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FORCE-DYNAMIC REPRESENTATION
OF LINGUISTIC INSULTS: A SIMPLE ANALYSIS

1. Insults

Jay [1992, 8] defines insults as verbal attacks in which the aim is to harm the other person by means of words. According to Allan and Burridge [2006, 79] insults are acts of verbal abuse where the speaker assaults the target or targets "by assailing them with contemptuous, perhaps insolent language that may include an element of bragging." Insulting belongs to the broad category of offensive speech, among such acts as profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarity, epithets and swearing. It is the last of these categories, however, which bears perhaps the closest resemblance to insults. Swearing may refer to the practice of "mak(ing) a solemn statement or promis(ing) (...) to do something or affirming that something is the case" [Pearsall 1998, 1873], as in *swearing by* or *swear that* (something is so). Similarly, cursing technically refers to the practice of wishing harm on a person [Jay 1992, 2-3]. In contemporary English, however, both swearing and cursing are primarily used in the sense of *swearing at* "utter(ing) offensive words in anger or annoyance" or *cursing at* "us(ing) offensive language, especially as an expression of anger" [Pearsall 1998: 1873, 451]. Therefore, in the remainder of this article I am going to use the terms insults, abusive swearing and verbal aggression interchangeably to refer to the practice of insulting.

2. Force dynamics theory

The theory of force dynamics was first presented by Talmy [1988] and illustrates how entities interact with respect to force. The theory is a generalisation over the traditional notions of causation, including the exertion of force, resistance to force, overcoming of such resistance, blocking of force and other relations. The relations in force dynamics theory are illustrated by the interaction of *Agonist* (*Ago*) and *Antagonist (Ant)*. Agonist, the focal force entity, is represented by a circle, while Antagonist, the force element that opposes Agonist, is illustrated with a concave figure. Talmy [1988, 55] illustrates the following basic steady-state force-dynamic patterns (*figures 1-4*) with their corresponding example sentences (1-4):

(1) The ball kept rolling because of the wind blowing on it.
(2) The shed kept standing despite the gale wind blowing against it.
(3) The ball kept rolling despite the stiff grass.
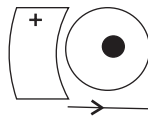(4) The log kept lying on the incline because of the ridge there.
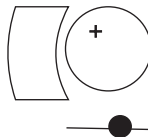
Figure 1. Ant-induced movement
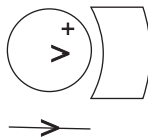
Figure 2. Ago-induced rest
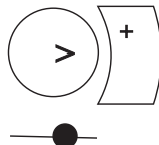
Figure 3. Ago-induced movement

Figure 4. Ant-induced rest

In Ago-Ant interactions the intrinsic tendency of Agonist is represented either by a dot – tendency towards rest – or an open arrow – tendency towards movement. The stronger entity (Ago or Ant), whose tendency prevails in a given situation, is marked by a plus sign. The end-result of Ago/Ant interaction is presented in the form of either an open arrow on a straight line – action – or a straight line with a dot – rest. In *figure 1* Ago, which has a tendency towards rest, is moved by a stronger Ant with a tendency towards movement. This is illustrated by the state result of movement (an open arrow). In *figure 2* the scenario is analogous, but with Ago as the stronger entity. Therefore, Ago's tendency towards rest blocks the movement-oriented Ant, with the state result of repose (a full dot) In *figure 3* the stronger Ago has a tendency towards movement. Thus, Ago overcomes Ant's resistance with movement as the end-result. By analogy, in *figure 4* Ant is stronger than Ago. Thus, Ago's tendency towards movement is successfully blocked by Ant.

3. Force-dynamic model of insults

Talmy [1988] applies the theory of force dynamics not only to the discussion of physical interactions, but also to different interactions of psychological, sociological and intertextual elements. In the remainder of this article, I am going to apply the theory of force dynamics to a simplified analysis of linguistic insults. In doing so I am going to refer to a small selection of movie scenes taken from contemporary full-feature English movies. The scenes come from a corpus of 130 film scenes derived from 39 contemporary films which have been investigated by myself in order to establish source material for a more comprehensive analysis of verbal aggression [Matusz, 2015].

On a very basic level linguistic insults may be represented as a force-dynamic model with Ago and Ant standing for two distinct human agents involved in the context of verbal conflict. Unless indicated otherwise, Ago represents the Speaker (hereafter S), while Ant represents the Addressee (hereafter A). In a prototypical situation of verbal aggression A is identified with the Wrongdoer (hereafter W), a person who performs a certain act of provocation towards S and is, therefore, responsible for S's episode of abusive swearing [Jay 2000, 57-61].

In a simplified model of insults S engages in an act of verbal aggression towards A. The resultant of this interaction indicates whether or not the act of insult has been delivered successfully, i.e. whether or not the insult has produced the feeling of being insulted (offended) in the addressee. The requirement of verbal aggression producing the feeling of being insulted in the addressee refers to Grzegorczykowa's [1991] perlocutionary condition for the speech act of insulting. Consider the following simplified model of successful insults:

In *figure 5* Ago's tendency towards movement represents S engaging in an act of verbal aggression towards A. A's (Ant) initial position is repose, since a party who has not been subject to abusive swearing does not normally reveal the feelings of being insulted or offended by the Speaker. In the simplified model of successful insults, as a result of Ago's action, the end result changes from rest to movement, which represents the successful delivery of insult, whereby A feels insulted as a result of S's utterance. An example of a successful delivery of insults is presented below in (5)
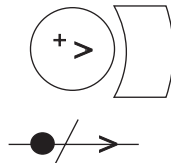

Figure 5. Simplified model of successful insults

(5) (A conversation between two conflicted female students (S1 and S2) during a high school party)
S1: (...) Honey, look around you. To everyone here who matters, *you're vapour, you're spam, a waste of perfectly good yearbook space, and nothing's ever gonna change that.* (*S2's eyes tear up*)
S1: Oh, you aren't going to cry are you?
(S2 runs out of the room crying)

[*She's All That*, 1999]

Sample (5) is an instance of successful insults, since Grzegorczykowa's [1991] perlocutionary criterion is realised; as a result of S1's verbal aggression S2 feels insulted, which can be deduced from S2's emotional reaction to the exchange. A different emotional reaction of A is presented in (6) below:

(6) (A discussion in the office of Secretary of State for the Department of International Development. S1 is Director of Communications for the Department of International Development. S2 is the department press representative. S1 is unhappy about S2's presence in the office and want S2 to leave)
S1: (…) *this is a government department, not some fucking Jane fucking Austen novel! Allow me to pop a jaunty little bonnet on your purview and ram it up your shitter with a lubricated horse cock!*
S2: Your swearing does not impress me. My husband works for Tower Hamlets and believe me those kids make you sound like... Angela Lansbury!

[In the Loop, 2009]

In (6) S (S1) verbally attacks A (S2). However, A's reaction to the insult suggests that A has not internalized S's remarks and does not feel offended as a result of the exchange. This situation is schematized in *figure 6*. The main elements of the model are analogous to *figure 5*. S (Ago) engages in abusive swearing towards A (Ant). This time, however, Ago's tendencies towards movement are blocked by Ant's intrinsic tendency towards repose. The end

result is, thus, rest – the lack of perlocutionary effect of A feeling insulted. Grzegorczykowa's perlocutionary condition is unfulfilled; A remains emotionally unmoved in the face of S's verbal aggression.
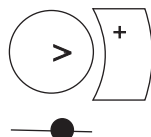

Figure 6. Simplified model of unsuccessful insults

It must be noted here that in the context of an actual exchange it is difficult to determine with certainty whether the insult produced by S brings about the appropriate perlocutionary effect in A. However, in Jay's [2000: 57-61] scenario of verbal aggression the emotional reaction of A towards S's insulting is a predictable and prototypical outcome. Therefore, and for the sake of brevity, the forthcoming models are based on the scenario of successful insults (as presented in *figure 5*), wherein the verbal aggression produced by S is psychologically internalized by A, and – as such – it brings about the effect of A feeling insulted as a result of the exchange.

As far as more complex models of insulting are concerned, the force dynamics theory may be used to represent different scenarios of verbal aggression. What follows below is a short description of only those models which are comparatively easy to present in the limited scope of this article, namely the categories of redirected insults, intensifying insults and insult chains.

As noted above, in the prototypical scenario of verbal aggression S's swearing episode is aimed at A, who simultaneously is the Wrongdoer (W) responsible for the act of provocation towards S. In some cases, however, W is not available for S as a potential target of insulting. Consider sample (7):

(7) (S2, Director of Communications for the British Prime Minister, is talking on a phone in the street. S1, his office collaborator, has just hung up without bothering to listen to the important information S1 has intended to communicate. S3 is a tourist walking by)
(S1 hangs up on S2)
S2 (to the phone): Fucking hung up, haven't you? *You fucking hoity-toity fucking...*
S3 (approaching S2): Hey, buddy? Enough with the curse words, all right?
S2 (to S3): *Kiss my sweaty balls, you fat fuck!*
(S2 runs into the distance)

[In the Loop, 2009]

In the above example, S1 provokes S2 into the act of verbal aggression by terminating a phone conversation without listening to what S2 has to say. Thus, S1 (W) is not available for insulting. S2 (S) then turns against S3, who has confronted him about his vulgar public behaviour. S3 thus becomes

A for S2's verbal aggression. The force-dynamic depiction of redirected insult requires the presence of three human agents W, S and A. This situation is schematised in *figure 7*:
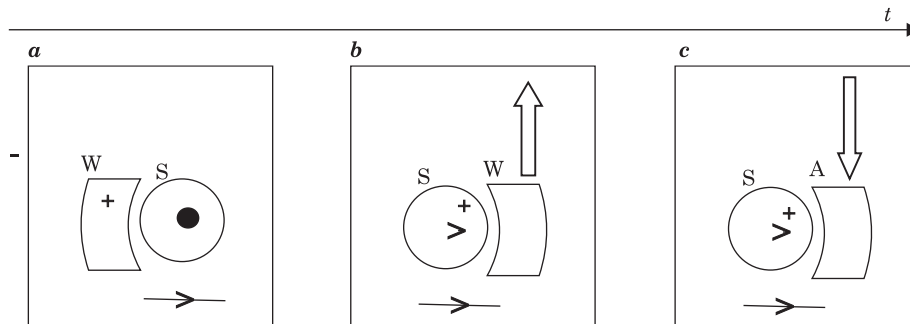

Figure 7. Force-dynamic model of redirected insults.

Representation of redirected insults requires a time-scale dynamic model which is realized in three stages (a), (b) and (c). Stages (b) and (c) are modified simplified models of successful insults (*figure 5*), while stage (a) represents W provoking S to engage in the act of verbal aggression and is analogous to *figure 1* above.

In the force-dynamic model of redirected insult stage (a) represents the provocation event where the Wrongdoer (W) interacts with the Speaker (S). The provocation is successful and moves the Speaker towards action, i.e. towards the act of insulting. However, in stage (b), the Wrongdoer is removed from the scene, which is indicated by the upward-facing arrow over Ant. This may be because of W removing himself/herself from the context of conflictive communication, as in (7), or in any other way becoming unavailable for S's act of insulting. However, S's anger and negative emotions do not diminish and S experiences the need to alleviate his/her anger. One way in which this can be realised is by redirecting one's verbal aggression towards a different target. In stage (c) a third party is introduced. The introduction of this party is marked by Ant with a downward-facing arrow. This party becomes the available target for S's swearing episode, and becomes the Addressee (A) of the insult.

Another scenario which may be presented in terms of a time-scale dynamic model is the category of intensifying insults. In intensifying insults, S's anger does not diminish as a result of S engaging in the act of verbal aggression towards A. Instead, S's anger is gradually intensified. This may happen when the perceived level of the severity of A's provocation is very high or when S has the kind of psychological makeup which makes him/her particularly prone to abusive swearing:

(8) (S1, a real estate agent has been talking to his customer, who came in order to demand the cancellation of his contract. S2, S1's business associate, has accidentally told the customer that his check has already been cashed and that the deal cannot be cancelled. The customer leaves the office in panic).
S1 (to S2, increasingly irritated): You stupid fucking cunt! You, Williamson, I'm talking to you, shit. You just cost me 6 thousand dollars. Six thousand dollars and one Cadillac. That's right. What are you gonna do? What are you gonna do about it, *asshole? You fucking shit! Where did you learn your trade, you stupid fucking cunt, you idiot? Who ever told you that you could work with men? Oh, I'm gonna have your job, shithead. I'm going downtown and talk to Mitch & Murray, and I'm going to Lemkin! I don't care whose nephew you are, who you know, whose dick you're sucking on. You're going out, I swear to you* (…)
[Glengarry Glen Ross, 1992]

In (8) S1's anger, as a result of the severe nature of S2's provocation, is intensified in the course of S1's swearing episode. This is represented in *figure 8*.
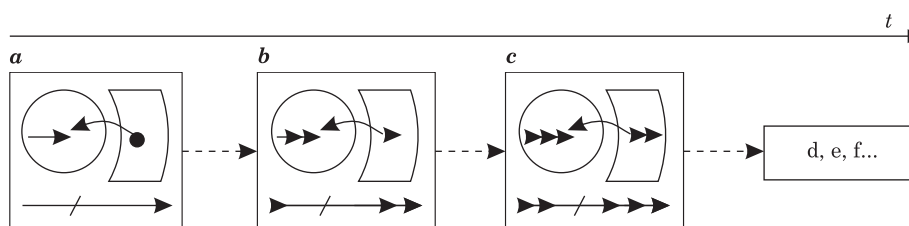

Figure 8. Force-dynamic model of intensifying insults.

The force-dynamic model of intensifying insults begins with stage (a), in which S verbally attacks A. The stage-resultant changes from rest to action, which represents the change of emotional state of A wherein A feels insulted as a result of S's verbal aggression. In intensifying insults, as a result of S's verbal aggression towards A, the level of anger in S does not decline, but is intensified. This prompts S to further insults towards A. This is represented in stage (b) as Ago with a double arrow. Ant in stage (b) is marked with a single right-facing arrow. This represents the state of mind in A, where A has already been insulted in stage (a). The stage-result, therefore, changes from a single arrow to a double arrow. In (c) the situation has a similar dynamics. S's negative emotions are further intensified (Ago with a triple arrow), which prompts S to insult A with an ever-increasing level of abusiveness. The double arrow on Ant refers to the end-result of stage (b) where A has been insulted to a greater degree than in stage (a). The transfer of force balance between Ant and Ago in stage (c) results in an even more intensified string of insult towards A. The scenario of intensifying insults may be further continued, which is indicated by (d), (e), (f) as possible further stages of the model. In theory, the string of insults may be intensifying *ad infinitum*. In practice, however, at some point the model has to be resolved in one form or another. Possible

outcome scenarios include *spontaneous cessation of anger*, *anger-terminating event*, *intervention of a third party*, *outburst of physical violence*, and others.

Finally, the force dynamics theory allows for the representation of conflictive communication wherein S and A repeatedly insult each other with an increasing level of intensiveness. This is exemplified in sample (9).

(9) (Two rivaling co-anchors (S1 and S2) at a local television station taunt each other as they are going off the air. S1 is male, S2 is female).
S1: *You are a real hooker. I'm gonna slap you in public.*
S2 (chuckling): *You have man boobs.*
S1: *You've got a dirty whorish mouth. I'm gonna punch you in the ovary.* That's what I gonna do. A straight shot.
S2: Ooh, ow.
S1: *Right to the baby-maker.*
S2: Ah, *jazz flute is for little fairy boys.*
(…)

[Anchorman: the legend of Ron Burgundy, 2004]

What happens in the exchange is that two conflicted interlocutors (S1 and S2) continue to assault each other with more and more intense or emotional epithets. This is illustrated in *figure 9*, which is a modified version of *figure 8* above:
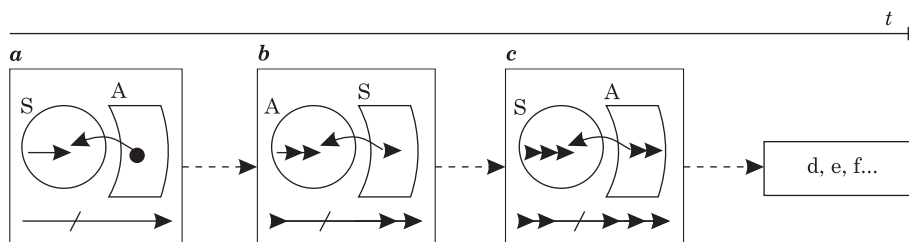

Figure 9. Force-dynamic model of insult chains

The force-dynamic model of insult chains starts with S verbally attacking A. As a result of this, A feels insulted, which is illustrated by the appropriate stage result (movement). S insulting A in stage (a) constitutes a provocation event for A. This prompts A to verbally assault S in stage (b). In order to make the insult effective, A assaults S with a swearing episode of increased intensity. Thus, A in (b) is marked with a double arrow. As a result, the stage outcome in (b) changes from a single arrow to a double arrow. The verbal aggression of A towards S in stage (b) constitutes, in turn, a provocation event for S to indulge in an even more intensive episode of verbal aggression. This is realised in stage (c), where S insults A with an ever more abusive string of insults. The final stages (d, e, f) represent the possibility of the scenario being continued until the scenario is concluded in one form or another, with spontaneous cessation of anger, anger-terminating event, intervention of a third party, outburst of physical violence among other possibilities.

4. Conclusions

Insulting and verbal aggression are important and ubiquitous linguistic phenomena and, as such, they require an appropriate and effective linguistic theory for their description. In this article I intended to show that force-dynamic models might be a convincing tool for the analysis of linguistic insults. The categories of verbal aggression illustrated above include the models of successful insults, unsuccessful insults, redirected insults, intensifying insults and insult chains. All these categories have been illustrated with appropriate samples from a corpus of contemporary full-feature English film scenes.

It must be said that the force-dynamic description of insults proposed above has a few important drawbacks. Firstly, it discusses only a small fraction of the possible scenarios of verbal aggression. Other categories of insults analysable in terms of force-dynamic models include the cases of non-human Wrongdoer, Absent Wrongdoer, S's insult being interrupted by a third party or a terminating event, spontaneous cessation of anger, and others. Secondly, the force-dynamic models presented above constitute a significant simplification of the phenomenon of verbal aggression. A convincing account of verbal aggression requires a more complex force-dynamic model of insults encompassing not only the interpersonal perspective, but also the intra-psychological perspective of the Speaker and the Addressee. This kind of approach could successfully account for the interplay of different intra-psychological and interpersonal factors influencing verbal aggression. A humble attempt at that – based on Jay's [2000] 5-stage model of verbal aggression – has already been proposed by myself [Matusz, 2015]. Thirdly, a comprehensive account of verbal aggression requires more representative samples of real-life language data, going beyond the limitations of verbal exchanges present in movie scenes. More representative language data can be taken from real-life conversational exchanges or from documentaries featuring conflictive contexts. It seems therefore, that the attempts at representing different scenarios of verbal aggression in the framework of force dynamics theory provide a worthwhile and promising perspective for the further analysis of linguistic insults.

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Summary

FORCE-DYNAMIC REPRESENTATION OF LINGUISTIC INSULTS: A SIMPLE ANALYSIS

Verbal aggression and insults constitute an increasingly important topic of contemporary linguistic analysis. The aim of this article is to present a simple analysis of linguistic insults in the framework of the force dynamics theory as presented by Talmy [1988]. The force-dynamic theory describes different relations of physical, psychological, social, intertextual causation by means of interaction between two entities of force (Agonist and Antagonist). Selected categories of insults are analyzed by means of force-dynamic models. These categories include successful insults, unsuccessful insults, redirected insults, intensifying insults, and insults chains. I intend to demonstrate that the theory of force dynamics is a viable candidate for providing a convincing framework for the analysis of linguistic insults. The article concludes with some suggestions concerning the future research into the field of verbal aggression in connection with the theory of force dynamics.

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