USING LANGUAGE TO OFFEND: A LOOK AT INSULTS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD.*

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Abstract: Language is an important tool used to communicate information, to establish and maintain harmonious social relations. However, in their daily use, people may engage in actions that impinge in some degree upon a person's face and thus produce utterances that offend. This paper highlights insults construction. Following Antoine Culioli's theory of enunciative operations, the paper examines some insulting utterances, their syntactic structures and the effect meanings they induce. The paper shows that insulting utterances result from underlying operations carried out by the utterer. Structures such as $\emptyset+(Adj)+Noun$, $You+(Adj)+Noun$, combined with words oriented negatively, confer on the utterance an insulting effect. However, depending on context, insults may fail and thus express solidarity instead.

Key words: co-utterer, insult, language, offend, reference, structure, utterance, utterer.

Résumé : La langue est un important outil qui permet de communiquer des informations, d'établir et de maintenir des relations sociales harmonieuses. Cependant, dans l'usage quotidien de la langue, il peut arriver que l'on s'engage dans des actions pouvant, à un certain degré, attaquer la face, et, par conséquent, favoriser la réalisation d'énoncés offensants. Cette étude met en lumière la construction de l'insulte. Se fondant sur la théorie des opérations énonciatives d'Antoine Culioli, l'étude examine quelques énoncés insultants, leurs structures syntaxiques et les effets de sens qui en découlent. L'étude montre que, l'insulte résulte d'opérations sous-jacentes effectuées par l'énonciateur. Des structures telles que $\emptyset+(Adj)+Nom$, $You+(Adj)+Nom$, se combinent aux mots orientés négativement, et confèrent à l'énoncé un effet insultant. Cependant, selon le contexte, il arrive que l'insulte échoue et exprime plutôt la solidarité.

Mots-clés: co-énonciateur, énoncé, énonciateur, insulte, langue, offense, référence, structure.

Introduction

Language is a double sword which can both hurt and heal. When two people speaking the same language who have never met before come face to face they start talking to each other about simple things. Language is a real means of communicating information, a remarkable means of establishing and promoting social relationships. However, there are times when people engage in what Goffman (1967) identifies as 'aggressive face,' use linguistic items and structures to attack face, thus hurt sensitivities and negatively affect social relations.

This paper highlights insults construction. Some questions are, what are really insults? What are the syntactic structures used in constructing insults? What are their referential values? Interactions between characters provide structures on insults construction. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part describes insults. The second identifies some syntactic structures involved in insults constructions. The third part analyses the identified structures building on A. Culioli's theory of enunciative operations[1].

1. Characterising Insults

Insults are described as expressions or behaviours that are often deliberately offensive toward someone. Insults can be verbal or non-verbal. For instance, slamming the door on a person's face, showing a person's rude behaviour, is offensive though no word is uttered. Insulting, indeed, does not always require using language. However, insults may, in many occasions, involve using language. Using language to insult may mean deliberately using language to humiliate, to degrade. Using language to insult may mean using words, linguistic structures to belittle the target. This is the reason why insults are often categorised among impoliteness formulae. As J. Culpeper (2009, p.529) points out: "and what about acts that simply attack face threats, insults, put-downs, sarcasms, mimicry and so on? Goffman (1967) mentions 'aggressive facework'. Clearly politeness is not the issue here but rather impoliteness."

Insults are indeed regarded as ways of manifesting impoliteness. J. Culpeper (2005b, p38) defines impoliteness as follows: "Impoliteness comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives behaviour as intentionally face-attacking or a combination of (1) and (2)". Thus, using language to insult may imply

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[1] The theory is neatly presented by Culioli (2018).

using impolite language that is, using an abusive, threatening language. Besides, J. Culpeper (2017, p.15) states that among impoliteness formulae, insults are the most frequently used: "with respect to other impoliteness formulae such as threats, dismissals, curses and so forth, they are the most frequent type". It is worth mentioning that, there are cases of mock impoliteness, where speakers use impolite expressions to each other but, in context, these expressions are likely to be interpreted not as sincere attacks on face but as expressions of solidarity. For instance, impolite expressions such as "old fool" uttered in a context which is that of a conversation between close friends would certainly be interpreted as an expression of solidarity.

Another characteristic of insults is that they are communicative devices. Indeed, as the speaker utters an insult he/she basically intends to offend the target. When using an abusive language, the speaker, on one hand, intends to communicate destructive opinions about the target. On the other hand, he/she communicates about his/her rude nature. As M. Martinez and F. Yus (2000, p.97) mentions: "Insults are distinguishably human. They are emphatic manifestations of our intentions, evidence of our feelings, and very often a clear exhibition of our aggressive nature". Therefore, not only does an insulting utterance basically intend to offend the target but it also demonstrates the speaker's rude nature.

Characterising insults, one may also resort to Lab and Rieu (1998)'s definition. Indeed, according to F. Lab and C. Rieu (1998, p.154), "defining insults comes down to this saying by Macduff in Shakespeare's Macbeth: 'I have no words_ my voice is in my sword: thou bloodier villain. Than terms can give thee out!" Insults are thus perceived as striking a blow at someone and, the weapons used are words. It is through words we act and, as Lab and Rieu (1998, p.154) rightly mentions, "in linguistic terms, insults are performative." [our translation]. Being performative is, indeed, an important characteristic of verbal insults. You accomplish the act of insulting by saying it. In linguistic terms, you can, for instance, teach without saying it, but you cannot insult without saying it. If you do not say anything, there is no insulting act.

2. Identifying Insulting Utterances

An observation of utterances reveals that insults construction may involve using the nominal forms   *Ø+Adj+Noun*, *You Ø+Adj+Noun*, *that+Adj+Noun* as illustrated in the following utterances.

(1) 'Shut up! ***Bloody fool***' shouted the policeman in English. (AOG, 151)

(2)   -'Nobody has called your name in this, ***ant-hill nose***.

  -You are asking for a cry.' (AOG, 65)

(3) What can happen to Earth, ***silly girl***? asked Nwafo. (AOG, 65)

(4) 'Shut up! ***You black monkeys*** and get down to work!' Mr Wright had a grating voice but

  one that carried for. (AOG, 83)

(5) -'If you have a grain of sense, in your belly', said Obika, you will know you are not in the

  house of the white man'.

  -Tell ***that young man*** to take care how he talks to me. If he has not heard of me he should

   ask those who have. (AOG, 138)

  Insults construction may also imply using verbal forms as *Noun+cop be+Adj*, *interrogatives*, *imperatives* and *conditionals* as in the following utterances.

(6) -***The fellow is mad***, said Obika.

  -No, my friend. If anyone is mad it's you. (AOG, 139)

(7) I say shut your mouth! ***Are you mad?*** (AOG, 129)

(8) -***Am I talking to a person or a carved nkwu?***

  -I don't know where he is. (AOG, 59)

 (9) ***Are you mad to attack a white man?*** screamed Moses in sheer amazement. (AOG, 82)

(10) ***Are you telling us***, Father of my Mother, ***that you regard us as market women?*** I have

  borne your insults patiently. (AOG, 23-24)

 (11) (…) ***When did you people learn to fling words in my face?*** (AOG, 129)

 (12) -'Tell that young man to take care how he talks to me. If he has not heard of me he should

  ask those who have.

  -***'Go and eat shit'***. (AOG, 138)

 (13) -'Let nobody call my name there!' shouted the other wife.

  -You, ***shut your mouth***, said Ezeule, turning to her; 'nobody has called your name'. (AOG, 129)

 (14) ***If you want to shout like a castrated bull***, you must wait until you return to Umuaro. The

  ensuing fight was grim. (AOG, 24)

 (15) '***If you have a grain of a sense in your belly***' said Obika, you will know that you are not

  in the house of the house of the white man but in Umuaro!

Hold your tongue, Obika. (AOG, 138)

(16) 'Move another step, *if you call yourself a man.*' (AOG, 24)

3. Analysing the Identified Insulting Utterances

In utterances (1), (2) and (3), the insult bears on the nominal form *Ø+Adj+Noun*. In 'Ø bloody fool', 'Ø ant-hill nose', 'Ø silly girl', the words 'bloody', 'ant-hill', 'silly' have an adjective value. They are used by the speaker to say something about the physical and psychological identity of the addressee. 'Silly' in 'silly girl' is used in its first meaning, that is showing a lack of thought, of judgment which, describes negatively the co-utterer. 'Bloody', 'ant-hill' qualifying respectively 'fool', 'nose', on the contrary, are not used in their first meanings. An ant-hill, indeed, is a mount of earth usually of about two meters high built by termites. 'Ant-hill' and 'bloody' are oriented negatively, they describe the co-utterer as having an unattractive physical aspect, a cruel nature.

With these words oriented negatively, the referential value of the structure *Ø+Adj+Noun* contributes to the construction of these insulting utterances. Indeed, in 'bloody fool' 'ant-hill nose', 'silly girl', the noun occurs with the zero article. For Culioli, (quoted in Bouscaren and al. (1992, p.100),

> The zero article (that is when there is no surface determiner), followed by the singular or the plural always, refers to the notion or to be more precise it refers to the constructed notional domain, that is to say the underlying predicative relation. For example, if we take Ø oil, we refer to 'that which is oil' as opposed to 'that which is not oil'.

In 'ant-hill nose', 'bloody fool', 'silly girl', reference is made to the notions 'be - ant-hill nose', 'be - bloody fool', 'be - silly girl' as opposed to 'that which is not be - ant-hill nose, not be - bloody fool, not - be silly girl'. With 'Ø ant-hill nose' 'Ø bloody fool' 'Ø silly girl', there is high degree of attribution of properties to the grammatical subject (noted C_0) which, combined with lexical items oriented negatively contributes to insults construction. The co-utterer's response 'you are asking for a cry' in (2), for instance, shows he perceives the offence.

In utterance (4), the insult is expressed with the nominal form *You+Ø+Adj+Noun*. Indeed, according to C. Potts and T. Roeper (2006, p.184) "this form is as expressive or conveying 'emotive force' and more precisely, as 'self-disapprobation'. As in (1) and (2) the words used (especially 'monkeys') are oriented negatively. The word 'monkey' firstly

designates a small primate which lives in trees; calling a person an animal name is offensive. Besides, in the nominal form *You+Ø+Adj+Noun*, the noun occurs with the zero article and indicates attribution of the property 'be - black monkeys' to the C_0 'you'. Indeed, the second person pronoun 'you' here has a deictic use and refers to the co-utterer, that is, whoever being addressed. If in the nominal form *Ø+Adj+Noun*, the co-utterer is implicitly mentioned, in the form *You+Ø+Adj+Noun*, on the contrary, the co-utterer is explicitly identified as the target of the insult. Thus, *You+Ø+Adj+Noun*, in terms of insults, appears more offensive as it overtly attributes the meaning expressed by the noun to the co-utterer. In *Ø+Adj+Noun*, there is no clear mention of the co-utterer, thus, the utterer in (1), (2) or (3) can deny the co-utterer as the target of the insult. In *You+Ø+Adj+Noun*, the utterer cannot.

In utterance (5), the adjective 'young' qualifying the noun 'man' is oriented negatively. Indeed, the word 'young' means having lived or existed for only a short time, not old; in this context, the person (here the co-utterer) designated as 'young' is not really young. The utterer means 'the man' is troublesome, he behaves like a delinquent. 'Be young', that is, 'be troublesome', 'be delinquent' is a characteristic the utterer attributes to the target, here the co-utterer. Besides, the presence of the pinpointing marker 'that' in 'that young man' contributes to insult construction. Indeed, F. Lab and C. Rieu (1998, p.161), describes 'that' as "the trace of an operation that contributes to the insulting effect of nouns."[our translation]. 'That', indeed, is a differentiation marker[2]. Saying, 'that young man', the utterer indicates that the designated person is part of the utterer's non-self-sphere[3]. 'That young man' means what the utterer does not include in his sphere of utterance. It is this value of the operator that confers an insulting effect on the nominal 'young man'. By saying 'that young man' the utterer does not want to recognize the person he is talking about as close to him; this confers on the utterance an insulting effect. 'That' has a 'distancing' effect which, indeed, fits insults.

In utterance (6), the verb form used is *Noun+Copula be+Adj*. By saying 'the fellow is mad', the utterer means 'the fellow' (that is implicitly the co-utterer) is identifiable to 'mad'. The utterer is asserting something, he indicates the identification operation between the noun 'the fellow' and the predicate 'mad' is validated. Compared to the forms *Ø+Adj+Noun* or *You+Ø+Adj+Noun*, for example, the form *Noun+Copula be+Adj* seems to have less emotive force due to the type of operation performed by the utterer. Indeed, as we have an assertion, the utterer selects only one value that is, 'you - be mad' as true. However, the co-utterer may

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[2] For Culioli, a differentiation operation is established as X ≠ Y, that is, X is not identifiable to Y(quoted in Bouscaren and al. 1992, p.151)

[3] A. Joly and T. Fraser (1980) distinguishes between the sphere of self and the sphere of the non-self.

play on the other value that is, ''you - not be mad'. With the structures *Ø+Adj+Noun* and *You+Ø+Adj+Noun* by contrast, there is no proper assertion and the insult is born with no possible questioning.

Insults in utterances (7), (8), (9), (10) and (11) take the form of interrogatives. Huddleston (1984) points out that interrogative clauses include different answer types:

> Who broke the windows? The answers include 'I broke the window', Tom broke the window (…) and so on. They are all of the semantic form 'X broke the window' supplying different values for the variable X. Such questions are commonly called X-questions and of course the kind questions that wh interrogatives are normally expressed. In the case of 'is she alive or dead?', by contrast, the answers are simply 'he is alive' 'he is dead. Here the set of answers is derivable from the question itself (…) and such questions are called alternative questions. (Simplified from R. Huddleston, 1984, p. 367)

Utterances (7), (8), (9) and (10) are alternative questions. The C_0 'you' here is deictic and indicates the co-utterer as the target of the insult. In these utterances, the utterer establishes a relation between 'you' and 'be mad', 'you' and 'be telling us…', 'you' and 'be mad to attack…', but does not endorse the predicative relation. He leaves it up to the co-utterer to endorse the predicative relation either positively or negatively or not at all if he wishes. (7) and (8) for example, can be glossed by 'you are mad?' 'you are not mad? , state it co-utterer'; 'I am telling to a person? I am not telling to a person? , state it co-utterer'. The utterer invites the co-utterer to state if the predicative relations 'you/be mad', 'I/tell to a person or a carved nkwu', are validated.

In utterance (11), the person who is asking the question 'when did you people learn to fling words in my face?' already knows that the persons he is talking with 'learn to fling words in his face'. Indeed, the utterer indicates that, at a moment before now, 'learn to fling words in my face' was true. The utterer establishes the predicative relation 'you/learn to …' as true at a moment disconnected from T_0 (the moment of utterance) and invites the co-utterer to locate the precise time of the event. The gloss for (11) would be 'you learned to fling words in my face yesterday? Two years ago? (…), state the precise time, co-utterer'. In these interrogative clauses, the insult results from that the utterer establishes a propositional content, with words oriented negatively, with the co-utterer as the target, and invites the co-utterer to validate.

Utterances (12) and (13) are imperatives, they are cases of direct orders and imply that in Sit_0 (the situation of utterance), there is not 'you/go and eat shit', 'you/ shut your mouth'. Here, the utterer wants the co-utterer to perform 'go and eat shit' 'shut your mouth'. The

utterer forces the interior I as the only domain to be selected. One gloss for (12) and (13) would be: 'Choose to do *go and eat shit*, totally exclude *not to go and eat shit'*. 'Choose to do *shut your mouth*, totally exclude *not to shut your mouth'*. The insult bears on the fact that the co-utterer is asked to carry out demeaning acts. For instance, shouting to an adult who is speaking to shut up is undoubtedly offensive.

In utterances (14), (15) and (16), the insult bears the form of conditional constructions. Indeed, the utterer constructs a hypothetical locator with 'if' and, from this hypothetical locator, asserts the propositional content in the protasis 'you/call yourself a man', 'you/want to shout …', 'you / have a grain of…'as largely true given the current circumstances. The gloss for (16) for instance, would be: 'in case it is true that you call yourself a man'. We have a hypothetical assertion of 'you/call yourself a man, 'you/want to shout…', 'you/have a grain of sense…' Here, the insult bears on the fact that, the utterer constructs a fictitious locator with 'if' and takes the propositional content as granted in Sit_0. The underlying operation characterising this construction in 'if' contributes, with words oriented negatively, to insults construction.

Examine the following utterance.

(17) Then he saw his wife turning water from the big pot outside the hut into a bowl. She stood

   up wearily and spat as she always did nowadays.

   - *Old woman.*

   -I have said if you know what you did to me you should come and undo it, she said,

   smiling. (AOG, 195)

In (17), as in (1), (2) and (3), the insult takes the form *Ø+Adj+Noun*. In 'old woman', reference is made to the notion 'be - old woman'. In some occasions, addressing a woman as 'old woman' would be offensive. By saying 'old woman', indeed, the utterer means a member of the class 'old woman'. However, in this context, the intended insult has failed as the co-utterer (here the wife), does not perceive it to be so. The co-utterer does not recognize the offensive nature of the utterance. Though composed of negatively oriented words and a structure that attributes a property of the C_0 (here the co-utterer), the nominal form 'old woman' does not generate any negative inference. The insult has failed and this utterance which would, in some occasions, be considered as demeaning is, by contrast, perceived as sympathising. As O' Driscoll (2020, p.73) rightly mentions, "the effects of insults can be cancelled by context". The nominal form 'old woman' here is indeed, not interpreted as a

sincere attack by the co-utterer but rather an expression of solidarity. The following sentence 'she said, smiling' shows good relationships among the speakers.

Re-examine utterances (3) and (6). In these utterances as mentioned above, the utterer attributes the property 'be silly', 'be mad' to the C_0 'girl', 'fellow', which, in this context results in insults. Indeed, by saying 'silly girl' here, the utterer intends to say the co-utterer lacks good sense, which, in fact, is belittling. However, in some occasions, saying 'silly girl' could be perceived as a bantering expression. For instance, when said between very close friends, this expression may not be perceived as offensive but rather heart-warning, sympathising. Besides, the utterance 'the fellow is mad' in (6), if said between friends during a large meal for instance, would actually be nothing offensive. It would certainly be understood completely differently and perceived as a mark of friendship. Therefore, depending on context, what would count as negative, as abusive, may be perceived as sympathising by the co-utterer.

Reconsider utterance (5). In the context presented in (5), the utterance 'Tell that young man…' offends and demeans the co-utterer. However, in some circumstances, it may be taken differently. Indeed, when said in a context where the word 'young' is not negatively oriented and means the opposite of old, this utterance, in spite of the presence of the marker 'that', may express sympathy. For instance, when said among friends referring to a player they admire as 'that young man' the underlying operation of differentiation characterising 'that' dwells, but because of the context, the utterance 'that young man' would certainly not have an insulting effect but rather an appreciative, complimenting effect. As Bouscaren and al. (1992, p.114) rightly points out: "*That* can also have a laudatory connotation. It is important to look at the context. 'The distance' relative to the utterer can be considered as either positive or negative".

Conclusion

This paper highlights insults construction. Building on A. Culioli's theory, the paper has demonstrated that insults result from underlying operations carried out by the utterer.

Nominal forms such *Ø+Adj+Noun*, *You Ø+ Adj +Noun*, indicating property attribution, *that +Adj+Noun* having a distancing effect, are used to make insulting utterances. Besides, verbal forms such as *Noun+cop be+Adj*, *interrogatives*, *imperatives* and *conditionals* are identified as traces of underlying operations which, combined with words oriented negatively, may lead to insults construction. The paper has shown that insults are

contextually dependant. A well-structured insult may fail depending on context. Thus, an insulting utterance basically intended to be face-threatening could, depending on context, not be interpreted as a sincere attack but rather an expression of solidarity, which indeed, could strengthen social relations.

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