A Socio-Pragmatic Study of Insulting in English News

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Abstract:

Media has become a common platform for communication as a tool of offense. English language has many insult words which are commonly used in the world of media. This study investigates the socio-pragmatic aspect of insulting in English news. It aims at identifying and analysing insult words and expressions used by news presenters. To specify the problem of the study, language has a harmful power that hurts the addressees and seriously harm their psychological well-being. The insulting words that are an element of all human languages are the source of this abusive power. The study questions sought to find out are if news presenters use insult words, which insult words, and in what social contexts. In this study, the descriptive method is used to describe the language of insult as it is used by some English news media, namely, ITV News and BBC News .The study is conducted by performing a socio-pragmatic analysis based on some contexts of English news. This study gives a BBC model of insulting language that reveals moments of highly emotional reality. The findings reveal that the use of insult words sometimes embodies a sense of personal hatred as in 'gleeful'. Moreover, the insulting words sometimes reflect racial content as in 'nigger'. It is also found that the wrong use of some positive words leads to an offense as in 'wheelchair bound'. The presented model also conveys its social and pragmatic significance and offers a specific illustration of derogatory language.

Keywords: (Socio-pragmatic, insult, English News, sociological, media).

دراسة اجتماعية ـ تداولية للإساءة في الأخبار الإنجليزية
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الملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الجانب الاجتماعي التداولي للإساءة في الأخبار الإنجليزية. وتهدف إلى تحديد وتحليل الكلمات المسيئة التي يستخدمها مقدمو الأخبار . أصبحت وسائل الإعلام منصة شائعة لوسائل الاتصال كأداة للاساءة . تحتوي اللغة الإنجليزية على العديد من الكلمات المهينة التي يشيع استخدامها في وسائل الإعلام . سعت أسئلة الدراسة إلى معرفة ما إذا كان مقدمو الأخبار يستخدمون كلمات مسيئة واي كلمات مهينة وفي اي سياق اجتماعي تستخدم من قبلهم. يُستخدم الأسلوب الوصفي في هذه الدراسة لوصف لغة الإساءة كما تستخدمها بعض وسائل الإعلام الإخبارية الإنجليزية. تم اختيار ITV News و BBC News لهذه الدراسة. اجريت الدراسة من خلال تحليل اجتماعي – تداولي بناءاً على بعض سياقات الاخبار الانجليزية .كشفت النتائج أن استخدام الكلمات المسيئة يجسد أحيانًا إحساسًا بالكراهية الشخصية كما هو الحال في Gleeful. علاوة على ذلك ، فإن الكلمات المسيئة تعكس أحيانًا محتوى عنصريًا كما هو الحال في Nigger. وقد وجد أيضًا أن الاستخدام الخاطئ لبعض الكلمات الإيجابية يؤدي إلى اساءة كما هو الحال في "مقيد على كرسي متحرك".

الكلمات المفتاحية: (اجتماعي ـ تداولي ، إساءة ، أخبار إنجليزية ، علم اجتماعي ، وسائل إعلام) .

1. Introduction

Human beings use languages to communicate with each other. However, language is sometimes used to offend or abuse others. Either intentionally or unintentionally, people may use words that defame, derogate, or offend the addressees and cause deep psychological injuries. This is known as insulting.

This phenomenon may occur in situations beyond the daily life frame. That is, it may occur in films or broadcasting where people sometimes use words which are unacceptable, or in a sense, words which have abusive power. The language of news sometimes embodies insulting words.

Insults are words used "to assert or assume dominance, either intentionally claiming superiority or unintentionally revealing lack of regard" (Neu, 2008,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 & Taavitsainen, 2000, pp. 71−73).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Language has an abusive power that can hurt the addressees and cause deep injuries to their psychological worlds. This abusive power emanates from the words of insult which are parts of all human languages. Much specifically, one aspect of using language is to present news, and there are thousands of news media worldwide. In this respect, news presenters may sometimes tend to use words which have abusive power. English, which is the subject of this research, is not an exception. The point is that English language has many insulting words which sometimes appear in English news. This research seeks to answer the questions included in the following.

1.3 Research Questions

This study is an endeavor to answer the following main question: Do English news presenters sometimes use insulting words? In addition to that, the following sub−questions emerge:

1. Do news presenters at ITV News and BBC News and use insulting words?

2. Which insulting words are used by news presenters at ITV News and BBC News?

3. What is the social context of each of the insulting words used by news presenters at ITV News and BBC News?

1.4 Research Objectives

This study is an endeavor to achieve the following main objective: To know whether English news presenters sometimes use insulting words. The following sub-objectives emerge:

1. To know if news presenters at *ITV News* and *BBC News* use insulting words.

2. To identify the insulting words which are used by news presenters at *ITV News* and *BBC News.*

3. To investigate the social context of each of the insulting words used by news presenters at *ITV News* and *BBC News.*

1.5 Research Methodology

The descriptive method is used to describe the reality of using insulting words by news presenters at *ITV News* and *BBC News*. The social context of using such words is also described using this method which does not only describe the phenomenon but also analyzes it and suggests some effective solutions.

1.6 Scope of Investigation

This study is limited to direct insult used by some English news media. This media includes *ITV News* and *BBC News*. A BBC insulting programme called "Playground Insults" presented by Scott Mills and Chris Stark is being given as a model of insulting language.

2. Literature Review

Socio-pragmatics is identified with the interaction between language and culture (Culpeper, 2011). The term pragmatics is defined as "the study of the meaning intended by the speaker" Yule (1996, p.3).In this respect, people's use of language is ultimately influenced by many factors related to social and cultural aspects. These aspects include gender, age, social class, etc. (Hanoon & Faisal, 2021).

Some scholars like (Morris, 1938) viewed pragmatics as the investigation of the existing or possible links of signs to interpreters. Recent studies of linguistics view pragmatics as the study of language use in context. Therefore, the term socio-pragmatics refers to the pragmatics' sociological interface. It is mainly based on the language as it is used in different cultures, different communities and different social situations. The focus is made upon social aspects like social classes, gender, etc. Anna Trosborg (1995) follows this point by saying that pragmatics analyzes patterns of interaction by focusing on the social situations in which such patterns are used and within a particular social system. Moreover, it strongly emphasizes the role of the interactive aspect as it acknowledges the social context (Hanoon & Faisal, 2021).

Other scholars like Levinson (1983, p.6) prefer to link pragmatics to human communication skills. Levinson views "pragmatics as the study of language in human communication as it is determined by social conditions". Here, it is urging to make a parallel between pragmatics and sociolinguistics as sociolinguistics is concerned with the effect of social aspects, cultural norms, people's expectations, and socio-cultural context on the language use (Trudgill, 1974)

Socio-pragmatics is crucial for studies on impoliteness. This is due to the fact that it is recognized as a field of linguistic pragmatics that is related to other fields of researches whose primary interests include interactional sociolinguistics and communication studies.

Insult may carry the meaning of taunt. According to John Baugh (2018) taunt is one form of insults incorporate offending comments that are provocative in nature. It is intended to harm and involves humiliating, cruel, demeaning, or bigoted language thinly disguised as jokes.

3. Research Concepts

3.1 Socio-pragmatics

In the context of social interaction, the language use varies according to the individual differences and the differences in situations. Even if they use the language to discuss the same topic, they change the way of speaking according to the change in situations. The point is that the conversation is based on the addressee's cultural and social background. An example of

this is when a husband introduces his wife to his boss, he would say "Good evening Mr. Bill, I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Dorothy". The words used in this conversation would become different in case he tends to introduce his wife to his close friend. In this situation, he might say "Hi Simon, this is Dorothy, she is my wife". Thus, it is evident that the speaker talks about the same topic; introducing his wife to someone, but the language style is changed according to the type of the husband's relationship with the addressee. The factor that determines the language style in the two situations is the addressee. In case a person talks to another person with higher social status or anyone whom he respects, formal language should be used.However, when talking with close friends, informal language should be used.

Before trying to define the term socio-pragmatics, it is urging to elucidate the two parts of the term separately. The word socio-pragmatics consists of two parts; socio and pragmatics. Socio is related to sociology, while pragmatics, as indicated by Yule (1996, p.3), "is the study of speaker's meaning".

Therefore, it is evident that certain socio-cultural factors greatly influence the way language is used. In this respect, social aspects like gender, age, social class, social situations, etc., directly influence the language use. Doing a research on the language as a human-related phenomenon should not be limited to the form and function of the language, but it should be investigated through the social aspects that greatly influence its usage.

In the context of conversation analysis, the analysis process should not be limited to understanding the speaker's meaning. Rather, it should include the aspects that greatly influence the people's use of certain language styles. Therefore, any attempt to understand the meaning and forms of any language should follow the pragmatic approach. However, in case of the existence of certain cultural or social differences, whether in terms of social classes or social situations, sociolinguistics is needed to decode such differences and validate the analysis. Wardhaugh (2006) views sociolinguistics as a study which mainly analyzes the existing links that connects language with society. This indicates that it deals with understanding the structure of language as it functions in real communication.

It is argued here that there is a strong need to combine pragmatics and linguistics to analyze the meaning in relation to its social context. This type of combination is referred to as socio–pragmatics.

Contrastingly, sociolinguistics is concerned with understanding the connections between language and society in order to understand the form and function of language as it is used in real communication (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021).

The sociolinguistic aspect of language has been a concern of great scholars since the second half of the 20th century. Fasold (1990) theorizes about the sociolinguistic variable and a language aspect that is associated with a number of alternative forms.Such alternative forms can be used for

saying the same thing, despite the fact that the existing variations obviously have social significance. Specifically, a sociolinguistic variable is a linguistic element associated with linguistic factors that include age, social class, gender, ethnic groups, etc.This point is clarified by scholars like Gumperz (1992 ,vii) who believed that sociolinguistic variables "are themselves constitutive of social reality". They can rightly be treated as part of a more general class of indexical signs which guide and channel the interpretation of intent.

3.2 English News

One of the common functions of media is to present news.In this context, news has become a concern of contemporary research. It has gained much significance due to the role it plays in society. Researchers are concerned about examining the linguistic aspects of language in the context of media discourse. When dealing with the concept of news it becomes urging to refer to the main features of news which is represented in attractiveness and politeness. This point is emphasized by Hameed (2017) who refers to the 19th century news through considering that Charles Dane, one of the 19th century's great news editors, as a news presenter whose news is based on the interest of his community and receives their attention. This point reflects that news should focus on the element of attractiveness. That is, it should attract people's attention. News editors also focus on the element that news should be common to readers.

It is justifiable to regard news as an essential factor in connecting people and improving their communication at the level of community. Besides, news provides information and allows people to exchange ideas and express their opinions on different incidences that take place around them.In this respect, news indicates the transmission of certain information that tells something about a current event. It is essentially presented to a large audience through different means that include broadcasting, printed matter, the internet, etc. In a sense, news may indicate works of oral or written nature that describe current events, announcements or statements of new data. Such works should receive people's interest in different fields like science, medicine, politics, sports, business, etc.

It is truly stated that news takes different forms and types according to the differences in the types of events. News is classified into hard news and soft news. The first type is associated with the daily events and developments. It provides information about serious events, and its message is urgent and cannot be delayed.Its content embodies information related to updates or unrests in politics, economy, crime, law, etc. The second type, which is represented in soft news, is not associated with urgent or daily events. Rather, it embodies sociable messages about events or things to remember. Its content is related to people, communities, places, problems, etc. (Hameed, 2017)

3.3 Language of Insult

In the etymological context, the word "insult" goes back to its Latin root "in" and "sultare" which embodies the meaning of 'jump on.' Therefore, the origin of insulting indicated an action of physical nature that moves towards a target(Ilie, 2001, Culpeper, 2011). This concept was later developed and carried a metaphorical sense of ridicule, taunt or impoliteness .(Culpeper, 2011)

The modern conception of insult basically denotes verbal abuse or behavioural acts (Neu, 2008, Archard, 2014). Some researchers like (Wajnryb, 2005) view insults as swear words. Other scholars believe that insulting may occur through name−calling (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000), and which usually are not claimed, as opposed to for example slanders, to be truth−conditional statements (Jucker, 2000). The historical roots of insults take us back to ancient Anglo−Saxon and German people who viewed insults as flytings. The term flytings denotes competitions of teasing, curses, threats and boasting about past deeds which used to be practiced on the basis of certain strict rules. Such practices, in many cases, led to physical violence (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000). This type of practices gained its popularity until it took the form of entertainment, especially in Scotland. In this respect, insults were used mainly to provoke the reactions of the opponents so as to intensify contests (Wajnryb, 2005). That is, the winner is the one who succeeds in outperforming his rivals.

It is urging to say that insults are not limited to oral language. In this respect, written works of literature embodied representations of insults. This

is evident in the literature of Early Modern English (Jucker & Taavitsainen, 2000)

This case continued in the literary works of different periods. Nowadays, words of insult are frequently noticed in African-American communities, where they are known as "sounding", "playing the dozens", "verbal dueling", "joning", "sigging", "cutting", "signifying" or "woofing". They "are not intended as factual statements" (Labov, 1972, p.332). They are played by adolescent males (Labov, 1972, Lefever , 1981) and adults (Dollard, 1939). The aim is to displace aggression towards white society (Lefever, 1981; Ilie, 2001), mainly for getting amusement (Lefever, 1981; Ilie, 2001) in case they are used by middle-class blacks (Cole, 1974), or when it is a matter of showing verbal prowess (Jucker & Taavitsainen, 2000). Aggressive language is naturally impolite. Impolite language cannot be avoided in any case of aggression. In order to carry out and convey their requirements, goals, and desires, people act differently and use a variety of communication forms. In practically all speech events across all societal groups, aggression is a common feature in interpersonal communication. Some scholars have distinguished between two types of insult; ritual insult and personal insult. These scholars include Goodwin (2006) and Kadar (2013). Ritual insults, according to Goodwin (2006), which are used by teenage girls, can interestingly help individuals to overcome conflicting situations. That is, they are used to reduce conflict by relying on expressions that the group members perceive as obviously untrue. This is known as "interaction as

playful, with each participant building upon the prior speaker's action"
(Goodwin, 2006, p. 96).

Here, it is urging to distinguish between insults and verbal offense. This
mission is difficult due to the fact that insult, as a socio−pragmatic concept,
is significantly misleading and broad (Jucker, 2000). In this respect, Jucker
and Taavitsainen (2000, p. 73) stated that an utterance is ultimately dubbed
as an obvious insult when it comes with some characteristics, the most
common of which is 'epithets'. There are other scholars who focused on the
behavioral basis of insult. Jeshion (2013) believed that an individual's resort
to insult is directly linked with personal behavior. Archard (2014) elaborated
this point by saying that insults are definitely abusive words. These words
ultimately target the insultee's personal achievement, his or her bodily
features, beliefs, family, job, etc. That is, an insulting word or an expression
must provide information about the addressee.

Other scholars like Archard (2014) have theorized about insults which
they regard as having two types: verbal insult and behavioral insult. These
include body movements and facial expressions (Jeshion, 2021). For
example, when someone calls another a slut, it is a direct insult even if it is
just one word. But there are words which don't denote direct insults, and
their abusive power is limited to their metaphorical use. They are
categorized as neutral words, e.g. the word 'weasel' becomes abusive only
when it is metaphorically used to indicate a sneak (Jeshion 2021). Another
example is the word 'genius' in case it is ironically used to express its

opposite meaning. Therefore, we can realize insults either implicitly through insinuations or explicitly through words that denote irony or abuse (Hill & Öttchen, 1995). An obvious example is when someone greets his former boss, who has lost his post, with (Good morning boss). This greeting embodies insult.

However, sometimes the speaker does not intend to hurt or insult the addressee when using swearing words that may be abusive. In this case, the addressee may feel insulted and he or she may consider such words as expressions of disrespect (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000) .This point might be contrary to what was stated by Babou-Sekkal (2012) who viewed "insult" as an expression or speech which is intended to degrade, offend and reprehend the addressee.

Thus, insulting is mainly intended to hurt one's psychological status or negatively affect one's self-esteem. This is due to that it is usually intended to criticize, offend or humiliate the personal competence or achievements of the abusee. It is urging to state that words are classified into acceptable and unacceptable. Moreover, the degree of acceptability and unacceptability of words varies according to the socio-cultural contexts and the common use of the word. The Figure below illustrates this point.

Degree of acceptability of words

Unacceptable		Acceptable
⬅══════════➡		
Offensive words, bad words, insulting words, defaming words, etc.		Common words that are accepted by the society

٭Source: Designed by the researcher

4. Use of Insult in English News: A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis

Any socio-pragmatic investigation of the language used by English news presenters must not ignore the analysis of the degree of acceptability and unacceptability of the language as it is used by them. This point is justifiable as news editors always pay attention to the notion of attractiveness. That is, due to the unprecedented spread of news media in our era, people have unlimited sources of news. This makes news editors think of ways to attract their readers, listeners or audience. One of those means is their tendency to use swear words which, in many cases, have offensive or abusive power. In this context, many words are insulting, either directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, for they cause the addressee to feel humiliated and psychologically injured.

A BBC Model of Insulting Language

A BBC insulting programme called "Playground Insults" presented by Scott Mills and Chris Stark where two people participate in a conversation is an example of using insulting words. The conversation below of Jennifer Lawrence and Chris Pratt illustrates this example (BBC interview,2016) .

Jennifer: You are so falsely strong , if I was given a choice of you or your wife

to protect me, I would choose your Anna.

Chris :   Why did they call it Joy? (referring to Jennifer's film)

Jennifer: I really loved you in 'Everwood', said no- one ever!.(referring to Chris's

TV series)

Chris: I can't think of anything bad about you.

Jennifer: Stop. Shut your mouth .Shut up. You are stupid.

Chris: It's a shame.

Jennifer: You three- year old son has probably taught you everything.

Chris: It's just a shame to meet somebody you thought you'd like.

Jennifer: You are so dumb that I consciously make an effort to use compound words

or words of more than three syllables.

Chris: How does it feel being in the stupidest Marvel movie?

Jennifer: You are so bad at acting that the cast of 'Saved by the Bell' feel sorry for

you.

Chris: I recently told you that you act like Adele sings…I hate Adele!.

Jennifer: Where do you keep your Oscar?

The above mentioned model of insulting language seems to be vividly interesting in the sense that the exchange of insults gains momentum as each one of the participants indulge in insulting each other. The language in this conversational model becomes more impressive as the exchange develops. The words are indicatives of the slovenly language that is intended to laughingly debunk and deplete the exchange of the two vivacious participants.

It is quite obvious that the model already mentioned reflects socio-pragmatic strategies based on cultural realities that allow us to comprehend the piece of discourse that go between Jennifer and Chris. Pragmatically speaking, the exchange between the two participants discloses laughingly disengaging speech acts that develop and enhance their discursive intentions. We, in fact, feel a logical transition from what is felt as an ordinary component of speech at the beginning of the hilarious dialogue to a

level of language that revels in its slangy texture in which the two speakers seem to revel in. A gradual level of intriguing impoliteness is revealed to define the exchange between Jennifer and Chris who operate the exchange that increasingly excites laughter. This exciting state gains momentum towards the end of the conversational act that ends thus:

Chris: You were given an Oscar for best actress. You would also get one for being

        the worst.

Jennifer: You are such a bad guy. Your beard is so thin. You are so old that your

        publicist is a registered nurse.

 Sometimes the use of insulting words is driven by personal, ideological, or political motives. In the context of English news, there are some cases in which the news presenters use insulting words whether intentionally or unintentionally. Below are some selected cases with their analysis.

Extract 1: 'gleeful'

    One news presenter at *BBC News*, by the name of Croxall, used the word 'gleeful' to express her happiness that Boris Johnson ruled himself out from the Conservative leadership race. The word 'gleeful' was offensive and unacceptable in the sense that it harmed Johnson's mind. Despite the fact

that the word 'gleeful' is not offending, according to its general usage, its use in this context grants it an abusive and offensive power.

Extract 2: 'nigger'

In its daily news programme, Good Morning Britain, *ITV* used the word 'nigger' in a context which was regarded as offending and unacceptable. The word appeared in a clip that took place during a discussion about whether it was appropriate for England Rugby Fans to sing 'Swing Lo Sweet Chariot' because of the song's apparent connections to slavery. During the discussion, a white male presenter uses the abbreviation "n−word". A black female guest, states that the "n−word" means "nigger". This was an apparent insult to the black community as the word was uttered by a white man. The word 'nigger' is socially unaccepted by a black person especially when it is used by a white person. Thus, it embodied a direct insult.

Extract 3: 'wheelchair bound'

Some acceptable expressions may carry a sense of offense and insult if they are used in situations other than the normal ones. For example, the words 'wheelchair bound' embodied an insult when it was used in an *ITV* Evening News programme. During the programme, a report was shown about a young girl who has recently received treatment for a rare disease. Having previously not been able to walk, the report shows the young girl walking and the treatment is described as miraculous. The reporter states

that her doctors had believed that the condition "would leave her wheelchair bound for the rest of her life".

The words 'wheelchair bound' are regarded as offensive since they indicate someone's medical condition. That is, the positive news of the girl who learned to walk after a miraculous treatment overshadowed any negative connotations associated with the term. In this respect, the words 'wheelchair user' would have been more acceptable. The following table summarizes the insulting words which were included in the previous analysis.

Insulting words that appeared in some English news

Media	Word	Function
BBC News	Gleeful	Insult
ITV News	Nigger	Insult
ITV News	Wheelchair bound	Insult

*Source: Prepared by the researcher

Findings:

In a social and pragmatic sense, insulting words within touched upon in this study are geared up towards embodying a social and a pragmatic sense. Accordingly certain words are shown to embody a sense of personal hatred whereas others seem to reflect a kind of racial content and the wrong use of some positive words lead to an offence. These negative realities are particularized by words like 'gleeful, 'nigger' and 'wheelchair bound'. The

model already presented also expresses its social and pragmatic sense and provides a concrete example of insulting language such as 'falsely strong' ,'shut your mouth', 'shut up', 'stupid', 'dumb', 'the stupidest', 'bad' ,'worse' and 'hate' as such words certainly have abusive power that negatively affect the psychological world of the addressee.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

1. The news editors at ITV News and BBC News should avoid using insult words.
2. The news editors at ITV News and BBC News should avoid the words that denote racial meanings.

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