

FUNNY INSULTS

M.Dufour

Institut de la Communication et des Médias





« FUNNY INSULTS »

At first sight an oxymoron, but
insults are like a chameleon... ready for hybridisation.

- A universal (?) practice, perhaps a building block of human communication, always ready to many old or new, regular or deviant uses.
- All of us are experts ... (as users (?) and victims)
- Insults have many close friends (at least in several languages)
synonyms:
slurs, injury, invective, affront
- « Thing » and action. (Noun and verb and ...)
- Verbal or not.
- Etymology : *in sultare* (« jump on »). An action, its means, its (possible) effect(s) or result(s)





ON BOTH SIDES OF DICHOTOMIES

A non exhaustive list ...

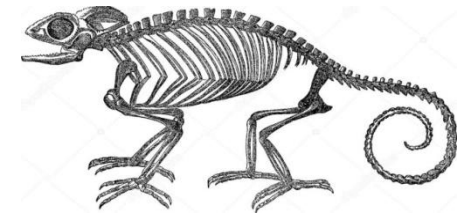
- Direct (it is aimed at an interlocuteur) / indirect (about ...)
- Intentional / Non intentional
- Explicit (obvious) / implicit (hidden, subtle)
- Rude / Polite
- Hot (anger) / Cold (calm) ... and also ... Hot (spontaneous) / cold (calculated)
- Individual target / collective target
- Private / public
- Conventional form (usual vocabulary) / Non conventional (new metaphor, « poetic »)
- Actual / by omission
- Offensive / non-offensive (?)





ESSENTIAL FEATURES

1. Derogatory : Explicitly or not, the insulted party is *downgraded* in a class (group, type, category...) lower than the one it is supposed to belong to.



Hence

a. An insult has both a descriptive and a (negatively) evaluative dimension... « You, dirty humans, ... »

b. Boundaries and their acknowledgement are essential.

2. Offensive: This negative evaluation amounts to an assault (?)

NB: The English « challenge » comes from *calumnia* (Kiernan, 1988 (33); Neu 2008 (51))



THE WORDS OF INSULTS

Usual and favorite categories of topics providing terms or expressions : scatology, sex (sexist), animal (bestiality) ...

- « Neutral » terms can be used too
 - with pejorative markers (« dirty », « fucking », « poor... », « ... »)
 - or in a specific context (metaphoric use)
- A possible « poetic » function :

Many conventional injurious terms are dead metaphors («shit », « bitch » and other « bird-names »).

The requirement of relevance help to frame a brand new metaphor ...

- Intonation and rythm





COMMUNICATIONAL ASPECTS (1)

- Demarcation: Typically, the locutor does not belong to the despised category. (Childish wisdom: « You call others what you are !»).
- When an insult is directly and intentionally addressed, the locutor often has an extra goal beyond the downgrading statement ... to hurt the interlocutor.
- But a listener (or reader) can feel insulted even when the locutor has no intention to insult (and possibly to hurt) her.

So, unlike many paradigmatic speech acts, the status and the success of the act of insulting depends on the acknowledgment of the insult.

Three basic initial relationnal schemes between A and B :

- A insults / B feels insulted (« Success » of the speech act)
- A insults / B does not feel insulted
- A does not insult / B feels insulted



COMMUNICATIONAL ASPECTS (2)

- Is there an insult (Am I insulted? « Where does he aim at ? »)
 - Relevance: An insult must be relevant ... in some way.
 - Truth: The content of an insulting statement is commonly taken as true by the locutor.
 - « The paradox of insult »: Instead of denying the mistaken statement, the insulted person often takes it seriously... as if the statement were true.
- Does the assault matters more than the content? (Cf: The case of duel)



COMMUNICATIONAL ASPECTS (3):

REPLIES TO INSULTS

Insults are often a prelude to a fight ...

Rejection and/or cancelation

- The no-reply option.
- Denying the content of insult.
- Taking the insult to one's advantage. (Cf Chirac)

Acceptance : « getting into the game »

Reply by an insult ...

... and the game can go on ...



CRESCENDO : FROM INSULTS IN DIALOGUE TO DIALOGUES OF INSULTS

A full range can be covered, from a spontaneous punctual insult to verbal fights
(ex: car drivers ...)

Insults for fun

Non offensive (?) they range from informal friendly insults to « ritual insults ».

- A widespread phenomenon, well documented both geographically and historically (Lagorgette, 2003; Neu, 2008)
- It challenges the principle that an insult is offensive ...
- ... but keeps the minimal requirement of a pejorative statement



INFORMAL DIALOGUES OF FRIENDLY INSULTS

- A universal (?) anthropological phenomenon, bound to play and contest.
- Addressed to privileged interlocutors (friends, lovers, kinfolks, member of « the » group...).
- Solidarity between friends or peers (seems to) and a fairplay attitude cancel the potential offense of a derogatory statement. (It can even express admiration!)

Distinctive signs : Absence of anger (e.g tone of the voice) and no attempt to deny.



FORMAL DIALOGUES OF INSULTS (1)

A process of pacification of insults by means of a codification

- From inter-ethnic ritual insults to insults for fun (Griaule, 1948; Derive, 2014; Diarra & Privat, 2018))
- Competitions of insults

They seem to be to (serious) verbal fights like martial arts or combat sports are to primitive war.

- A contest (with loser and winner). A principle is to outbid (→ ruder and/or extravagant insults).
- In front of an audience ... who appreciates and judges.
- Champions.



FORMAL DIALOGUES OF INSULTS (2)

Competitions of insults

Some have been studied for several decennies in the Afro-American culture of boys and young adults. (Dollard 1939, Abrahams 1962, Labov 1972 ...)

« Your mother ... »

« You, XYZ ... »

But this phenomenon spreads beyond the Black community (Ayoub 1965) and well beyond the USA (Vettorato, 2008, Bertucci 2013).

How can it express the solidarity of a community, unless you create *ad hoc* communities ? ...



CONCLUSION

Are non-offensive direct insults still insults? Yes.

Are offensive insults more frequent than non-offensive ones? This is not certain.

Is there a link between insults and the origin of human verbal communication ?



Thank you for your attention !