression of camaraderie among African-Americans (see below).

Sexist, racist, speciesist, classist, ageist, and other –IST dysphemisms (Allan & Burridge 1991, 2006) function as insults. One’s proper name is closely associated with one’s identity, and children, but rarely adults, deform proper names to insult or tease, e.g. *Burridge* becomes *Porridge*, *Zinkewitz* becomes *Stinkyshits*, and *Tina Fritz* turns into *Freena Tits*. This is a kind of –IST dysphemism. Turning to racist dysphemisms to exemplify –IST dysphemisms in general: all human groups, it seems, have available in their language a derogatory term for at least one other group with which they have contact. Among the racist dysphemisms of English, are: *mick* and *paddy* for Irish person, *frog* for a French person, *kraut* and *hun* for a German, *chink* for a Chinese, *jap* or *nip* for a Japanese, *paki* for a Pakistani, *polak* for a Pole,

⁶ A *pisshead* is a drunk; so it doesn’t fall in with this category of insult.

wop and *eyetie* for an Italian, *ayrab*, *towel head*, *dune coon* and *camel jockey* for an Arab, *kike*, *yid* for a Jew, *chief*, *Hiawatha* and *Geronimo* for male North American Indians and *squaw* for their womenfolk, and so forth. English-speaking whites tend use the adjective *swarthy* dysphemistically, also *inscrutable* of Orientals. They may use *black*, *nigger*, *nignog*, *wog*, *coon*, etc. for people of African ethnicity and for other people with similar skin colour to Africans, such as Australian Aborigines and south Indians. In return, African-Americans talk about *grays* and *honkeys*. In Australia we hear *skip* “Anglo-Celtic Australian” (from a television series ‘Skippy the bush kangaroo’); *boong* and *abo* for Aborigines; *gin* for an Aboriginal woman; and for people from east and south-east Asia, *slants / slanties*, *slopes*, *gooks*, *RGBs* (Rice Gobbling Bastards), *UFOs* (Ugly Fucking Orientals), *kanardles* from *can hardly see*. Afrikaners once used *skepsel* “creature” when referring to blacks and coloureds; in Nazi German, Jews were described as *kriechend* “crawling, servile”; Nazis described the marriage of an ‘Aryan’ to a ‘non-Aryan’ as *Blutschande* “blood disgrace” or *Blutvergiftung* “blood poisoning, tetanus” (Clyne 1987).

Racist terms are not intrinsically dysphemistic, and can be used without prejudice: for instance, *blacks* is not necessarily any more dysphemistic than *whites*; and in Australia, *boong* and *gin* are not invariably dysphemistic, no more so in fact than are *lebo* “Lebanese”, *wog* “Caucasian Australian who is not Anglo-Celtic” and *skip(py)* “Anglo-Celtic Australian”. Practically all these ‘racist’ terms can be used without irony in orthophemistic illocutionary acts. Consider the term *nigger*. African-American law professor Randall Kennedy’s book *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* provoked a storm of protest from blacks and whites when it first appeared.

Patricia Williams, an African-American professor at Columbia Law School, objected to the title: “That word is a bit like fire – you can warm your hands with the kind of upside-down camaraderie that it gives, or you can burn a cross with it. But in any case it depends on the context and the users’ intention, and seeing it floating abstractly on a book shelf in a world that is still as polarized as ours makes me cringe.” (*New York Times* December 1, 2001)

Used among African-Americans *nigger* is often a badge of camaraderie, identity and solidarity (when it is often spelled *nigga* but pronounced the same) (see Allan 2015, Asim 2007, Folb 1980, Kennedy 2003, McWhorter 2002, 2010). Something comparable holds true for almost all racist terms – indeed, all –IST terms.⁷ Nonetheless, the lexicon entries for the

⁷ Take the case of the late wheelchair bound quadriplegic John Callaghan’s cartoon *Quads*, which pokes fun at the disabled, see <http://www.callahanonline.com/index.php>.

racist terms exemplified above will need to mark the degree to which they are dysphemistic: e.g. *black* should probably be marked as orthophemistic; whereas *nigger* should probably be marked as typically dysphemistic, with exceptional contexts identified (for discussion see Allan 2011). Privileged use of terms like *nigger* (and other –IST dysphemisms) may be extended to outsiders under certain circumstances. The problem is that side-participants and overhearers may not recognize this special dispensation.

Then there are terms of insult or disrespect, which invoke slurs on the target's character, such as *arsehole / asshole, bag, bastard, battle-axe, bidy, codger, crank, crone, cunt, dag, dick, dork, drip, dweeb, faggot, fogy, fuddy-duddy, fuss-budget, galoot, geezer, grommet, grot, grump, hag, nerd, pansy, perv(ert), poof(ter), prick, queer, schmuck, scumbag, shirtlifter, sissy, slag, slob, slut, SOB / son of a bitch, tramp, twat, wanker, wimp, witch*. Many of these derive from tabooed bodily organs, effluvia and sexual behaviours, of course.

Ritual insult is a competitive game, a kind of teasing or banter; it is not an attack on an enemy or someone who is an outsider despised or disparaged; it is an expression of group solidarity. This clearly comes out in a *celebrity roast* “unmerciful mockery of a celebrity in his or her presence”. As a display of upmanship, the dozens uses insults based on people's supposed sexual practices (*I heard you were getting sex all the time until your wrist got arthritis*), age (*Your mother is so old, she was a waitress at the Last Supper*), appearance (*You were so ugly at birth, your parents named you Shit Happens*), smell (*Your breath smells so bad, people on the phone hang up*), domestic arrangements (*The only difference between your girlfriend and a subway is that everybody hasn't ridden a subway*), and other inadequacies of the addressee or their family (*Your sister is so stupid, she went to the baker for a yeast infection; Your father is like cement – it takes him two days to get hard; Your mother has so many crabs she walks sideways*). These are categories found in true insults, intended to wound, humiliate, and belittle. If the solidarity function of ritual insult is the criterion which distinguishes it from true insult, then we have to class what is sometimes called friendly banter as ritual insult. It is marked by the use of normally abusive address forms or epithets which are uttered without animosity, which can be reciprocated without animus, and which typically indicate camaraderie. (3) is an example:

- (3) <Darkman-X> so wait becuz i have the onboard raid controller i could fit 2 hdd's on the raid controllers and 2 on the ide controllers?
 <mark> RAID is just a standard of combining different drives.. you can make a raid out of scsi drives along side ide drives if you want

<mark> you could make a raid out of a hard drive and a ram drive
 <mark> just forget about the raid stuff
 <Darkman-X> lol
 <mark> and picture it as another ide controller
 <mark> thats all it is unles syou setup the raid stuff
 <Darkman-X> so wait i can have 2 hdd's on the raid, 2 on teh primary ide and then 2 drives on the secondary ide?
 <mark> i guess.. tried reading the manual?
 <Darkman-X> lol manual?
 <mark> :)
 <mark> didnt your motherboard come with any papers
 <Darkman-X> iz that that book that says A7V333 on it?⁸
 <[RaW]> yes
 <Darkman-X> lol the one that i'm using to prop up my comp table?
 <[RaW]> probably
 <Darkman-X> whoops
 <Darkman-X> :-)
 <Darkman-X> j/k
 <JoHn> lol
 <[RaW]> yur supposed to use your school books for that dummy
 <Darkman-X> ummm no i dun wanna look at em
 <Darkman-X> they're evil
 <[RaW]> keep your motherboard manual close to your heart
 <[RaW]> >:)
 <Darkman-X> lol (Logged August 29, 2002)

The context for (3) was a chat room that has long since disappeared. For convenience I shall assume that all participants are male. (3) opens with <Darkman-X> seeking advice⁹, which he gets and responds 'lol' – literally, 'laughing out loud' but often used as equivalent to a smiley; here we can take it as intended to correspond to a grateful smile. <Darkman-X>'s second question about the number of disks he can run through RAID and IDEs evokes the

⁸ This refers to an Asus mother board issued in March 2002, cf. http://dlcdnet.asus.com/pub/ASUS/mb/socka/kt333/a7v333/e1010_a7v333.pdf.

⁹ A RAID [Redundant Array of Independent Disks] controller is a device for managing the functions of multiple disk drives. IDE [Integrated Drive Electronics] is another kind of controller for storage devices.

ensorious counter question ‘tried reading the manual?’, echoing the exasperated expletive *RFM* (Read the Fucking Manual) – a common response to a question which can usually be answered by referring to the instruction manual that comes with electronic and mechanical devices. In (3), this response triggers the bantering repartee which follows. Because bantering (teasing) plays with insult, it risks being interpreted as insult to which (serious) offense may be taken. We might compare it to a verbal joust where there is mock struggle without the intention to seriously wound the interlocutor. In (3) the potential insult is parried by <Darkman-X>’s ironic ‘lol manual?’ demonstrating he hasn’t taken offense at <mark>’s remark. After further interchanges in which a third participant, <RaW>, appears and effectively takes over from <mark>, <Darkman-X> claims his manual is propping up his computer table, thereby implying the manual is not readily available for consultation. The truth of this is left hanging through three more turns before he admits to just kidding (‘j/k’). Whereas lying to someone is potentially insulting, kidding is saying something (mildly) outrageous but untrue as a move in the verbal joust. The response from <RaW> is that <Darkman-X> should be using his school books to prop up his computer table. We can see that this is not serious advice but playing along with the narrative because he calls <Darkman-X> ‘dummy’. *Dummy* is a potential insult but in (3) it is part of the verbal jousting: only a stupid person would use his computer manual rather than his school books to prop up a computer table. Since by this stage it is unlikely that any participant believes the table to be propped up by books of any kind, ‘dummy’ cannot rightfully be applied to <Darkman-X>; so it is a nonserious tease. <Darkman-X> responds in kind by playing along, saying that school books are ‘evil’ so he doesn’t want to look at them. At this point the exchange is brought to a close by <RaW> returning to the initial topic and telling <Darkman-X> to keep his motherboard manual close to his heart (i.e. always to hand). <RaW> signs off with an evil grin (‘>:’) that is perhaps influenced by <Darkman-X>’s use of ‘evil’. <Darkman-X> accepts graciously (‘lol’).

What we see from the discussion of (3) is that banter (including ritual insult and teasing) have the agent needling the addressee but not insulting them because there is no serious attempt to wound or belittle him or her since both are participating in verbal play. Thus, banter is a dynamic of social interaction. Unlike insult, banter does not assail with offensively dishonouring or contemptuous speech or action; it does not treat with scornful abuse or offensive disrespect; it does not offer indignity to the target; nor does it affront, or outrage by truly manifesting arrogance, scorn, contempt, or insolence towards the target.

Speaking of the agent's making no attempt to wound or belittle the target we are referring to the agent's perlocutionary intention, a claim which warrants explication. The perlocutionary intention of the speaker/writer is the intention to bring about a particular perlocutionary effect on the hearer/reader by saying what is said. The term 'perlocutionary intention' is shorthand for an illocutionary intention to have the hearer/reader recognize the illocutionary point of the utterance (the message) in order to achieve a certain perlocutionary (cognitive/behavioural) effect. The perlocutionary effect of a language expression can only be determined from the context of utterance – i.e. its co-text and the situations of its utterance and of its reception (cf. Austin 1962, Bach & Harnish 1979, Allan 1994). Insult eventuates as a perlocutionary effect – which may be unintended. Nonetheless, its dysphemistic effects are properly castigated. Yet what is more abhorrent is the intention to achieve such an effect. The agent's intention can only be surmised from the context of utterance – the co-text and the situation of utterance including what is known about the speaker/writer and the perlocutionary effect of this and similar uses of the potential insult. Judging the perlocutionary effect is also a matter of conjecture, although it is normally identifiable by the target as the sense of insult. So, both perlocutionary intention and, to a lesser degree, perlocutionary effect are open to controversy resulting from differing interpretations of what, to an onlooker, appear to be the same set of data.

Let me now define the pragmemes of insult, (4), and banter, (5):

- (4) **The pragmeme of insult.** (A) The agent has the perlocutionary intention in uttering $\epsilon \subseteq \nu$ to assail the target with offensively dishonouring or contemptuous speech or action and/or to treat the target with scornful abuse or offensive disrespect. (B) The agent's uttering $\epsilon \subseteq \nu$ has the perlocutionary effect (perhaps realising the agent's perlocutionary intention) of demeaning to someone and/or of affronting or outraging them by manifest arrogance, scorn, contempt, or insolence.
- (5) **The pragmeme of banter.** A form of competitive verbal play and upmanship in which the agent needles a sparring partner with critical observations on their physical appearance, mental ability, character, behaviour, beliefs, and/or familial and social relations in circumstances where it is mutually understood that in uttering $\epsilon \subseteq \nu$ there is no serious attempt to wound or belittle the interlocutor.

With all this in mind let's look more closely at (2), reprinted here for convenience.

[H]e called me a slut, cunt, worthless bitch, I slapped him at some point, then he followed me to the porch, where I'd gone to cry, to tell me how I spread my legs for anyone who walks by, and

how I have no respect for myself because no one taught me to respect my body when I was a teenager. [...] This is not the first time he's called me a slut/whore/cunt/bitch/etc. He accused me of cheating 2 weeks ago (I'm not, nor will I ever because of family history with cheating) with a coworker. [...] I put a hand out and said "If you lay one finger on me, I will scream and call the police." This is when he proceeded to call me a f*cking cunt, bitch, and a piece of shit (he'd called me worthless earlier in the week, again not for the first time). (<http://forums.thenest.com/discussion/12002898/husband-called-me-a-c-t-b-ch-sl-t>, September 2013)

Although (2) could be a work of fiction I shall assume, as online respondents did, that it is intended to be a true report from the woman's viewpoint. The world and time is somewhere in North America in 2013. I have quoted less than 25% of the letter, the whole of which provides more context. In particular:

My husband and I have been married for almost 2.5 years now. We've been in couples therapy for nearly 2 years, and were in therapy prior to getting married (our pre-marital couples counselor actually fired us saying she couldn't help). Our current therapist had us both agree this past Tuesday to stop drinking for 2 weeks to see if we could actually stand each other sober. We both agreed. [...] Two weeks ago, we moved into a new apartment. Today, I informed him we were separated, officially, and he would sleep in the guest room and we would discuss it in therapy. (Ibidem)

This clearly reveals a dysfunctional relationship in which antagonism is partly fuelled by alcohol. In such a context, I presume the static common ground to be that verbal and physical abuse is not uncommon, so that what is reported in (2) is highly credible.

Within (2) there appear the tabooed terms *slut*, *cunt*, *bitch*, *fucking*, *shit* and *whore*. Political correctness prefers the first five of these terms to be euphemised lest offence be caused, which they are in the heading to this letter: 'husband-called-me-a-c-t-b-ch-sl-t'. The heading is more widely distributed than the content of the piece and if a reader feels queasy about reading the explicit (uneuphemised) forms of such words they do not have to click on the title and see them. There is, of course, little cognitive effort required to correctly fill out the euphemised title, so the hypocrisy of such a ploy, and that of referring to *the f-word*, *the c-word*, *the n-word*, etc. speciously favours appearances over reality. Nevertheless, this is the preferred politic (Watts 2003) or politically correct behaviour. Within (2), the tabooed terms are all spelled out explicitly except for 'f*cking' – an exception for which I can see no rational explanation.

A perception of insult, like the perception of love, is a proprioceptive response and there is no gainsaying someone who claims that the very existence of a word like *cunt* or *nigger*

(even in a dictionary) wounds their sensibilities and therefore insults them. It follows that on every occasion such a word occurs, these people are insulted – presumably even by whoever compiled the dictionary. A rational explanation for such a state of affairs is that such people attend only to the offensive uses of the words and ignore inoffensive uses and so they overgeneralise the application of the insult pragmeme. I deem such a perspective abnormal and return to the more common interpretation of insult that we find in (2).

‘[H]e called me a slut, cunt, worthless bitch, I slapped him at some point[....]This is not the first time he’s called me a slut/whore/cunt/bitch/etc.’ The woman slapped her husband because she was upset by the fact that he was insulting her: it was not only the perlocutionary effect of his words but, there can be no doubt from the wife’s report and our own onlooker observation, it was the perlocutionary intention of the husband. The wife’s slap is a retaliatory insult, also intentionally wounding. It is clear that insult too is a dynamic of social interaction. There can be no doubt that the woman was, and strongly felt she was, insulted. Terms like ‘slut/whore/cunt/bitch/etc’ imply the wife was sexually promiscuous: *slut* “slatternly and/or wears sexually provocative clothing and/or is sexually promiscuous”; *whore* “sexually promiscuous, perhaps in exchange for money or other advantage”; *bitch* “disagreeable and/or contemptible woman and/or sexually promiscuous (like a bitch in heat)”; *cunt* “nothing but a receptacle for male sexual gratification and/or a despised, unpleasant person or thing”. All these match the accusation that ‘I spread my legs for anyone who walks by’ and ‘cheating [...] with a co-worker’ – accusations that she denies.

The male anxiety over a female partner’s promiscuity is not entirely irrational. Because women and not men bear children, and consequently menstruate, lactate, and are primary carers of children, women are physically and socially disadvantaged compared with men. In consequence men have traditionally asserted social dominance and even ownership rights over women such that there are peculiar taboos over women’s procreative organs (and often over their entire bodies) which purportedly aim to protect a man’s genealogical investment. Until the advent of *in vitro* fertilization, a woman invariably knew that the child she has borne is genetically her own; whereas a man can only be certain his wife’s child is genetically his if he is certain she has not had sexual intercourse with another man. In the interests of self-protection, women have generally accepted and even encouraged the taboos on their bodies as measures towards ensuring their personal safety and economic security. These taboos have been confirmed by the dominant religions in many cultures. Against this background, any question about a woman’s sexual behaviour has been seen as an offence

against a desirable social, religious, and even rational norm. Thus it is particularly insulting to accuse a woman of sexual promiscuity. This is common ground.

When, in (2), the wife fears her husband's physical aggression and threatens to call the police 'he proceeded to call me a f*cking cunt, bitch, and a piece of shit (he'd called me worthless earlier in the week, again not for the first time)'. In addition to the sexual promiscuity she is being denigrated as 'worthless' and 'a piece of shit', and not for the first time. One can confidently assess these, also, to be hurtful insults.

The specific practs of insult reported in (2) are intended to denigrate the wife's honesty in the relationship and also her worth as a person. In terms of (4), she has been assailed with offensively dishonouring or contemptuous speech and action; treated with scornful abuse and offensive disrespect; and suffered indignity, affront, and outrage. There is no doubt from the context of (2) that the husband's perlocutionary intention to insult achieved the intended perlocutionary effect on the wife.

(2) identifies a series of blatantly explicit terms of insult. Let's now consider some more subtle insults from chapter 3 of *The Big Sleep* (Chandler 1939). The raconteur is Philip Marlowe, Los Angeles private detective. The woman is Mrs Vivian Regan née Sternwood, daughter of a millionaire in whose mansion these interchanges take place. This is their first meeting.

(6) She had a drink. She took a swallow from it and gave me a cool level stare over the rim of the glass.

'So you're a private detective,' she said. 'I didn't know they really existed, except in books. Or else they were greasy little men snooping around hotels.'

There was nothing in that for me, so I let it drift with the current. ...

[They discuss the fact that her husband Rusty Regan had disappeared, and Mrs Regan mistakenly assumed her father had employed Marlowe to find him.]

... Mrs Regan said: 'Well, how will you go about it then?'

'How and when did he skip out?'

'Didn't Dad tell you?'

I grinned at her with my head on one side. She flushed. Her hot black eyes looked mad. 'I don't see what there is to be cagey about,' she snapped. 'And I don't like your manners.'

'I'm not crazy about yours,' I said. 'I didn't ask to see you. You sent for me. I don't mind your ritzing me or drinking your lunch out of a Scotch bottle. I don't mind your showing me your legs. They're very swell legs and it's a pleasure to make their acquaintance. I don't mind if you don't like my manners. They're pretty bad. I grieve over them during the long winter evenings. But don't waste your time trying to cross-examine me.'

She slammed her glass down so hard that it slopped over on an ivory cushion. She swung her legs to the floor and stood up with eyes sparking fire and her nostrils wide. Her mouth was open and her bright teeth glared at me. Her knuckles were white.

'People don't talk like that to me,' she said thickly.

The world and time of the novel is Los Angeles during the 1930s. Unlike (2) or (3), (6) is a fictional encounter, but one that is intended to mirror the real world such that the criteria we use to judge the characters are those we would apply to the real world. So, what do we draw from this fictional interaction? The first thing I would say is that it rings true: the author has presented an interaction that the reader can believe could quite probably happen in real life. Raymond Chandler knows enough about human behaviour to recreate in fiction a sequence of interactions in which the participants insult one another.

The next time that they meet, both Regan and Marlowe remember and admit to being rude to one another at the meeting recounted in (6) and, as readers (onlookers), we can see why. In a pattern that continues throughout the book, the rudeness (blatant insult) mostly comes from Mrs Regan, though Marlowe is insolent (subtle insult). In (6) she insults his profession, first by doubting that any such profession exists and then, accepting the inevitable, by claiming that private detectives are 'greasy little men snooping around hotels'; thereby further insulting Marlowe by implying that he is an unsavoury inconsequential character whose work is mostly checking on the sexual peccadilloes of people having extra-marital affairs. All this behaviour of Regan falls within the pragmeme of insult as described in (4), specifically: Mrs Regan speaks of Marlowe contemptuously, heaping upon him scornful abuse and offensive disrespect. As an onlooker, one cannot seriously doubt that this is her perlocutionary intention or that it achieves the wished for perlocutionary effect.

Marlowe ignores the jibe ('There was nothing in that for me, so I let it drift with the current'), though it perhaps contributes to his perception that Mrs Regan is 'ritzing' him – a perception that mostly derives from her overall behaviour towards him which is arrogant, haughty, and supercilious (cf. (4)). She is well aware that she is his social superior and the daughter of his current employer, but she could be more gracious in her treatment of him.

Even if she has the disposition to be rude, she has no right to be. According to the existing social conventions obtaining in the world and time of the novel, Marlowe may owe Mrs Regan more deference than he awards her, but her remarks about private detectives are insulting because they decry his social standing and malign his character. Note that impoliteness, too, is a dynamic of social interaction: like most other kinds of social interactive behaviour, an insult can be confronted, reciprocated, or ignored. If it is not unnoticed, it will probably be remembered (as was evident in (2)).

Marlowe disrespectfully fails to answer Mrs Regan's question whether her father had informed him when Rusty had left: 'I grinned at her with my head on one side. She flushed. Her hot black eyes looked mad. 'I don't see what there is to be cagey about,' she snapped. 'And I don't like your manners.'" Her response is to redden, look angry, and speak sharply to him; all signs of irritation and anger in response to the perceived affront of his insult – which, the world of the book, has to have been intentional. She justifiably accuses him of being provocatively cagey and obliquely accuses him of being rude by saying that his manners displease her. We can interpret this as a comment on his perceived insult, and it is directly confrontational.

Marlowe takes up the challenge by somewhat insolently defending his attitude as tit-for-tat. He reciprocates the complaint about Mrs Regan's manners and objects that since she had initiated their encounter he was not the supplicant, she was. He then chides her for her arrogance (which insults him) and castigates her behaviour by suggesting she is something of a lush and, furthermore, immodest ('I don't mind your ... drinking your lunch out of a Scotch bottle. I don't mind your showing me your legs') – which, of course, insults her by denigrating her behaviour and her moral character. He then, annoyingly, praises the way she looks and forgives her for thinking him bad-mannered. He even admits he is ill-mannered and pretends to be distressed by this inadequacy. Mrs Regan cannot know whether or not he is being sincere (and perhaps he doesn't either), but the very possibility of his being insincere and thereby mocking her is subtly insulting because he is conceivably treating her with contempt. There is an element of banter here and whole point of banter is to teeter on the brink of insult. That Marlowe is needled is signalled by his sharp admonishment: 'don't waste your time trying to cross-examine me', which is an indirect way of telling her to shut up, an outright face-threat, indubitably impolite and insulting because critical of her behaviour. Understandably, Mrs Regan's response is very angry, much more so than before, and she says 'People don't talk like that to me' which is a bald on record accusation of verbal insult.

The insults traded in (6) are more subtle and socially acceptable than the kinds of insult reported in (2) because no tabooed terms are used and the insults themselves are less unpardonable. But the pragmeme of insult described in (4) applies equally well to both (2) and (6).

In this short essay I have demonstrated a pragmeme of insult defined in (4). The behavioural act of insulting is determined by the context in which the act occurs. I have focused on verbal insult which naturally depends in large part on the language used because the insult arises from its perlocutionary effect; I did argue, however, that the agent's intention to create this effect – the agent's perlocutionary intention – is evidence of a malicious intent to wound, and that intention is universally regarded as more reprehensible than an unintentional insult. Nonetheless the perlocutionary effect of unintended insult is hurtful. To substantiate my claim that (4) defines the pragmeme of insult I showed its applicability to two texts containing insults: (2) in which tabooed words were used as blatant crass insults, and (6) in which the insult is more subtle and more socially acceptable. I also demonstrated that banter (including ritual insult and teasing) differs from true insult and thus, although banter may seem to be using terms of insult, it does not satisfy conditions for the pragmeme of insult. I defined the pragmeme of banter in (5).

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