THE POWER OF INSULTS

A study of condescending linguistic strategies in four English online discussion forums

Anna Holmberg
Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate how language is used, online, in a condescending way in order to make the recipient feel belittled. The research questions sought to find out what kind of linguistic strategies are used online in order to make language function in a derogatory way as well as the linguistic reactions these strategies evoke in the recipients. How this derogatory usage can be met by using specific linguistic strategies was also explored.

The study was conducted by performing qualitative discourse analysis based on the theoretical framework of Culpeper’s (1996) impoliteness theory. The data consisted of excerpts from four different threads in online discussion forums. The results indicate that there are several ways to insult someone, and that sarcasm, in particular, is heavily utilized in order to make language function in a derogatory manner.

The conclusion of the study is that phenomena such as the flouting of maxims, face-threatening acts, impoliteness strategies and flaming are all utilized when trying to belittle someone. All these linguistic strategies performed with the intention to insult people have proved to have a negative affect on people who are exposed to them. This affect can be detected through the linguistic reactions they rendered, for example: counter-attacks with insults of their own and refuting the insults.

The present study contributes to enlightening linguistic strategies which are being used in a derogatory way and as such might function to raise awareness of the power invested in language.

Keywords: derogatory linguistic strategies, flaming, FTA, impoliteness, insults, threads
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1 Introduction

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Think about this proverb for a little while. Words might have never hurt us physically but what about the emotional damage they cause? This occurs when we cannot quite pinpoint it but somehow one little word or phrase creates a feeling of belittlement. It might not have been an outright insult but we still find ourselves feeling patronized and inferior. This act of making one feel lesser of a person is heavily used by bullies of all sorts. Whether they are bullies from ones’ schooldays, in which case their methods of putting one down are probably not very sophisticated, or grown-up bullies whom one has to face every day at work, they can still have an enormous impact on the way one feels after the encounter. Lakoff (2000:20) expresses her view on this phenomenon as follows:

“[…] how can language have this kind of power – explanatory and cohesive, on the one hand; divisive and threatening on the other? How can something that is physically just puffs of air, a mere stand-in for reality, have the power to change us and our world?”

Consider the following declarative sentence: You are so much smarter than you look. There are no negative connotations to the words in this sentence that would be a plausible explanation for creating the feeling of being condescended. However, one knows instinctively that one has in fact been insulted. Sometimes it can be fairly obvious that someone is insulting another but, on the other hand, sometimes there is a need for some interpretation. This is a part of what pragmatics is all about: a speaker’s intended meaning (Yule 1996:3).

The speaker’s intended meaning when using this kind of language is most definitely a case of condescending. Although the statement above is not an outspoken insult but more of a covert form of the same, a case of psychological warfare if you may, it should still be seen as having a vast impact on a person’s mood. Whether the statement performs an overt or a covert form of insulting it still has the intention to belittle someone. On the off chance that the sentence referred to above was not meant to be insulting, consider the fact which Yule (1996:5) puts forward in stating: “getting the pragmatics wrong might be offensive.”

Moreover, belittling comments such as the one mentioned above are also likely to trigger a number of different, more or less, effective responses. In fact, it is these responses and reactions that determine whether or not the recipient feels insulted. Therefore this study
explores not only linguistic strategies used to belittle and insult a person, but also examine the recipients’ reactions.

According to Fairclough (2001:1) there is a widespread underestimation in the world today regarding the power invested in language. Therefore, Fairclough (2001:1) claims that it is important to “increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation”. This study contributes to enlightening this aspect of the power invested in language and how it is apparent in society today.

1.1 Aim, scope and research questions

The aim of this paper is to investigate how language is used, online, in a condescending way in order to make the recipient feel belittled. It also explores the linguistic strategies used to deal with this phenomenon. In order to fulfill this aim the following research questions are studied:

1. What kind of linguistic strategies are used online in order to make language function in a derogatory way?
2. What linguistic reactions and responses do these linguistic strategies evoke in the recipients?
3. How can derogatory usage be met online? What kinds of conflict management strategies are used by the recipients?

This study concentrates on the pragmatic aspects of insulting as well as impoliteness theory. The present study only covers four different online discussions found on forums covering a diverse array of topics. No special consideration is given to the aspects of gender, age, ethnicity, etc. since demeaning linguistic strategies can be used by everyone and towards anyone as argued by Bergqvist (2007:102). Another reason for excluding such factors is the difficulty to establish those aspects reliably when collecting the data online.

2 Theoretical background

This section starts out with a brief explanation of pragmatics and the kind of communication this entails. It then presents an overview of Grice’s cooperative principle (1975) with its
maxims as well as the phenomenon of flouting. Furthermore, this study describes speech acts, more specifically, how they relate to the concept of face. In addition, there is also a section on politeness and its contrasting side impoliteness. The section subsequently ends with a note on online bullies, flaming and conflict management strategies.

### 2.1 Communication and pragmatics

According to Yule (1996:3) there are several definitions of what is included in the concept of pragmatics. The two definitions applicable in this study are:

- “Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning.”
- “Pragmatics is the study of the expression of relative distance.”

There are many things to consider when it comes to communication between whoever produces an utterance and the recipient who has to interpret that utterance. Not only does one have to try to analyze what the speaker or writer meant by their utterance to figure out what their intended meaning was, but one also has to interpret this utterance from a contextual point of view. Aspects that should be taken into account are where, when, to whom and under what circumstances the utterance is put forward. These are all perspectives which influence how the speaker or writer expresses themselves. In pragmatics the interesting part of an utterance is in fact, the unsaid. A great deal of interpretation is sometimes needed to conclude the hidden meaning of what is being communicated. Exactly how much interpretation is needed depends on the social distance between those communicating (Yule 1996:3).

One way of communicating distance is by using a third person pronoun where a second person pronoun would be more appropriate. This can, in the English language, be used for an ironic purpose but also with the intention to insult someone (Yule 1996:11). An example of how this can be regarded as an insult is provided by Mathlein (2006:74f): imagine a party of three involved in a conversation where one of the participants is referring to one of the other participants by using a third person pronoun. By not talking directly to a person but still talking about a person in their presence is almost always considered rude. Moreover, this phenomenon works in the opposite way as well. Adopting a familiar tone towards someone unfamiliar and using a person’s given name is a strategy resulting in disturbing the social boundaries in society (Mathlein 2006:35f).
The examples depicted by Mathlein (2006) are related to the notion of speech acts, more specifically, to face-threatening acts (henceforth FTAs). Therefore Section 2.3 relates to this phenomenon. The examples are also guilty of flouting the maxims and thereby not abiding to existing guidelines regarding conversations. These concepts are therefore described below.

2.2 The cooperative principle

In the mid 70s Grice (1975) created the cooperative principle in which he puts forward his ideas on cooperative conversations. A conversation is usually held on the principles that the utterances have a meaning and a relation to each other, i.e. they are not just random utterances made without thought. It is also thought that a speaker, by mere participation in a conversation, agrees to the implicit rules which are inherent in conversations. These ‘rules’ were constructed not only in a prescriptive fashion but also to give an account of features present in cooperative conversations. These features, which Grice called maxims, were in a sense created to show under which conditions a conversation should be held (Cruse 2004:367). These maxims can in turn be put through deliberate flouting which means that the maxims are violated in the sense that the guidelines are not abided by. Violating the maxims can be seen as a sign of a speaker’s/writer’s hidden meaning and that something is merely implied instead of stated (Cruse 2004:372f).

The cooperative principle consists of four maxims which are: the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner. Their functions are to ‘control’ a conversation, although they should not be considered as rules as such but instead they should be regarded as guidelines. According to Grice (1975) these maxims are based on logic and are as such not culturally dependent. On the other hand, there can be some minor differences when it comes to different cultures. One of these dissimilarities is the importance given to each of the maxims (Cruse 2004:367ff).

The maxim of quantity is focused on how much information one ought to give in an utterance. In other words, one should not give too much or too little information in order for this maxim to hold (Cruse 2004:368). Cruse (2004:373) gives the following example of the flouting of the maxim of quantity:

“Mother: What did you do last night?

Daughter: (with exaggerated patience, elaborates a long list of totally uninteresting details)”
The maxim of quality deals mainly with truth-telling and dictates that one has to be truthful in conversations. This requires not only that one has to have evidence for what one is trying to claim but it also makes it necessary to abstain from telling a lie and claiming what one knows is wrong (Cruse 2004:367f). Obviously, one is flouting this maxim when a lie is told. However, that is not the only way in which this maxim can be flouted. Sometimes when people are speaking in metaphors as in “I married a rat” (Cruse 2004:372), the maxim of quality is flouted. The person making this statement did not marry an actual rat but instead compares his or her partner to a rat and is therefore guilty of flouting this maxim.

The maxim of relation is concerned with relevance and it constitutes the necessity of contribution to a conversation. It relates to the fact that an utterance/answer in a conversation can be true albeit not relevant (Cruse 2004:368f). This is displayed in the example below.

Question: What are you wearing to the party tonight?
Answer: The earth is round.

The answer is totally irrelevant and although it is true it does not contribute to the conversation, i.e. the maxim of relation has been flouted. The purpose of flouting this maxim could possibly be a strategy to signal a lack of interest.

The maxim of manner relates to the avoidance of obscurity, ambiguity and unnecessary prolixity as well as the necessity of being orderly. Stating the need to be orderly merely means that occurrences should be expressed in a fashion that complies with the right temporal relation (Cruse 2004:369). An example of this maxim and how it can be flouted by unnecessary prolixity is given here:

“A: I’ll look after Samantha for you, don’t worry. We’ll have a lovely time. Won’t we Sam?
B: Great, but if you don’t mind, don’t offer her any post-prandial concoctions involving supercooled oxide of hydrogen. It usually gives rise to convulsive nausea” (ibid 373).

If the maxims are flouted they can give rise to an FTA. The section below therefore accounts for the concept of face and what this entails. Since face is a vital part of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory regarding politeness as well as Culpeper’s (1996) impoliteness theory, which follows the politeness strategies given by Brown and Levinson, these theories are described in Section 2.4.
2.3 Speech acts

Speech acts are actions which are performed through utterances. Examples of such speech acts are commands, requests, apologies, etc. The utterances have to be placed in context for us to be able to correctly interpret them (Yule 1996:47f). Speech acts are also relevant to this study of online communication because such communication can be said to be ‘written speech.’ As Maricic (1999:10) concludes, e-mails, or postings on forum threads as in this case, are a kind of written conversation. The postings demonstrate some characteristics found in written text but, like speech, they are more instant in nature. They often occur in the spur of the moment, giving no time to reflect before sending or posting a reply.

The concept of speech acts is something that is closely connected to face. Face, in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, is the same as a person’s public self-image; this image is expected to be respected in order to maintain a person’s ‘face wants’ (Yule 1996:60f). Whenever something is uttered that could be considered a threat to a person’s self-image i.e. imposes on the notion of face, it is called a face threatening act. As opposed to this, whenever a potential threat is uttered a face saving act can occur. By issuing a face saving act, one can lessen the possible threat. While these face saving acts occur, attention can be paid to that person’s negative or positive face. Negative face relates to our need to not be obstructed by other people, having freedom of action as well as being independent. Positive face is quite the opposite, it deals with our need for acceptance and to be part of a group which shares the same wants (Yule 1996:60f).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), there are several FTAs which threaten the positive face of the hearer. Amongst those are criticism, ridicule, insults, disagreement, etc. In comparison, FTAs which threaten the negative face of the hearer consist of, for example: suggestions, warnings, orders, etc. Pertaining to the speaker’s positive face, the following are examples of FTAs: apologies, not being able to uphold bodily control, etc. Among FTAs which threaten the negative face of the speaker, the following are examples of what is included in this concept: making excuses, saying thanks, etc. (Maricic 1999:17f).

In interaction, particularly interaction which includes face saving acts, politeness can be defined as “the means employed to show awareness of another person’s face” (Yule 1996:60). In Section 2.4 the notion of politeness is therefore discussed further. The concept of face is very much connected to Grice’s maxims and thereby how one should act in a conversation. By abiding to certain guidelines one can save a person’s face, or perform an FTA if these
guidelines are violated. Thus the section below deals with, mainly, impoliteness theory and provides us with a brief overview of strategies which create FTAs.

2.4 (Im)politeness theory

The concept of face, as mentioned in Section 2.3, has been partly developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). They argue that politeness is concerned with how a speaker constructs an utterance and the way the hearer interprets that utterance (Brown & Levinson 1987:55). Besides the notion of face, Brown and Levinson also put forward the idea of rationality. By rationality, the authors suggest that speakers have the capacity to identify and utilize politeness strategies in order to accomplish their intended goals (Maricic 1999:17). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), there are five strategies which can help maintain a person’s face while performing a potentially face threatening act. These strategies have been revised by Culpeper (1996). In his version the strategies exist as impoliteness strategies where the focus is on attacking face instead of saving face.

1. *Bald on record impoliteness* – FTAs which are performed in an unambiguous manner and are aimed at candidly threatening the face. An example of this is the statement: go to hell (Culpeper 1996:356). This strategy can also contain “blunt provocative questioning” as well as “overt expressions of doubt” (Maricic 2005:145).

2. *Positive impoliteness* – strategies which are used with the intention of damaging the addressee’s positive face wants (Culpeper 1996:356). This can be done by attacking the need for acceptance.

3. *Negative impoliteness* – strategies which are used with the intention of damaging the addressee’s negative face wants (Culpeper 1996:356). This can be done by imposing on a person’s need for independence.

4. *Sarcasm or mock politeness* – strategies which are blatantly insincere in nature. This is closely connected with Leech’s (1983) irony principle which states that the recipient should only indirectly understand the offensive part of a statement (Culpepper 1996:356). This can be observed when asking a question which only requires the answer yes but instead it is met by the sarcastic answer: *Is there rice in China?*

5. *Withhold politeness* – this creates deliberate impoliteness and occurs in the absence of expected politeness. An example of this is “failing to thank somebody for a present” since this can be interpreted as intentional impoliteness (Culpeper 1996:357).
Culpeper (1996) also puts forward a list of impoliteness output strategies, developed from Brown and Levinson’s politeness output strategies. However, the list is not exhaustive and the possible impoliteness depends on the context.

**Impoliteness output strategies:**

1. *Ignore, snub the other* – pay no attention to the other’s presence (Culpeper 1996:357). This relates to the flouting of the maxim of relation since ignoring the other person in a conversation makes it hard to contribute anything to the conversation.

2. *Be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic* (Culpeper 1996:357). This can also be compared with flouting the maxim of relation as it contributes nothing to a conversation.

3. *Use inappropriate identity markers* – “for example, use title and surname when a close relationship pertains, or a nickname when a distant relationship pertains” (Culpeper 1996:357). This strategy is also acknowledged by Mathlein (2006:35f), who refers to this as ‘the magic of first names’ as it can disturb established social boundaries if one’s first name is used inappropriately.

4. *Use obscure or secretive language* – for example, confuse others with a specific jargon, or use a code known only to the members of a particular group, leaving the rest unknowing (Culpeper 1996:357). This can be compared with the flouting of the maxim of manner as that maxim relates to the usage of correct jargon.

5. *Seek disagreement* – talk about a sensitive topic with the purpose of seeking out conflict (Culpeper 1996:357). This can be connected with the phenomenon of flaming, discussed in Section 2.5.

6. *Use taboo words* – “swear, or use abusive or profane language” (Culpeper 1996:358). This strategy is overtly flouting the maxim of manner since that maxim necessitates the usage of appropriate lingo.

7. *Call the other names* – use belittling nominations (Culpeper 1996:358). The flouting of the maxim of manner is apparent in this strategy as well since it does not abide to the guidelines regarding the avoidance of unnecessary obscurity which name-calling inevitably creates.

8. *Frighten* – make others believe that actions harmful to others will take place (Culpeper 1996:358). For example: you are going to pay for what you just did.
This can be said to flout the maxim of relation since it does not contribute anything of value to the conversation.

9. **Condescend, scorn or ridicule** – make sure your power over others is emphasized. Be scornful, belittling and do not treat others seriously (Culpeper 1996:358). This takes place when, for example, someone states in a sarcastic tone of voice: *you are joking, right?* This strategy is guilty of flouting the maxim of quality in the way it avoids the need for evidence for what is claimed, something that is rarely found when ridiculing someone.

10. **Invade the other’s space** – “literally (e.g. position yourself closer to the other than the relationship permits) or metaphorically (e.g. ask or speak about information which is too intimate given the relationship)” (Culpeper 1996:358). This can be said to flout the maxim of quantity as it requires an answer which would contain too much information given the non-existing relationship.

11. **Put the other’s indebtedness on record** (Culpeper 1996:358). This can be done by pointing out someone’s weakness in public thus making them lose face. One could claim that this is related to the flouting of the maxim of quantity since it provides information that is unnecessary as well as unsolicited.

The strategies described above are useful in trying to pinpoint the linguistic markers which help determine if an insult has taken place. Therefore, these strategies are used in the result section to explain exactly why a party feels insulted. The next section describes how one can deal with these impoliteness strategies as well as bullying tendencies in general. Since this study explores computer-mediated communication a note on flaming is also put forward.

### 2.5 Online bullies, flaming and conflict management strategies

Flaming is a phenomenon that is widely spread on the Internet. To flame can be described as follows: “To rant, to speak or write incessantly and/or rabidly on some relatively uninteresting subject or with a patently ridiculous attitude or with hostility toward a particular person or group of people” (http://foldoc.org). Another explanation is put forward in the *NetLingo Online Dictionary* which states that to flame is “to send nasty or insulting messages via e-mail or to post them on a newsgroup”.

Turnage (2007) points out that phenomena such as profanity, using “all capital letters, excessive exclamation points or question marks”, are also expressions of flaming. She describes that using all capital letters can in fact be seen as the online “equivalent of
screaming”. Furthermore, her study highlights the fact that flaming is one of the main sources of online conflict. In addition, she identifies “hostility, aggression, intimidation, insults, offensive language or tone, unfriendliness, uninhibited behavior, and sarcasm” (ibid) as the most common characteristics of flaming.

In conflict management the focus is on how to deal with so-called ‘problem people’. There are several types of ‘problem people’ but the specific type which is of interest in this study is the so-called bully. Bullies are individuals who deliberately push people around and they can often perform the act of flaming. According to Tracy (2007) there are several ways of dealing with these bullies:

- *Don’t fight fire with fire*. Using harsh words only worsens the situation and it could very well evolve into a full-blown fight. Furthermore, being defensive and trying to justify oneself only encourages the bully to keep going because the strategy to get a person out of balance is clearly working.

- *Use the silent treatment*. By being silent the bully has nothing to attack and silence will eventually make him or her feel uncomfortable which often results in the bully becoming more reasonable. Another similar tactic is ignoring the bully’s statement. Ignoring for example, a personal attack in this manner will lead to a refocus on the real discussion.

- *Call a spade a spade*. Identifying a bully’s behavior, getting their attention by confronting them and then explaining to them that their behavior will get them nowhere can often lead to a change in the bully’s behavior.

3 Material and method

This section deals with the material and the method utilized in this study. It explains what kind of material was examined and in what way it was analyzed. It also clarifies the approach taken in gathering data.

3.1 Material

The data were exclusively retrieved from the Internet. Four different threads in three different discussion forums were utilized. Discussion forums, in general, consist of a wide array of topics. Forums are then divided into sub-groups depending on their specific subject; these subjects in turn contain so-called threads which are basically discussions with two or more
participants. The discussions are carried out by posting replies and opinions on the thread at hand.

The material consists of excerpts from these forums which were singled out whilst looking for specific phenomena, such as FTAs, and analyzed for the purpose of presenting explicit cases of insults and derogatory language. The examples presented in this study were chosen due to their relevance to this particular study and their ability to provide concrete evidence, in the form of linguistic markers, for the occurrence of insults as well as the reactions they rendered.

The table below provides an overview of the threads researched in the present study.

Table 1: Threads selected for analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thread</th>
<th>Postings</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thread 1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1/29/08 – 4/18/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thread 2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6/21/07 – 6/22/07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thread 3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11/18/07 – 11/20/07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thread 4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12/2/07 – 3/22/07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table presents the number of postings as well as the number of participants. The dates, which attest to the contemporary aspect of this study, are also included. The data in this table are described further below.

Thread 1: Deny that global warming is caused by us
This thread consists of 12 participants. Since this thread, as well as the website at large, is concerned with forecasting the climate in the 21st century, it is safe to say that people who post on this forum have at least some interest in environmental issues. It was retrieved from the Climateprediction.com website and this particular thread consists of 28 postings (www.climateprediction.com).

Thread 2: Mexico City
As for this thread the excerpt was gathered from the Lonely Planet website, more specifically, the Thorn Three Travel Forum. In this forum all kinds of travel related subjects are discussed.
The specific topic of this thread was Mexico City and it consists of seven postings and five participants (www.lonelyplanet.com).

Thread 3: Mexico

In this thread the focus is on Mexico in general and this too was taken from the Lonely Planet website. With 20 postings and 14 participants it was quite clear that this was a topic which involved a great deal of responses (www.lonelyplanet.com).

Thread 4: My Kaplan class is terrible!

This is a thread found on a forum for the Law School Admission Test (henceforth LSAT) discussion, a discussion forum aimed at helping students prepare for their LSAT. Even though the forum was created to give support and advice to one another, this particular thread, containing 20 participants and rendering 21 postings, displayed several cases of FTAs and insults (www.lsatdiscussion.com).

The initial search was performed in areas where occurrences of condescending linguistic strategies were thought to be present. For example, generalized stereotypical traits such as politicians’ rhetorical abilities and lawyers’ infamous manipulation skills were such areas deemed to render a great deal of results. However, it soon became apparent that insulting was evident in all sorts of areas. Sometimes when a question was answered by people who thought themselves to be experts, every so often a conflict appeared.

3.2 Method

Firstly, examples of what could be seen as derogatory language were searched for. This was done by examining secondary literature. After determining that such aspects of language as impoliteness, flouted maxims and flaming should be in focus, the data were gathered from the threads found in online discussion forums as described in Section 3.1. The knowledge gained from the theoretical background presented in Section 2 was then applied for analytical purposes. More specifically, the content was analyzed by mainly using the theoretical framework of Culpeper’s impoliteness theory which is built on Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory. By observing the occurrences of impoliteness and searching for linguistic markers which could prove that one part had been insulted, it could be concluded that an FTA
had occurred. Lastly, the analysis and discussion were presented in Sections 4 and 5 where conclusions could finally be drawn.

The present study is not concerned with frequency in any way; its purpose is merely to establish that derogatory language usage is in fact something that is evident online and to demonstrate different linguistic strategies related to this. Examples were therefore sought out to provide evidence of this occurrence; these examples are analyzed in Section 4 of this study. The method utilized in this study is qualitative discourse analysis. According to Esaiasson (2003:233) a qualitative method of this kind entails merely interest in the occurrence of certain linguistic strategies and does not deal with the notion of frequency.

A note on the ethical issues of this study should also be issued since there are a number of considerations that have to be made in order to carry out a study based on research of online communication. This study abides by the guidelines described by Maricic (2005:71f), which state that consent from the participants is not required if:

- The data are gathered from a public forum which requires neither password nor registration in order to access it.
- The participants in the thread are not representing a group of people in a potentially vulnerable position, for example minorities of any kind.
- The thread does not deal with topics that could possibly damage the participants if exposed.

Additionally, anything found in the data that might disclose the participants’ identities should be disguised for their protection (Maricic 2005:72). With these guidelines in mind, the names of the participants have been partially or completely edited.

4 Results

This section displays the results of the study. Examples are put forward and then discussed according to Culpeper’s (1996) impoliteness theory, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) FTAs, the flouting of Grice’s (1975) maxims and the concept of flaming and how to deal with verbal abuse, mentioned in Section 2.

4.1 Thread 1: Deny that global warming is caused by us

As one can gather from the title of the thread, the topic is the environment, more specifically, global warming. The discussion mainly focuses on climate change and one of those involved
in the discussion claimed that the notion of trying to stop the phenomenon was foolish since it
was already a fact. That statement sparked this response (1):

(1) *Let’s see now,* we must take responsibility for poisoning the environment (atmosphere, land,
water), yet the notion that we should stop human induced changes to the climate are foolish?
*Been hanging around politicians too long I’d say.*

The first part of this statement in (1) uses a *condescending* tone, by posing a rhetorical
question, which in itself can be interpreted as rather insulting. Rhetorical questions can be
seen as a non-authentic question and as such they flout the *maxim of quality*. However, the
real insult in this example is the sentence *been hanging around politicians too long I’d say.*
This is the phenomenon of insulting someone one the basis of the general prejudices
regarding politicians i.e. their ability to answer a question without really giving an answer,
their rhetoric skills which can sometimes cause confusion. The statement is also *sarcastic*,
which is an impoliteness strategy. It can be interpreted as sarcastic by the implication that the
person posting the original question might have adopted some bad habits which politicians
can sometimes posses. Even though this can be classified as a mild form of insult it is still
regarded as *flaming*, both in the sense that it is sarcastic as well as unfriendly. The response to
the statement shows us that the respondent feels insulted as seen in (2):

(2) I didn’t say that we should try to stop “human induced” changes to the climate.
What I said was is that you cannot stop climate change. Climate Change is a natural ongoing
process, it cannot be stopped. The only thing that we can change is our part. Beyond that earth
will go along as it has over the millennia and get warmer and colder on its own. The words
that we speak count!
As far as the “been hanging around politicians too long”, that is just a *pot shot my friend. Adds
nothing to the debate really.* It only serves to *alienate.* It is a bad habit among those in our
movement in my humble opinion.

The response in (2) is fairly calm at first; the respondent is simply clarifying what s/he meant.
However, when examining the latter part of the statement one can clearly notice that the
respondent has in fact taken it as an insult. Firstly, the respondent calls the utterance made in
(1), a *pot shot.* Then s/he refers to *my friend* which can be a way of marking that the statement
is not all right and if they were friends such language should not occur between them.
However, this could also be interpreted as an inappropriate identity marker if they might not be friends yet. In that case, the respondent is responding by utilizing an impoliteness output strategy. In addition to this it can be regarded as sarcastic if it is used with obvious insincerity. *My friend* can also be used to communicate distance and by adopting this familiar tone and showing excessive familiarity, the social boundaries are disturbed. The word *alienate* also serves as a linguistic marker which helps determine how the recipient felt about the statement in (1).

The way the statement is responded to is on the other hand commendable, a textbook example. This is what is meant in conflict management literature when using the expression *call a spade a spade*, as mentioned in Section 2.5. By identifying a behavior with bullying tendencies and explaining that such a behavior will not be accepted, the insult falls flat. Even though the term *my friend* was used in this example, it should still be seen as a correct way of dealing with the covert insult, especially since the usage of *friend* is ambiguous.

### 4.2 Thread 2: Mexico City

Lonely Planet is one of the most used online resources for people who want to get travel-related information. In this case the question in (3) is an attempt to get information regarding a trip to Mexico City.

(3) Hi guys,

I ve [sic] a question: i want to go to Mexico this summer but i m not sure if do Cancun to Mexico City or Mexico City to Cancun...i supposed to star my trip at the beginning of july [sic] and end it in august 22/25, then 1 week in NYC , then home!

In case ill star in MExico City my flight arrive at the Benito Juarez airport at 22.18 PM...is it dangerous??? how can i avoid rubery [sic] or things like that? Is It Cancun the same or is more safe to get there in the with an evening flight???

Thanks M

From analyzing the spelling of the message (3) above, it is rather obvious that English is not M’s native language. Spelling mistakes are found throughout the text but there was one word in particular, *rubery*[sic], that evidently sparked the interest of one of the participants of the thread. Instead of letting it slide and answer his question about robbery, the participant practices some bullying:
(4) No need to worry about rubery [sic] at the airport. As you know, Mexico City's airport is quite old, so most of it is made of wood and stone. You have nothing to worry about rubber or other latex-derived products at Benito Juarez.

Making fun of someone’s lack of language skills is an obvious way of making them feel bad about themselves while one is asserting oneself. This form of ridicule is an impoliteness output strategy as well as an FTA performed through sarcasm. One can tell that it is a sarcastic statement because it is put forward in a manner which implies ignorance on the requester’s part. It is also an obvious case of flaming as the person issuing the statement is not only ridiculing the other person but is also talking about something irrelevant to the question posed. By being irrelevant this person is also guilty of flouting the maxim of relation. M’s response (5) was simply to ignore the rudeness and calmly walked away from the discussion group:

(5) Thanks guys for all ur [sic] information
    ciao
    M

Although it is hard to tell if M was truly insulted by (4), one can draw the conclusion that M felt that the desired responses were not appearing and therefore M moved on without discussion. However, since message (4) was highly sarcastic and therefore the insult was not very hard to detect, we can assume that M felt insulted and no longer wished to participate in the discussion. Another interpretation of this last response is that M did not understand the answers and left the discussion to save face.

4.3 Thread 3: Mexico

This thread was also retrieved from the Lonely Planet website and it deals with Mexico. The question posed in (6) is very wide and generic. In travel forums, like this one, it is fairly common that people consider themselves to be experts and these so-called experts are not prone to answer broad questions as the one below. They may have felt as if answering the question posed would be a waste of their expertise.
Example (6) shows a pretty basic question which elicited a number of sarcastic replies as in (7).

(7) This is a joke, right?

Posing a rhetorical question like the one in (7) stating that this has to be a joke suggests that it should not be taken seriously. As stated above, rhetorical questions can be seen as insults since they flout the quality maxim. The insult here comes from the presupposition that no one would be so stupid as to post a question like the one in (6) in that forum. In addition, by using a condescending tone, which again implies that this should not be taken seriously, the author performs an impoliteness output strategy. One can tell that it is a condescending statement by its alluding to a joke that has not been told. As described in Section 2.4 using a condescending tone, as in this case when a rhetorical question is posed, the author can be seen as being scornful and not treating the other person seriously.

(8) I saw a good dog fight in Durango...[c]

The answer in (8) is totally irrelevant to the posed question. This indicates not only a lack of interest but it might also send the signal that the original question was not worthy an answer. Thus an impoliteness output strategy is performed through the act of ignoring the question. It is also a case of flouting the maxim of relation presented in Section 2.2. In this case the respondent probably wants to deter the requester from asking any further questions. However, the message (8) can also be seen as straightforward by its suggestion of where to go if one wants to see a dog fight. In (9) we see the requester’s response to these remarks:

(9) wow, Thanks guys. I hope you get a nice stabbing or something.

Now, for those that do travel. When is the best time to go to Mexico? Im concerned about the heavy rains and severe floods. what are the best places to see and resorts to stay in? Im looking to relax and maybe take a few day trips.

Thanks.
From reading the response of the requester, in particular the reference to them getting a stabbing, it is evident that the requester is upset and insulted by the answers. By counter-attacking in such a manner, by an FTA of their own, the requester has only succeeded in alienating even more participants in the thread. Therefore, when the question is posed once again, the requester is met by more sarcasm and resentment.

(10) When is the best time to go to Mexico? - Google

This response in (10) is offensive in that it suggests that the requester should have figured out this solution by himself/herself. It is even linked to the Google search engine. The FTA is a case of negative impoliteness as seen by the impolite suggestion put forward. As usual when it comes to insults, this too has a certain amount of sarcasm to it. Example (11) below shows us another type of insult.

(11) Given your a garden variety troll...you have not been badly handled here...NOW, go away...

The term troll used in this response does not refer to the mythical creature from Scandinavian folklore. In this sense a troll is someone who posts something on an online discussion forum with the purpose of getting attention and disrupting the discussion. The posts can include contradictions of common knowledge, deliberate insults and asking wide questions with trivial answers (Indiana University website). The online FOLDOC dictionary states that the act of trolling “aims to elicit an emotional reaction from those with a hair-trigger on the reply key” (http://foldoc.org/). The NetLingo Online Dictionary provides the following explanation: “the act of posting a message in a newsgroup that is obviously exaggerating something on a particular topic, hoping to trick a newbie into posting a follow-up article that points out the mistake”. A newbie is “someone who is new to the Internet or new to computers in general” (www.netlingo.com).

The statement in example (11) explains why the requester is not given any help on the forum and why the term troll is taken as an insult. The insult can be seen in the use of the command go away, which is an FTA threatening the negative face of the requester. The imperative go away is also two different impoliteness output strategies as it is trying to
frighten off the requester, as well as being unsympathetic. In (12) we can clearly see that the statement in example (11) is perceived as an insult by the person posing the original question.

(12)[c], This is a travel forum. The idea is people ask travel related questions and (hopefully) get useful information. Now instead of acting like a dickhead, perhaps you could help. Although you probably don't really like to travel, in which case you should go onto a different branch such as Your Choice. what are the best places to see and resorts to stay in? Im looking to relax and maybe take a few day trips

The requester answers by trying to put [c] in his or her place by simply stating that this is a travel forum. By doing so the requester first gives the impression of wanting to end their bickering. However, the requester then goes on to refer to the respondent as a dickhead which indicates anger. The usage of dickhead is a case of the impoliteness output strategy: call the other names. The outright insult stated by using the word dickhead is an FTA aimed at one’s positive face. The discussion ends with other people explaining to the person posing the original question that the question is perceived as too wide and that it gives the impression of that person trying to escape from doing any research of their own. These explanations, one of which is shown in (13), were more friendly and more useful and thus yielded no reply from the requester. The lack of further postings could indicate that the answer given in (13) was satisfactory to a certain extent at least.

(13)[L] - most of those responding believe you are a troll... somebody who posts inane questions or inflammatory[sic] questions in an attempt to get other people to spend a lot of time responding.

It is possible that you are simply as naive as your question and just unfamiliar with TT. In that case, I will give you some simple advice.

There is a FF posting that will answer many of your questions.

There is a search feature that will introduce you to previous postings relevant to your questions.

General questions like yours will not get serious answers as they suggest that you are unwilling to do any work - like getting a guidebook from the library or doing any research.

Specific questions will get you good answers from experienced travelers.
4.4 Thread 4: My Kaplan class is terrible!

As the name of this thread suggests, it is a discussion about a Kaplan class which is a preparatory LSAT class designed to help people pass the test. The thread starts out with someone complaining that s/he does not feel as if the class is giving him/her any real help. This person then states that they have only achieved 166 points on the practice test. What follows below are the responses which during the course of the discussion create a great deal of conflict.

(14) people that get a 166 don't need an lsat/kaplan class. think about the dumbasses that get 130s.

Message (14) is an inflammatory statement, or a flame bait, created to elicit angry responses from the other participants. By stating that some people are dumbasses, two different impoliteness output strategies are performed: call the other names by using derogatory nominations, and seek disagreement. An FTA on that person’s negative face is also apparent since it suggests that people getting a low score on the test are dumbasses. Since the statement (14) implies an insult aimed at people scoring in the 130s, this is an example of flaming. Its purpose is that of ridiculing and insulting. Example (14) elicited the response in (15) below:

(15) Ok, first of all, who do you think you are to call people that got 130's "dumbasses"? Why do you pass judgement on people? Just because they may not be good at standardized tests does not mean that they aren't good in the classroom and such. There are PLENTY of people that aren't good at standardized tests that have 4.0 GPAs. Seriously, why don't you evaluate what you say before you say potentially hurtful things.

The statement in (15) provides us with an example of an answer that states fact whilst trying to avoid further conflict. However, by stating who do you think you are, which functions as a rhetorical question, suggests that the author is upset. The message is included among the examples in this thread mostly due to the fact that it brings forth the statement that: there are PLENTY of people that aren't good at standardized tests that have 4.0 GPAs. This statement together with the statement comparing people to dumbasses sparks the heated discussion visible in this thread. In (16) a reference to these two statements is depicted.

(16) I would wager there is NO ONE that has a 4.0 GPA that is scoring in the 130's.
Example (16) shows yet another case of flaming, among other things by the usage of capital letters as in NO ONE. By stating that NO ONE with a 4.0 GPA could ever be scoring as low as in the 130’s, this person is again calling people stupid and performing an FTA. The utterance (17) below illustrates that this person feels very insulted.

(17)[TF]: I earned a 4.0 in my undergrad work, a B.S. in philosophy and a M.S. in genetic psychology as well, I have completed 2 years of medical school (currently in my third). AND..... I ACHIEVED A 133 on my FIRST LSTAT [sic] SCORE 3-WEEKS AGO! I MUST BE DUMB! FINALLY MY PROBLEM HAS BEEN EXPLAINED TO ME! I'm stupid! I have since increased my score into the 150's, during practice exams, over the subsequent weeks. However, make no mistake about it: THE LSTAT DOES NOT MEASURE AND IS NOT INTENDED TO BE A MEASURE OF ONES INTELLIGENCE LEVEL!

It is nothing more than an exam. My wife is a practicing attorney and partner in one of the most competitive firms in the nation, after having received her degree from one of the top-5 universities in the country, and guess what: She received a 156 on her LSTAT and a 3.9 in undergrad!

If you're achieving a 175 on your LSTAT, I have news for you: NO ONE will EVER care! You will get to law school and pass or fail! It is of no consequence to anyone what score you received and is likely to be one of the easier exams you will complete throughout your career. Lastly, MANY people achieve average scores on LSTAT exams and continue on to be wonderful attorneys. Equally high numbers of people achieve 175's on their LSTAT exam only to flunk out of law school.

Thus, treat the LSTAT for what it is: A means to an end. It is certainly not a measure of one's intelligence. In fact to my knowledge, and I'm guessing having a masters in genetic psychology and actually having conducted many such experiments into the matter, I may be considered to be the resident expert for this particular website: No written or physical exam measures intelligence to an adequate degree. The science of the human mind is simply not advanced enough to ever produce such an exam, and it is unlikely such an exam ever will exist.

After all, one's reflex actions can be a sign of muscular intelligence. One's rate of breathing when exposed to a stress can also be a measure of one's physiological intelligence (yes it can be trained). Hence, one's brain is simply one aspect of conscious and unconscious intelligence. Hence, for the "person that achieved a whopping 166+ on his/her LSTAT" WHO CARES! THE LSTAT is a JOKE! The sooner you realize this, the sooner you'll be able to put your current academic aspirations in perspective.

I strongly suggest you make several copies of my words and read them to prior to taking your subsequent exams. For mark my words, the LSTAT, and I'm actually laughing as I type this, is so easy compared to a Bar-Exam you'll be laughing yourself silly if ever the day should
come that you're fortunate enough to actually be faced with the prospect of taking such an exam.

Okay I've wasted enough time!

"I got 166 on my Lstat!" HAAAA I'm crying here,...that's the funniest thing I've heard all day...lololol ahhahahahahahaha YAY~! YAY!!! hahahahahah.... 166 on my LSTAT
HAHAHAHAHA!!!"

Peace out monkeys!

As seen in example (17), this sender feels obligated to justify his results to show that he is certainly not a dumbass. The reaction is aimed at the assumption that one is stupid if one scores as low as in the 130s. The sheer length of this posting indicates an insecurity as the respondent vehemently tries to give proof of his skills and abilities. The statement starts out with a list of academic achievements and the fact that the respondent scored 133 on the first test even though he has a 4.0 GPA. It is then stated, in capital letters: I MUST BE DUMB! FINALLY MY PROBLEM HAS BEEN EXPLAINED TO ME! I'm stupid! As described in Section 2.5, using all capital letters is the online version of screaming and just as in real life, screaming is something that can occur when we are upset. In addition to this, the statement that he MUST BE DUMB almost functions as a rhetorical question. The statement: FINALLY MY PROBLEM HAS BEEN EXPLAINED TO ME is loaded with sarcasm and so is the statement I'm stupid! This sarcasm which is categorized as an impoliteness strategy of its own, tries to reverse the idea of exactly who is stupid. The sender is trying to counter-attack by implying that the stupid party is actually the person who thinks that one cannot have a 4.0 GPA and still score in the 130s.

TF then goes on to explain how he has improved his score and that the LSTAT [sic] by no means measures intelligence. Again he is using capital letters which can indicate that he is very anxious to prove himself able. Furthermore, he keeps on supplying evidence of his abilities, as well as people’s abilities in general, and in his endeavors tries to prove that the fact that they all got low scores on the LSAT does not relate to being an otherwise accomplished person. In his mission to prove their capabilities, he becomes repetitive and tries to show that people who get higher scores flunk just as easily. One can claim that this obsessive justification is a clear sign that he is insulted. TF also strives to explain that since he has a Masters in genetic psychology he is the resident expert i.e. he knows better then those people who judge people scoring in the 130s as dumb. This is an attempt on his part to put them in their place and convince them that it is quite the opposite, that they are the dumb ones.
He finishes off by stating that the LSTAT [sic] is a joke and that he wasted enough time on this forum trying to explain how it works in real life. Overall, we can detect that despite his heavy usage of sarcasm he is upset and feels insulted, he took the statement in (14) personally. He signs off by referring to the rest of the participants as monkeys which in itself acts an insult; more specifically it is an impoliteness output strategy named call the other names.

The next two postings in the thread were also justifications made by people defending themselves from the notion that they were dumbasses. One sender even stated that s/he was a gifted musician and thereby trying to make that piece of information function as evidence to prove that s/he was not stupid. However, since the statement in (17) elicited specific responses these other messages mentioned above are not put forward here. Instead example (18) illustrates one of the responses to (17).

(18) Wow... someone is really insecure about their LSAT abilities. Downplaying the LSAT is simply this person's form of denial. I moderate change in scores can have a drastic impact on your career prospects. Anyone who gives you all this garbage about how there are so many gifted attorneys who didn't do well on the LSAT is obviously nursing the wound of a dreadful LSAT experience.

This person is insulting TF by ridiculing him and stating that he is insecure and in denial. All forms of ridicule are FTAs which serve to threaten the positive face of a person. The statement in (18) can be interpreted as covert flaming; its purpose is to provoke a response by putting TF down and challenge his previous statement. By using an impersonal pronoun such as someone and anyone, an indirect insult is issued. Since this person knows that TF issued the statement referred to, the insult is produced by alluding to this someone/anyone. As so often is the case regarding insults, sarcasm is omnipresent. Stating that the person downplaying the importance of the LSAT is obviously nursing the wound of a dreadful LSAT experience is a sarcastic way of suggesting that TF had failed in his LSAT attempt and is now trying to overcompensate.

5 Summary and conclusion
This section gives a short summary of the topic researched in this study as well as some concluding remarks which comment on the overall results.
This study has examined different ways of insulting someone. By using condescending language with the possible intent to belittle someone, a wide range of responses and counter-attacks are created. The results clearly indicate that different techniques and strategies used with the intention of insulting people are apparent in the four threads which were investigated.

The first research question was formulated as follows: what kind of linguistic strategies are used in order to make language function in a derogatory way? Based on the findings in Section 4, one can conclude that there are a number of ways to make language function in a derogatory manner. One of these ways is by flouting the maxims as shown in statement (8). Another strategy to make language function in a derogatory way is by utilizing FTAs and different impoliteness strategies, as in (11) where the term troll is used to refer to the requester. This use of a derogatory name-calling functions as an impoliteness output strategy. Different impoliteness output strategies are often used in a derogatory manner with the intention to insult someone as discussed above.

One gets the indication, by detecting the usage of such words as dickhead and dumbasses, that the need to be subtle about one’s insult is of less importance for some people. There is a fine line between being covertly rude to crossing the line and becoming overtly rude. Several messages began with covert rudeness and then escalated into the use of very offensive language as in example (9) where the respondent wishes the other participants a nice stabbing. Some of the examples, such as (4), given in the study were rather see-through instances of trying to belittle someone. In this example, the respondent is ridiculing the requester and thus performing an FTA, by joking about the spelling of the word robbery, in this case rubery [sic].

Furthermore, it seems like the need to appear ‘smart’ about the way one wants to insult someone, is sometimes redundant. We see this in the usage of overt insults, for example calling someone a dickhead (12). In (14) the phenomenon of flaming, which is also an overt act, becomes apparent. Stating that people who get a low score on an LSAT are dumbasses is an inflammatory name-calling. This triggered, as intended, many responses, particularly responses from people trying to assert themselves. For example, (17) provides us with a lengthy retort in which the respondent tries to redeem himself.

The second research question dealt with linguistic reactions and responses to derogatory language usage evoked in the recipient. The results presented in Section 4, display a number of different strategies used to deal with insults. The most common strategy apparent in this study at least, is to counter-attack with an insult of their own. Again, derogatory name-calling
is evident as a counter-attack, for example in (12) where the recipient calls the bully a *dickhead*. The example presented in (17) shows us another strategy to defend oneself when being subjected to insults. This is a strategy which contains a fair amount of justification on the part of the insulted person. Even though the response from the requester sometimes started out well, it soon developed an offensive tone. This is seen in posting (12) which starts out with an explanation but then escalates as the requester uses the term *dickhead*.

The examples described above are all examples of how people have reacted in an inefficient way. However, there were other examples that still enlightened the fact that the persons posing the original questions felt insulted yet these people had a better strategy of coping with these bullying maneuvers, as discussed below.

The third research questions read: How can derogatory usage be met online? What kinds of conflict management strategies are used by the recipients? As described in Section 2.5, one of the best ways to end an argument and to deal with someone unreasonable is to walk away from the conflict or to identify an unacceptable behavior. Judging from the results in Section 4, the best way to end a bickering, like the ones apparent in the study, were consistent with the recommendations given in Section 2.5. For example, in (5) M thanks everyone for the information and then leaves the discussion. This falls under the category *use the silent treatment* as well as *don’t fight fire with fire*. Another coping strategy is to *call a spade a spade* which is apparent in example (2). The response in (15) is also an example of this strategy.

In conclusion, the act of flaming and especially the usage of sarcasm were phenomena which were more or less, omnipresent. To perform an FTA and insult people are both actions that have a vast impact on the recipients. This can be concluded by examining the responses of the people exposed to derogatory language usage. The examples presented in this study provided us with the evidence needed to make such a claim and proved that people in the present study were negatively affected by insults. This impact was shown both through counter-attacks as well as through drawing attention to the bullying strategy. In either way it is safe to say that the insults did not go by unnoticed or unrefuted.

Some of the linguistic strategies mentioned in this essay might be used in the spur of the moment and therefore it is believed that a study focused on spoken interaction would yield further proof of the occurrences of these strategies and FTAs. For example, a series of in-depth interviews can be performed to further explore people’s reactions towards condescending linguistic strategies as well as manipulative talk.
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