A Contextualist Analysis of Insults

Y. Sandy Berkovski[(✉)]

Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey
sandy.berkovski@gmail.com

Abstract. For a predicate expression F contained in a sentence S ('x is F') to count as an insult, it should be used in a situation having a number of contextual elements. There should be an audience to whom the utterance of S is addressed. There should be a target of the insult, an individual who the speaker wishes to be shunned, excluded from certain, more or less salient, forms of social cooperation. The purpose of the utterance of S is to persuade the audience, by appeal to their emotions, to shun the target. Slurs have the canonical occasions of use structurally identical to the occasions of insults.

1 The Initial Picture

I want to begin with a large claim. I will not be able to substantiate it here. But I hope, even if undefended, it would not sound outlandish or incoherent. This is partly because it is almost wholly unoriginal. Indeed, it is not a claim, but rather a picture.

In this picture, language has a role to play in our collection of information about the world and about ourselves. We found a way to classify objects, animate and inanimate, to record observations, to describe our subjective experiences, to make predictions about the future. In this propositional employment of language our statements should be evaluated by how well they represent the world. They should be accepted or rejected on the basis of their truth value. I will not of course try to spell out what notion of truth we should endorse, or what notion of truth is most congenial to this picture. But I do want to say that the semantic properties of statements are what get to be examined—should be examined—within that employment of language. The purpose of a statement, 'Wolves are grey' is to say something about the wolves. Our interest, concern with this statement is with its truth and with the analogous semantic properties of its constituent parts. If what it says is true, if wolves are grey, then the statement is accepted; and if they are not, then rejected.

But human life, in its modest beginnings, is not all about description and enquiry. Not even primarily so. It is in the first place about survival and reproduction. As those happen, necessarily so, in the condition of scarcity, it is thus a great deal about managing relations with others. (Plainly it is also about many other things, such as sensory and semi-sensory pleasures and pains—but those I should put aside.)

Our survival and prosperity, the success of our somatic and reproductive efforts, depend on the success of our cooperation with others. Language has a

role to play here too. Cooperation depends on communication, and language is an effective instrument of communication. In the course of communication, of course, language may once again be employed in its propositional mode. We can exchange with others information about the world, hence improving or impairing our descriptions and predictions.

Cooperation cannot begin before it is clear who one should cooperate with, who is a worthy candidate for the cooperative task at hand, and who is not. Just as there is a competition for material resources, and in part because of that competition, there is normally a competition for allies. Where more than a few actors are involved, and where material resources are relatively scarce, language comes handy in forging alliances. Potential allies communicate to each other the purpose of the alliance, they gather information about each other's abilities, and they present themselves, their own abilities and worth, to each other. Every inclusion in an alliance, at least in a reasonably large group, is at the same time an exclusion. The possible rewards, once the task is completed, will be enough for everyone. Someone must be left behind, when the allies divide the spoils. Alternatively, an alliance is from the start directed against others.

Once again, language is an essential tool. Alliances can be built with non-linguistic means, by embracing, kissing, pushing, and punching. These methods of communication are costly and unsafe. They have another distinct disadvantage. Once people have gained the ability to represent in language the world and themselves, they have also gained the ability to misrepresent it. Misrepresentation is a potent tool in alliance building. It allows one to misrepresent oneself to potential allies—that is, to present oneself as better than one in fact is (the capacity for self-misrepresentation we encounter throughout the animal world, but there it is rudimentary and inflexible). It similarly allows one to present potential and actual rivals as worse than they in fact are.

2   Rhetorical Adaptations

So language has a unique role to play in alliance building. This, I now wish to point out, is a different mode of its employment. Call it the 'rhetorical mode'. One might think it is not interestingly different from the propositional mode, where the purpose is to gather and convey information about the world. Here too, one uses the language to gather and convey information about particular aspects of the world—namely, allies, rivals, and oneself. Just as one describes the properties of flowers and trees, one can describe properties of people. One then uses these descriptions to improve one's relationships in the cooperative effort and generally one's standing in the group.

This deployment of language in the propositional mode envisages a possibility of a prolonged debate where claims are made and objections are heard out. For the practical purposes of alliance building it is defective. The chances that your reasoning is compelling, and that the rival's reasoning is not, are hard to estimate. And on many occasions there would not be enough time to make your argument to begin with.

Hence language must be adapted to serve the purpose of quick persuasion. Instead of elaborating a complex argument of uncertain prospects, it is more promising to appeal to the interlocutors' emotions. Instead of laboriously showing what properties of this man make him an enemy, or disqualify him from being an ally, it is more efficient to appeal to the shame, fear, disgust, or the desire for revenge of your interlocutors. A classic skirmish between Thersites and Odysseus in the *Iliad* contains this exchange:[1]

> [Thersites:] Weaklings! Cowardly creatures! You women, not men, of
>   Achaia,
> let's go back home in our ships, and leave this fellow
> here in Troy to gorge on his prizes [...]
> [Odysseus:] Thersites, wild babbler, sharp stump speaker you may be,
> but shut up! (*Il.* 2.235–246)

The insults hurled in these speeches are designed to rally the support behind the speaker, Thersites and Odysseus respectively. The expressions 'weakling', 'cowardly creature', 'wild babbler' appear as though their use is meant to predicate a property of the given subject (Achaian troops or Thersites). However, Thersites could not care less if the Achaians are indeed cowardly. He may in fact believe they are not, and precisely because they are not, he may hope to agitate them into action.

Language in its rhetorical mode, its grammar and syntax, look exactly the same as they would in the propositional mode. Indeed, the terms used in the example before us could well be used in the propositional mode. Thersites could have conducted a semi-theoretical enquiry, collecting statistical data, interviewing different Achaian soldiers, so as to establish how many of them are weaklings, cowards, and how many are not. Those data carry no relevance for him when he is engaged in a public spat with Odysseus and Agamemnon. On the surface his utterances appear to assert propositions. In reality he is merely trying to build an alliance of fellow soldiers against the aristocratic chiefs. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same goes for Odysseus.

3   The Autonomy of Rhetoric

The first conjecture I am raising now is that, syntactic similarities notwithstanding, the semantic properties of sentences in their rhetorical mode should be evaluated differently from the semantic properties of sentences in their propositional mode. The second conjecture is that the rhetorical mode should contain expressions unused and unusable in propositional mode. I shall try to substantiate this claim below. But here is one intuitive reason why it should hold. With the same expressions used in both modes, the addressee cannot be certain what is expected of him. When Thersites asserts 'Achaians are cowards', the addressees

---

[1] See [4].

(here Achaians themselves) may be misled into examining the truth value of this statement. A lengthy debate may ensue:

> — It seems everyone I know in this army is a coward.
> — Yes, but look at Achilles! And are *you* a coward too?
> — So Thersites' universal generalisation must be false.   (1)

It is in Thersites' interest not to allow such a debate to begin and to obscure the real purpose, which is to nudge the Achaians to rebel against the chiefs. A mechanism must, therefore, be introduced to prevent this misunderstanding. There is a need for expressions appealing to the emotions of the audience directly, avoiding the slide into the propositional mode.

Non-linguistic mechanisms are familiar. Raising one's voice, banging on the table, gesturing wildly—all of these contrivances are in the arsenal of public speakers whose purpose is to prepare the audience for action. They are designed to divert the audience's attention from the propositional syntax of the speaker's utterance, to prevent the audience from searching for the propositional content and from assessing its truth value. An aspiring master persuader would look for a linguistic mechanism serving an analogous function. The mechanism should be some kind of a linguistic expression designed to be employed exclusively in the rhetorical mode. I shall attempt to show that mechanisms of this nature can be found, and that their proper understanding would allow us to resolve some of the thorny issues in the current debate on offensive speech.

4   The Rhetorical Function of Insults

Every regular alliance is an alliance against something and often also someone. Such an alliance will be forged, in great part, by linguistic means. Potential allies should be shown why the cause is worthwhile. If the alliance builder wishes to gather the support for his cause, and if the alliance comes at the expense of another individual—an excluded one, a rival, an enemy—then he will seek to portray that individual in a negative light while at the same time stressing the positive characteristics of the alliance members.

If the picture lately sketched is taken for granted, it seems that this alliance building by linguistic means will be carried out in the rhetorical mode. Yet the expressions and syntactic forms deployed in that mode can also be deployed in the propositional mode. Separating between the two modes on any given occasion, one expects, will not be trivial.

One way this separation can be achieved is by working with a sufficiently rich notion of context. We have seen earlier how insulting expressions can be used in building alliances. But whether a particular expression counts as insulting will, on the present view, be determined by the context of utterance. If I come to the doctor's office, he might utter matter-of-factly the sentence:

$$\text{You are an alcoholic.} \tag{2}$$

He utters the statement in the privacy of his office, in a regular voice, typing my information into the computer. He then proceeds to recommend an appropriate treatment. He states it as a diagnosis, a necessary first step in a treatment. By contrast, if a sneering colleague announces that same fact at a business meeting, uttering (2) in the presence of many people, our collegiate relationship may well be over. What elements are responsible for this divergent interpretation?

The predicate 'ξ is an alcoholic' belongs in the vocabulary normally used in the propositional mode. Semantically, the statement appears to carry factual content. To say that x is an alcoholic is to ascribe a certain property to the individual x, and this ascription can be either true or false. What made the utterance offensive in the second case is the features of the context. We might explain it as follows. The speaker insulted the 'target' (the person targeted by the insult), because with his utterance he represented the target as a person not suitable for a range of social tasks. Moreover, the target would normally be able to understand (to infer or to grasp immediately) what the purpose of the utterance should have been, and how that utterance would have been interpreted by the audience. That understanding could be gleaned from the salient features of the context. If the audience, for instance, consisted of recovering alcoholics who also happen to be business colleagues, the statement might well not have been insulting. In the event, however, there was no salient reason for the speaker to utter (2)—no reason, that is, other than to offend.

'ξ is an alcoholic' is an 'incidental insult'. There are occasions where its literal use can be interpreted as insulting. Some other expressions may be wearing the offensive content on their sleeves. If a colleague casually said:

$$\text{You are a sot,} \tag{3}$$

it would be taken as offensive. It certainly would be offensive in the context of a business meeting. Still, there would be contexts, one may argue, where even that term is not offensive. Perhaps a close friend concludes our intimate private conversation about my addiction with (3) and a suggestion to check into a clinic.

5   Testing Semantic Identity

But does the offensive colleague say anything different from the doctor? Both attribute a quality to the subject, but is it the same quality on both occasions? Perhaps the semantic content of the predicate 'ξ is a sot' should be given as 'ξ is an alcoholic'. When we say that someone is a sot, we say semantically nothing more and nothing less that he is an alcoholic, while registering non-semantically our attitudes towards that individual (or perhaps towards alcoholism generally, or alcoholic drinks, or the class of alcoholics as a whole).

A classic test for this hypothesis of meaning equivalence would be to embed the predicates in oblique contexts. We ask whether:

$$\text{Lenin believes that Mussorgsky is an alcoholic} \tag{4}$$

should entail:

$$\text{Lenin believes that Mussorgsky is a sot.} \tag{5}$$

Now it seems to me that the test is inconclusive. If Mussorgsky happens to be just some unfamiliar person, then an average speaker may concede the entailment. Suppose, though, that Mussorgsky is Lenin's favourite composer. Then, conceivably, Lenin would vehemently deny that Mussorgsky is a sot ('You should not speak like that about my favourite composer!'), while admitting that he is an alcoholic.

This latter feature leads to another test, of denial and negation. Someone who wants to deny that Mussorgsky is an alcoholic, can do so with a straightforward negation:

$$\text{No, Mussorgsky is not an alcoholic.} \tag{6}$$

And now, even Lenin can very well utter:

$$\text{No, Mussorgsky is not a sot, he is merely an alcoholic.} \tag{7}$$

If the two predicates had the same meaning, Lenin would have contradicted himself. Since his statement sounds sensible enough, it seems we have evidence, after all, that the sentences 'x is an alcoholic' and 'x is a sot' attribute different properties to x.

6   Property Ascription

Observe now that the locution 'merely' is not superfluous. If the speaker said:

$$\text{No, Mussorgsky is not a sot, he is an alcoholic,} \tag{8}$$

he would have implied that the predicates stand in no logical relation to each other, as in:

$$\text{No, Mussorgsky is not Polish, he is Russian.} \tag{9}$$

By 'merely' the speaker signals a relation between being an alcoholic and being a sot. A very intuitive idea would be to say that the predicate 'ξ is a sot' is a conjunction of predicates in disguise. When we say that someone is a sot, we say that he is an alcoholic of a pernicious kind, that in addition to being an alcoholic he is stupid, unkempt, smelly. Thus Lenin's utterance (7) should be parsed as:

No, Mussorgsky is not a stupid, smelly alcoholic; he is an alcoholic

simpliciter, neither stupid, nor smelly. (10)

The idea that offensive statements ascribe certain properties to the subject is often advanced in the literature on slurs, though its theoretical representations

vary.[2] In the inferentialist treatment propounded by Dummett and Williamson the use of 'x is a Boche' should mandate an inference to 'x is cruel'. In Hom's semantic externalism, a conjunction of repugnant properties is part of the semantic value of a pejorative. According to the related null-extensionality thesis of Hom and May, someone who asserts 'a is a Boche' thereby asserts that Germans are inherently cruel (or inherently possess some other repugnant property).[3]

The material adequacy of these forms of analysis is deficient. They attribute to the user a theoretical commitment to associating with a given class of people (Germans or alcoholics) certain determinate properties. This means that there should be a broad agreement among the competent users of the pejorative predicates as to which properties should be associated with the objects in its extension. It is not sensible to expect any such agreement.

A significantly weakened version of the view, that for each user there must at least be one property associated with the extension, is also not credible. When asked about which property he typically associates with sots, other than the property of being an alcoholic, the speaker may be puzzled. Even if he eventually comes up with an answer, the initial difficulty itself is telling. If taken at face value, it should cast doubt on his competence with the term.

There is also a more general problem here, at least if the picture sketched at the outset is correct. An assumption behind the property ascription thesis is that the user of pejorative expressions, at least when they occur in declarative sentences, makes an assertion about how the world is. The addressees of his statement similarly evaluate it on the basis of its truth value. This assumption can be challenged.

The plausibility of the property ascription thesis in large part rests on the possibility of pairing some pejoratives with descriptive terms:

$$\text{sot} \sim \text{alcoholic}$$
$$\text{faggot} \sim \text{homosexual}$$
$$\text{junkie} \sim \text{drug addict.}$$

There are certain descriptions a person should satisfy for him to be called a 'sot', 'faggot', or 'junkie'. One might hate Tchaikovsky as much as one pleases, but calling him a 'sot' reveals the speaker's insufficient command of the language (if he is aware of relevant historical facts). By contrast, it would not be linguistically incompetent for the speaker knowledgeable about Mussorgsky's life to call that composer a 'sot'.

---

[2] Terminological note: in [5] the class of pejoratives consists of swear words, insults, and slurs. Here I ignore swear words completely. I hope it should become clear by the end of this essay why their analysis should differ in principle from the analysis of the other two kinds of expressions. The use of pejoratives, in the present terminology, is normally taken as being *offensive* against someone, a quality shared by 'insults' and 'slurs'. This is in line with the nominal definition in [6], where, rather oddly, the author still includes swear words under the same heading. For an alternative classification of pejoratives and slurs see [7].

[3] See [5,7,10].

But consider the expressions 'bastard' or 'motherfucker'. There are no descriptive terms conventionally correlated with them. Originally, these particular terms may have had transparent descriptive meanings, but these are no longer relevant in the current use. 'Bastard' referring to an illegitimate child and 'bastard' a pejorative word are in the current use two homonyms.

What is then the canonical use of 'bastard'? *Is* there such a use? As we have already agreed that there is a level of semantic content separating insulting expressions from non-insulting ones, the canonical use of 'bastard' must be different from the canonical use of any non-insulting expression. With no neutral correlates available, the person apparently does not have to meet any special conditions, does not have to belong to any distinct group, to be called 'bastard'. Such expressions may be called *pure insults*.

7   Expressivism

Rather than saying that the competent use of the insulting term should purport to associate properties with the target, we can say that it purports to express the attitudes of the speaker. Hence the expressivist proposal:[4]

E1. A term t is *insulting* if it is used to *express* derogatory attitudes of the speaker towards the target.

But this formula is inadequate, so far as it fails to capture the reactions of the target. If the speakers use an expression with the full intention of expressing derogatory attitudes, but the targets routinely fail to take an insult, to be insulted, then the expression is not insulting.

Of course if no target, or very few, took an insult when t is applied to them, one would have to ask why t was supposed to express derogatory attitudes in the first place. For t to function as a vehicle for derogatory attitudes, the canonical occasions of its use—those we cite when explaining the term, and when we say that the term is used literally—these occasions must not be merely the occasions where the speaker wishes to express his beliefs or feelings about the target. There must be some other condition characterising the occasion, beyond the fact that the speaker was in a certain state of mind. Such a condition may be that the target is actually insulted. So we say:

E2. A term t is *insulting* if it is used to *express* derogatory attitudes of the speaker towards the target, and the target tends to *be insulted* by the fact of those attitudes.

This claim is not obviously circular. To be insulted is to have an emotional response to the expression of derogatory attitudes. What it consists in we can hope to clarify further without invoking the notion of insulting expression. The

---

[4] See [9] for a sophisticated generalised version of expressivism. See [8] for incorporating the specific idea about slurs' expressive function into a non-expressivist semantic account.

canonical occasion for using an insulting expression would be one where the speaker means to insult, and the target is indeed insulted.

Still, this is not a satisfying solution: its material adequacy is questionable. Suppose Stalin reads in Lenin's private diary:

$$\text{This Stalin is a real bastard!} \tag{11}$$

It seems to me that Stalin could be upset or angry. He would not be insulted. To be insulted is an emotional response, but it is not a response to the bare fact of the attitudes itself, to the bare evidence of these attitudes. One imagines that Stalin would be insulted if Lenin uttered (11) face to face, and even more so if in public. *Ceteris paribus*, the bigger the audience, the bigger the insult. For the insult to occur, the derogatory attitudes should be expressed in a public setting.

To show now the weakest spot of expressivism, let me take a step back and ask how we should think of those 'derogatory attitudes' whose central role has been taken for granted by expressivism. Again, in the case of 'bastard' or even 'motherfucker', it is rather difficult to pinpoint the specific attitudes. All the same, let us pretend that on some occasions the speaker would express the belief that the target is unreliable, as in this expanded version of (11):

> While I have been ill, Stalin tried to grab more power in the Central
> Committee. This Stalin is a real bastard! (12)

Something has gone wrong. If all that Lenin meant to express was Stalin's unreliability, there would again be little reason for Stalin to be insulted. Even if Lenin were to say in public merely that Stalin was unreliable, that would be an occasion for a debate, not for an insult.

I fear we are nearing a dead-end. A derogatory attitude is not merely a belief or a feeling about a person (or possibly an animal or a work of art, but ignore any of that). It is *identified* in part by the way it is expressed. An attitude becomes derogatory when it tends to be manifested in a particular way—in an insulting way. Or perhaps it positively cannot be expressed other than in an insulting way. And this is a vicious circle.

8 Outline of the New Proposal

Expressivism has a sound intuition behind it. The attitudes of the speaker are relevant for understanding the linguistic mechanism of insults. Their role is just not that prominent. The true analysis of insults is as follows. Their very introduction into the language, the layer of content (in addition to others if there are any) that is properly insulting, is designed to represent the target as a relatively unsuitable partner in social cooperation. This representation should be understood as taking place in the rhetorical mode. The speaker, in using insults, directly appeals to the audience to treat the target as a socially unsuitable individual. As his utterance is in the rhetorical mode, he is not solemnly putting

forward a description, hoping that the audience would draw its own conclusions. His utterance is a call to action, not to reflection or examination.

I do not mean to say that insults are an exact linguistic equivalent of shouting or slamming the table. The speaker has, after all, to *persuade* the audience to shun the target. If he could command it to do so, there would be no essential role for insults play (or perhaps they would have been embedded solely in imperatives). The best way for the speaker to succeed in his rhetorical gambit is to appeal to the audience's emotions. The purpose is to let the members of the audience emotionally reject the target, to prepare them emotionally to shun and ostracise him. So insults often conveniently carry connotations (in the Millian sense of the term) that appeal to the audience's disgust, contempt, sense of revulsion. The use of 'motherfucker' does not predicate any sexual behaviour of the subject. But to call someone a 'motherfucker', with the connotation of a universally repulsive form of incest, is effective in immediately creating a negative emotional attitude towards the target. The same goes for 'bastard', but with this expression gradually losing its negative connotation, it is also far less effective and less insulting than before.

I should now speak of the emotional states of the target and of the speaker himself, and of the roles these states play in understanding insults. An expression is insulting when the target has a regular emotional response to its utterance. The target, we say, is emotionally insulted by a linguistically insulting expression. Under the present analysis, an insulting utterance has an intended audience. The purpose is to make the audience shun the target of the insult. The semantic stability of insults, i.e. the fact that they have canonical occasions of their use (as opposed to incidental insults such as 'ξ is an alcoholic'), means that the target can easily recognise the ostracising significance of their utterance.

Emotional reactions to the situations of ostracism are hardly a mystery. If human organisms are products of evolution, then being hurt by acts of ostracism should have conferred an evolutionary advantage. In the first place, being hurt alerts the victim that something has gone wrong, that this type of situation should be avoided. It does not, however, inform the individual where exactly the problem is, or how it should be solved. Hurt of the kind we now examine can also produce a shock. The victim can be shocked into silence, may become extremely passive. In this way he can accumulate more reserves, mental or physical, to recover from the psychological injury. Finally, outward manifestations of hurt inform others of the necessity to avoid putting themselves in similar situations.

The features just mentioned are in fact the features characterising physical pain.[5] It thus appears possible to align the hurt inflicted by insults with physical pain. Recent research goes a long way toward defending the alignment.[6]

What of the attitudes of the speaker? Should the speaker, at least on canonical occasions, be present in a heightened emotional state, and should he have cognitive attitudes towards the target congruent with the insulting expressions he is using? I think the significance of this issue has been rather overrated. If an

---

[5] See [2].
[6] See [3].

average speaker does not have those congruent attitudes, if he, for instance, is simply paid to deliver his insults, these insults would not be too effective. The audience would be able to gather the lack of passion and the lack of conviction. The speaker would appear insincere. I suppose it is a general theorem in the art of rhetoric that in order to persuade, one has to appear sincere. And of course one simple way to appear sincere is to be sincere. Thus we normally expect the speaker to possess those congruent attitudes, to really believe that the target is contemptible, disgusting, and deserves to be shunned. But these characteristics of the speaker's condition, to repeat, are not necessitated by semantic analysis; they are contingent facts of human psychology.

9   The Case of Slurs

I have now spoken of pure insults. I wish now to say a few words about slurs. It is well to distinguish the two categories. In the first place, unlike pure insults, slurs have neutral correlates. Secondly, the worst offences, in the linguistic realm, are caused by slurs. Thirdly, the semantic behaviour of slurs appears different from that of pure insults. I will comment on the last point before turning to the other two.

It is argued that slurs remain offensive under negation or when embedded in indirect speech. When Lenin says

$$\text{Stalin is a bastard,} \tag{13}$$

one can straightforwardly deny the statement:

$$\text{No, Stalin is not a bastard} \tag{14}$$

without sounding offensive. But when Stalin says:

$$\text{Tchaikovsky is a faggot,} \tag{15}$$

to merely deny the statement would remain offensive:

$$\text{No, Tchaikovsky is not a faggot.} \tag{16}$$

Even more interestingly, slurs wreak havoc in indirect speech.[7] Suppose Lenin wishes to record what Stalin said about Tchaikovsky and then repudiate his derogatory attitude:

Stalin said yesterday that Tchaikovsky was a faggot, but I do not share his attitudes to homosexuals. (17)

Evidently, Lenin does not wish his remark to be offensive to Tchaikovsky. It is widely accepted that Lenin should fail. His utterance does not merely convey the other speaker's offence—it is itself offensive.

---

[7] See [9].

What I have to say about these phenomena is somewhat close to the views developed in [1], but I will not try to map out the points of contact.[8] I want to begin by noting that pure insults can similarly remain offensive in indirect speech and under negation. Unfortunately, I can find no clear-cut example in the English language; and in any borderline cases, not being a native speaker, I would not trust my linguistic intuitions.

But there is, I think, a perfect example in Russian (you will have to trust me on this one). The Russian language contains the word '*moudak*'. It is part of the Russian '*mat*', or argo, the forbidden part of the language. That was the case at least until a few decades ago, before general laxity took root. So I will be describing the situation then, rather than at present. '*Moudak*' is similar to 'motherfucker' or 'bastard' in that it is used to insult, having no neutral correlate. It is not meant to identify a stable group characterisable in descriptive terms. Yet it is probably a purer insult: whatever its ancient etymological origins, to the modern user of the word it should carry no Millian connotations.

But in other regards '*moudak*' is closer to slurs. For suppose Stalin says:

$$\text{Trotsky is a } moudak. \tag{18}$$

Then, if Lenin denies:

$$\text{No, Trotsky is not a } moudak, \tag{19}$$

he would still sound offensive. And again, if Lenin says:

Stalin said yesterday that Trotsky was a *moudak*, but I do not share his views and attitudes, (20)

he would sound offensive. But ask this: offensive to whom? And I think to any Russian speaker it should be clear that Lenin is not offensive specifically to Trotsky. He is rather offensive to the people gathered around. The word is not supposed to be uttered in a polite society. It is a gross offence against manners. People around recoil from hearing the word not because it offends Trotsky, but because it makes them cringe, as any violation of manners would.

You will now say that in (20) Lenin did not utter the word. He merely quoted the word, hence in effect named the word without uttering it. He might have as well said, 'that word, you know, the M-word', and that would not have been offensive. This observation is correct. But the answer is just around the corner. Quoting the offensive word still reminds the speakers of the word itself. And locating the offensiveness of '*moudak*' in the domain of manners completes the explanation. For suppose that Stalin passed gas in Lenin's presence. Lenin promptly leaves the room and goes to the party comrades to inform them what Stalin has accomplished. If now Lenin says:

Imagine what just happened: Stalin passed gas! This is gross, no one should ever do that, (21)

---

[8] However, I do not endorse the general theory of slurs in [1].

arguably he, and certainly not Stalin, is already offensive to the people around him. No-one should even mention such episodes. But if Lenin, instead of merely saying what Stalin did, resolved to demonstrate it symbolically (perhaps by making a similar sound, or even by passing gas himself), he would have been *much more* offensive, and no less offensive than Stalin originally was.

Thus, I wish to suggest, the offensiveness of slurs in embedded constructions should be viewed in a similar light. It came to be that certain slurs, such as 'faggot', 'nigger', 'cunt', have become unacceptable in a civilised society. With regard to their status in a public conversation, they are now on a par with '*moudak*'. In indirect speech, for example, their offence is real, but its nature has changed. They do not offend *as* slurs. They offend as any prohibited segment of language would.[9]

10   Review

For a predicate expression F contained in a sentence S ('x is F') to count as an insult, it should be used in a situation having a number of contextual elements. There should be an audience to whom the utterance of S is addressed. There should be a target of the insult, an individual who the speaker wishes to be shunned, excluded from certain, more or less salient, forms of social cooperation. The purpose of the utterance of S is to persuade the audience, by appeal to their emotions, to shun the target. Slurs have the canonical occasions of use structurally identical to the occasions of insults. The details should vary, so far as slurs possess neutral correlates. This modified treatment of slurs I have not attempted to pursue here.

References

1. Anderson, L., Lepore, E.: Slurring words. Noûs **47**(1), 25–48 (2013)
2. Bateson, P.: Assessment of pain in animals. Anim. Behav. **42**, 827–839 (1991)
3. Eisenberger, N.I.: The neural bases of social pain. Psychosom. Med. **74**(2), 126–135 (2012)
4. Green, P.: The Iliad/Homer. University of California Press, Berkeley (2015). Green, P., translated
5. Hom, C.: Pejoratives. Philos. Compass **5**(2), 164–185 (2010)
6. Hom, C.: A puzzle about pejoratives. Philos. Stud. **159**, 383–405 (2012)
7. Hom, C., May, R.: Moral and semantic innocence. Anal. Philos. **54**(3), 293–313 (2013)
8. Jeshion, R.B.: Slurs, dehumanization, and the expression of contempt. In: Sosa, D. (ed.) Bad Words. Oxford University Press (2016)

---

[9] Another brick in the argument would be the observation that some slurs fail to offend in indirect speech or under negation. Examples should include 'junkie', 'doper', 'sot'. These are all unquestionably slurs, e.g., easily meeting the conditions of Jeshion's semantics in [8]. Hence it is a particular property of some slurs that makes them behave in a strange way in embedded constructions.

9. Potts, C.: The expressive dimension. Theoret. Linguist. **33**(2), 165–198 (2007)
10. Williamson, T.: Reference, inference, and the semantics of pejoratives. In: Almog, J., Leonardi, P. (eds.) The Philosophy of David Kaplan, pp. 137–158. Oxford University Press (2009)