

## ”HOPE YOU HAVE A SHIT BIRTHDAY YOU FAT CUNT” – cognitive strategies, rhetorical figures and linguistic means used in insulting Tweets

”HOPE YOU HAVE A SHIT BIRTHDAY YOU FAT CUNT”  
– strategie kognitywne, figury stylistyczne i środki językowe używane  
w określeniach obelżywych na Tweeterze

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### Abstract

The paper deals with offensive language gleaned from Twitter, encoded by (abusive) insults and verbal reactions to them. The study aims to analyse how they are constructed in terms of (i) the cognitive strategies employed by the insultees, (ii) rhetorical figures and (iii) linguistic devices used by both the insulters and insultees. The tweets are illustrative of the following shifts occurring in responses relative to insults: register clash, changing explicit insult into implicit, figure/ground reversal, syntactic echoing, changing abusive language into jocular or into an ironic insult, etc. The cognitive strategies employed by the insultees comprise: ignoring the insulting content, agreeing with the insult, and attacking the insulter with an explicit or implicit insult.


**Keywords:** impoliteness, offensive language, (abusive) insults, rhetorical devices, Twitter, social media, irony


### Streszczenie


Artykuł opisuje język obelżywy występujący na Twitterze, w szczególności (i) strategie kognitywne radzenia sobie z atakami werbalnymi, (ii) użyte figury retoryczne/stylistyczne oraz (iii) środki językowe wykorzystywane zarówno przez atakujących i atakowanych. Opisane tweety ilustrują następujące różnice między tweetami i odpowiedziami na nie: zmiana rejestru, zamiana eksplicytnego komentarza obelżywego na implicytny, odwrócenie figury i tła itp. Strategie kognitywne obejmują na przykład ignorowanie treści obelżywych, pozorną zgodę z komentarzem obelżywym oraz atakowanie osoby obrażającej eksplicytnym lub implicytnym komentarzem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** niegrzeczność, język obraźliwy, określenia obraźliwe i obelżywe, środki retoryczne, Twitter, media społecznościowe, ironia

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## **1. Introduction**

The study aims to examine instances of impolite language, mostly encoded by insults, as well as types of targets' reactions to insults based on data teased out from Twitter. The tweets analysed in this paper are illustrative of contrasts observed between pairs of offensive comments and replies to them at three levels: cognitive strategies employed by the insultees, rhetorical devices, and linguistic means. Social media are claimed to be ripe with impolite, in particular offensive and aggressive language (Graham, 2008; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017; Hardaker, 2017; McVittie et al., 2021), and for this reason, Twitter was selected as a source of data for the study of insults presented in the remainder of this paper.

As insults are incarnations of impolite verbal behaviour, also dubbed uncivil behaviour (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al., 2021; Bączkowska, 2021), in section 2, the difference between impoliteness and incivility will be discussed to present some background for the key concept of insults, which will be next contrasted with similar terms, such as abusive comments and slurs. The aim of the study and the descriptors are elaborated in Section 3. Section 4 delineates the data collection and methods of analysis, while the very results of the empirical study are described in section 5, which is followed by conclusions regarding the cognitive strategies deployed as well as rhetorical figures and linguistic devices, which are marshalled in section 6.

## **2. Incivility, impoliteness and insults**

### **2.1. Incivility**

In/civility is often discussed with reference to the historical development of some cultural concepts revolving around civilisation, which comprise civil society, ethos, norms, citizenship, and only more recently with allusions to the concept of courtesy (Sifianou, 2019). Strongly affiliated with in/civility are thus political connotations and democracy, as stressed by Orwin (1992) and Papacharissi (2004). Regarding political spheres, Muddiman (2017) distinguishes between two types of incivility: personal-level incivility (e.g., insults, impoliteness) and public-level incivility. Along with the political references, some socio-cultural aspects, such as stereotypes, are also associated with in/civility (Papacharissi, 2004; Sifianou, 2019). Furthermore, in line with Chen (2017) and Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2017), in/civility shows affinities with the language of power, particularly with using language to encode superiority, exert power and demonstrate control over interlocutors.

Interestingly, whilst these goals are typically achieved by intentional actions, Chen (2017) also allows non-deliberate measures involving strong, aggressive, and attacking remarks. From these proposals, it transpires that the term incivility bifurcates into two subtypes: one denoting behaviour at the social level and the other one tightly connected with interpersonal interaction. Mills (2017) is of the opinion that the term impoliteness should be reserved to designate socially unaccepted behaviour seen at the individual level.

## **2.2. Impoliteness**

Impoliteness is a concept primarily used in pragmatics (Culpeper, 1996, 2008, 2011; Bousfield, 2008), revolving around the act of face-threatening (Kienpointer, 1997). Building on the theory of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987), the scholars dealing with impoliteness redefined this concept and offered a new approach to it. Whilst politeness was seen by the classical account as a sheer failure to be polite and was conceived of in terms of a universal feature across and regardless of the languages used, the new perspective sees im/politeness as a strategic measure deployed by the speaker on purpose, i.e., intentionally (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 2008; Culpeper et al., 2003), albeit in later publications unintentional (Culpeper 2011) use of impolite behaviour has also garnered support (non-intentional impoliteness is also allowed by Terkourafi, 2008), and as a language- and interaction-specific facet of discourse. Impoliteness is thus analysed at the interpersonal level, unlike incivility, which encompasses wider social, cultural and political contexts. By necessity, these two concepts overlap to some degree, as situated im/politeness is embedded in culture-specific and social norms, mainly regulated by the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) code of conduct.

## **2.3. Insults**

Against this theoretical bedrock of incivility and impoliteness, it is possible to define some forms of impolite language, and specifically, a stronger form of it, i.e., offensive verbal behaviour, which is the topic of this paper. One of the incarnations of (usually) explicit, offensive language is an insult (for the proposal of other types of explicit offensiveness, see Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al., 2021). Once used to denote physical violence (Ilie, 2001, p. 238), the term insult comes from Latin *in* and *sultare*, which mean to *jump on*, it is now used in the metaphorical sense, usually to label hurting somebody (the target) verbally (Culpeper, 2011, p. xiii). An insult is defined as an assertion

of dominance and superiority (whether intentional or not) which shows disrespect (Neu, 2008, p. vii), is meant to hurt if used intentionally (Wajnryb, 2005, p. 19), through taunting and ridiculing (Culpeper, 2011, pp. xi-xiii), often with the use of name-calling and swear words (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, p. 85; Wajnryb, 2005, p. 19), and is assessed by the insultee (the target) as socially inappropriate and demeaning (Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000, pp. 71–73). An insult typically refers to an insultee's personal features or behaviour (Jeshion, 2013), as well as beliefs, achievements, bodily features, job, family or possessions (Archard, 2014, pp. 129–130). Several scholars have classified insults (Feinberg, 1985; Mateo and Yus, 2013; Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2000; Culpeper, 2011; Bączkowska, 2021). Subtypes of insults were offered by Feinberg (1985), who contrasted "pure insults" with calumnies, invectives and dominance claims. Speaker intention, insult interpretation and the insultee's reactions to insulting comments were elaborated by Mateo and Yus (2013) in line with the relevance-theoretic framework. Various aspects of insults were discussed by Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000), including semantic aspects, interactants' attitudes, context-dependence, level of formality, etc. The speaker-intended meaning and the target's reception of insults were the basis for a classification of insults for Bączkowska (2021). On the other hand, unlike the previous studies, Culpeper (2011) dealt with structural features of insults.

#### **2.4. Insults vs abusive comments and slurs**

In the taxonomy of explicit offensiveness proposed by Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al. (2021), insults are distinguished from abusive language on the strength of emotions they invoke: insults are seen as milder forms of offensiveness than abusive comments that draw on extremely offending expression. While this division has some justification and has also been acknowledged by other scholars (e.g., Cousens, 2020), the borderline between them may pose some problems, and thus, for the study presented here, no distinction is made between insulting and abusive comments. The insults examined below are, in fact, very harsh and vulgar, and thus they conflate with abusive language as proposed by Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk et al. (2021) or can be dubbed abusive insults.

Very often, insults are used synonymously with slurs (Cousens, 2020, p. 1), sometimes also seen as their subtypes (Meibauer, 2016, p. 145), that are either recognised on the strength of their illocutionary force (Meibauer, 2016) or perlocutionary effect (Allan, 2015). A clear dividing line, however, should be

drawn between the two terms. While insults predicate on personality features and possessives (even if expressed indirectly) and invoke varying aspects related to facets typical of an individual (Meibauer, 2016; Nunberg, 2018; Tenchini and Frigerio, 2020; Hess, 2020), slurs denote an individual by showing his/her affinities with a social, ethnic or demographic group characteristics ascribed to the individual, such as religion, social or professional group (e.g., immigrants, prostitutes, etc.), age, etc. (Croom, 2011; Allan, 2015; Cousens, 2020). In accord with this approach, calling someone *you stupid cunt* would be an insult as it refers to the individual's female intimate body part, which is exceptionally negatively evaluated (by resorting to vulgarity), by saying *you stupid migrant* would typify as a slur as it characterises an individual by filtering his features through a stereotype-laden view of a given social/ethnic group and indicating his membership therein. Slurs are often exploited in offensive language on social media, yet they will be ignored here as the study focuses solely on insults.

### **3. Aim of the study**

Recently, a number of papers have appeared that deal with offensiveness or impoliteness on social media. For example, the study by McVittie et al. (2021) shows various forms of offending on Twitter and reactions to the insulting comments, wherein the following categories are proposed: ascribing category membership to the first contributor, taking up first contributor self-identification, syntactic echoing and co-constructing criticism of himself. While generally, the study offers an interesting and a novel insight into ways of dealing with offensive language on Twitter, the categories are not based on the same criterion as they refer either to some fine-grained psychological strategies the target resorts to or to a language-based transformation (syntactic echoing). Drawing on this proposal, this paper aims to extend the categories and offer a more linguistics-oriented classification that marshals the measures used by the insulter and insultee in line with three levels of description: cognitive strategies, rhetorical figures (a term used interchangeably with rhetorical devices, stylistic devices or figures of speech) and language means (language devices). The typology proposed in this paper is believed to provide a comprehensive description of offensive language encoded by both the speaker and the target, and, along with one offered by McVittie et al. (2020), it can provide further insight into the nature of offensive language discourse on social media.

### 3.3. Categories of description

#### 3.3.1. Cognitive strategies

Several strategies for dealing with insults (i.e., types of reactions to insults) have been proposed thus far. On a general note, Ilie (2001, pp. 253–257) identified the tendency of "dissociating oneself from the target" or attacking the insulter with a counter-insult. On the other hand, Labov (1972, p. 335) proposed denial, excuse and mitigation as ways of dealing with offensive language, whilst Jucker (2000, p. 375) mentions denial, excuse and counter-abuse. Finally, Feinberg (1985, p. 226) allows what he calls provocation and challenge. The former instigates strong emotions, vexation and angst, whereas the latter is an invitation to verbal combat. The categories proposed by McVittie (2020), with the exclusion of syntactic echoing, can elaborate on the above-mentioned types of reactions to provide a more precise description.

#### 3.3.2. Rhetorical devices

Of a number of rhetorical devices identified by scholars (e.g., Abrams and Harpham, 2012), several will be illustrated by this study. One of the most frequently explored rhetorical figures on social media is irony. In essence, irony occurs when what one says is a contradiction to what one means (Partington, 2007, p. 1548). For example, by saying *you are beautiful* in an ironic way, one does not mean that the target is genuinely an attractive person but, in fact, the opposite, that the person looks ugly. This is, of course, only one of the possible subtypes of irony, the prototypical one and the most common one (for other types of irony, see: Partington, 2007; Kapogiani, 2011). Bathos is a much lesser-known rhetorical figure that consists in introducing a clash in the register, wherein there is a descent from high style (pathetic, elevated or passionate) to lower style (trivial, ridiculous) (Abrams and Harpham, 2012). Another rhetorical device that will be illustrated in the following study is a play on words, specifically a pun. It relies on homonymy or words similar in pronunciation yet disparate in meaning; thus, they often beget a humorous effect.

#### 3.3.3. Language devices

Language devices are understood here as language means that do not resort to figurative language, that is, to some forms of reconceptualisation (Bączkowska, 2021, 2022) that are typical of many rhetorical devices, in order to achieve a special stylistic effect. Instead, they use either marked lexis that triggers high

emotions (e.g., vulgarisms, swearwords) in the hearer at whom an insult is hurled (the target) or introduce manipulations at the syntactic level (e.g., rhetorical questions or mirroring a syntactic structure in a reply). Importantly, rhetorical questions are typically subsumed in dictionaries under the heading of stylistic figures; here, they are treated as a transformation at a language level rather than at the conceptual one, as they do not entail figurativeness. In fact, they tend to be explicit, yet at the same time, they are not direct (i.e. they are indirect), at least in the Searlean (1975) sense. For Searle (1975), indirectness pivots on changing the function of a proposition, as in the oft-cited example of *Can you pass me the salt*, wherein an interrogative becomes a request rather than a question, as could be expected based on the sentence structure. Due to their explicitness and indirectness (but not implicitness), rhetorical questions may be viewed as language devices (i.e., those that manipulate words and/or syntactic structures), which could also be dubbed 'figures of sentence' rather than figures of speech (i.e., those that predicate on conceptual transformations and figurativeness), although they could also be seen as intermediary forms that share some features with language devices (non-figurativeness) and figures of speech (covert nature of meaning encoding inasmuch as some form of transformation is actually involved, i.e. indirectness, even if not as difficult to retrieve as implicitness). Forms of indirectness are contrary to figures of speech; the latter explore some ambiguities at the level of thoughts/concepts, hence they are also called figures of thought. Language devices thus dwell on the notions of explicitness and directness (as in the case of, e.g., swearwords) or explicitness and indirectness (as in the case of rhetorical questions) as opposed to stylistic means that tend to explore lexical obscurity and implicitness and are rarely built on a direct, that is readily accessible, form of expression; however, direct implicitness is also possible, as proved by Kecsces (2017) for conventionalised idioms. Taken together, (1) figures of speech assume figurativeness, while indirect and explicit expressions do not; (2) implicit and indirect expressions illustrate covert offensiveness as the meaning is somehow veiled, i.e., it is not encoded straightforwardly, whereas explicit expressions exemplify overt offensiveness as they are readily available and do not need any intermediate stage of decoding a somehow hidden meaning.

## 4. Material and method

Insults and replies to them were extracted from social media using Twitter API. It is commonly acknowledged (Graham, 2008: 287; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017, p. 13; Hardaker, 2017; Bączkowska 2021) that Twitter is one of the most offensive language and hatred-infested social media platforms, and thus it was decided to use it for the analysis of insults. The retrieved tweets were posted over the last decade (from January 2011 to February 2021). The last ten years were selected for the study at hand based on the assumption that a decade was a sufficiently long time to collect a reliable size dataset containing varying types of insults. The automatic searches were narrowed down to several Twitter accounts known for being riddled with strong or offensive language, namely those run by three celebrities: James Blunt (a pop singer), Rihanna (a pop singer), and Piers Morgan (a journalist). The total number of tokens in the corpus adds up to ca. 0.4 mln, including both the insulting comments and the targets' replies.

## 5. Results and discussion

For illustrative purposes, ten tweets were selected for the present study out of the pool of data, which contain varying language devices (means), rhetorical figures and cognitive strategies employed, all of which show some shifts, e.g., shuttling between explicit and implicit insults, turning a genuine insult into a jocular or ironic (or ironic jocular) comment, shifting the intensity of an insult, or changing the text style/genre.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.





Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

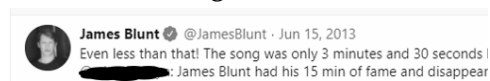


Figure 9.

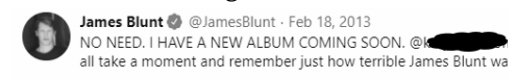


Figure 10.

The first example (Fig. 1) shows a context wherein an insulter hurls an insulting comment at the insultee (James Blunt, a well-known British pop singer) yet without success, as the addressee (who is also the target here) seems to be untouched by its offensive content. The insulter resorts to swearwords (explicit offence) in the assessment of the singer's best-known song and threatens that one day s/he will meticulously explain why, according to the author of this post, there is no artistic value in it (*"On my bucket list, I want to sit James Blunt down and explain – line by line – why his song "You're Beautiful" fucking sucks"*). In reply (*"And I'd like to sit you down and*

*explain – dollar by dollar – why I don't care*"), drawing on the syntactic structure of the insulting comment, the insultee explains that he ignores this comment for financial reasons. The undoubted success of the song is used as an argument against the critical evaluation. The insultee uses a linguistic means, dubbed syntactic echoing (McVittie et al., 2021), that strengthens Blunt's argument and ridicules the author of the insult, thus weakening its potential offensive illocutionary force. A contrast is built in this context that inheres in a shift from a potential insult to a non-insulting comment (although it is not entirely neutral as it has some humorous overtones).

In Fig. 2, a strong, explicit insult is turned into an implicit one, yet retaining reference to the offensive content of the first post. The author of the insult makes a very negative comment about the appearance of one of the most recognisable British journalists Piers Morgan, known for his anti-migration views for which he is being criticised in this post ("*@piersmorgan you are one ugly cunt*"). The swear word 'cunt' is claimed to be the most vulgar in British English (Dewaele 2018); the content is thus heavily offensive and straightforward. The reply dwells on the same frame of reference of appearances and thus remains strongly offensive, although encoding the offence at the implicit level ("I know. I borrowed your face."), thus illustrating the shift from explicit to implicit insult. Content-wise, the insultee seemingly agrees with the insulter about how ugly he is but only to add immediately afterwards that the insulter's appearance is equally unattractive, thus reversing the insult and hurling a new one against its author, giving him a taste of his own medicine.

In the next example (Fig. 3), the author of the tweet makes a comment about James Blunt's music in a way that can be dubbed an insulting compliment ("*@JamesBlunt can't stand your music but your comebacks are second to none*"). The compliment stems from the concept of the singer's marketing dexterity manifest in his retorts, while the deprecating comment exposes the low quality, according to the author of the insult, of Blunt's music. Of the two facets present in the double barrel post, the complimenting one seems more salient and positively profiles the whole proposition. The insultee employs the same strategy to fight back inasmuch as he constructs his reply as consisting of two facets with contradictory axiological charges: one referring to the insulter's appearance and one to the noticed act of compliment ("*Can't stand your face but thanks for the compliment*"). Unlike in the first post, however, the negative feature of the insulter's face is profiled here with the compliment appreciation remaining in the background, which makes the reply more insulting than the original message. Thus, a shift can be observed

here, from an insulting compliment to what might be dubbed an appreciative insult.

A contrasting perspective, from superior position to inferior, can be observed in Fig. 4. A strong, explicit insult is hurled towards James Blunt ("*James Blunt is the rudest cunt on this earth. I fucking hate him*") which encodes both a general disparagement towards the insultee ("*a rude cunt*") and the insulter's personal contemptuous stance ("*I fucking hate him*"). The reply to this debasing and vulgar comment shows the insulter in an inferior perspective in an ad hoc frame of reference, i.e., as a runner-up on a podium of "*The Rudest Cunt Competition*", thus downgrading him to an inferior place relative to Blunt's 'victory' and the ensuing feeling of superiority ("*U're just a jealous runner-up in the Rudest Cunt Competition.*"). Thus, the inferior view of the insultee imposed straightforwardly by the insulter is reversed to the target's superior position. This reversal is of course ironic and humorous at the same time. Jocular irony was used here to fight an explicit and vulgar insult.

A linguistic device was used in the following context to contrast the insulting content with the insulter's ignorance of it. In Fig. 5, the insulter deploys an idiomatic expression to convey his dislike ("*I can't stand James blunt*"). The insultee offers a play on words by dwelling on the literal meaning of the expression ("*Have a seat. I have that effect on people*") followed by an expression of agreement with the insulter. As in some of the previous contexts, here as well, the reply triggers a humorous effect yet without insulting back. Thus, the contrast between the insult and the reply to it resides in the use of idiomatic vs literal reading of words and in attenuating the offensive load of the insult by using a non-offensive, jesting reply derived from the play on words.

Another example of play on words is captured by the contexts in Fig. 6, wherein the insultee, again, resorts to a literal reading of the word *single* in a rhetorical question ("*Is there one single James Blunt fan out there?*", "*Most of them are single*"). The offence revolves here around the suspicion of having no fans, not even one (not a single one), while the defence pivots on another literal meaning of the word "*single*", which may also denote an unmarried person. By overtly ignoring the obvious offence with a pun elaborating meaning ambiguity, the insultee shifts the emotional charge of the tweet from insulting to entertaining.

Traversing from an insult to irony is seen in Fig. 7, wherein a severe offence is ignored and substituted by an apparently neutral comment.

The insulter wishes all the worst to the British journalist Piers Morgan using a vulgar vocative premodified by a negative adjective ("*@piersmorgan hope you have a shit birthday you fat cunt*"). This demeaning and insulting post might be purposefully (mis)interpreted by the insultee in terms of 'friendly teasing' ("*Awww, shucks – thanks buddy*"). While using vulgarisms and insults are allowed as a form of expressing intimacy among close friends (Hasund and Stenström, 1997, pp. 127–129) as well as in order to leverage in-group bonds among peers (Norman, 1994; Daly et al., 2004; Vandergriff, 2010, p. 237), it is hardly possible that such was the intention of the insulter, of which the insultee is undoubtedly fully aware. Still, by calling the insulter "*buddy*", which is an evident irony as he could not possibly mean a friend but rather a foe by referring to the insulter, Morgan does not dwell on the offensive load but leaves it unattended and turns it to implicitly suggested teasing. This cognitive strategy of ignoring insulting language by endorsing irony based on meaning reversal shows contrasting measures taken to, in the actual fact, achieve similar aims, that of annoying the target (the addressee), yet in the case of the reply, it is much milder and implicit, whereas in the case of the attacker it is explicit, aggressive and degrading.

A spiteful insult hurled by a Twitter user ("*merry Christmas tampon head!*") in Fig. 8 builds around the apparent insultee's ugly appearance (Rihanna, a famous pop singer) and has seen a much stronger, disparaging aspersion cast in reply to the original insulter ("*same 2 u cunt*"). The contrast here hinges on the escalation of vulgarity in reaction to an insult, which met with approval from other Twitter users (many more retweets and 'likes' than in the case of the original insult).

In Fig. 9, the insultee states provocatively, addressing a collective audience (i.e., anybody out there who has access to Twitter, as it was written without using the handle to invoke the target) that "*James Blunt had his 15 min of fame and disappeared*". The target is characterised by referring to his apparent short-lived career as a pop singer (he started his career with a tremendous single hit "You're Beautiful", released in 2005) and implicitly indicated poor artistic skills, being a one-hit-wonder. James Blunt did not get in a tizzy; in reply, he takes up the resources from the first turn and agrees with the purported allegations providing further details to justify the accusation and to belittle his own merits, and even to make the criticism harsher and more self-denigrating: "*Even less than that! The song ["You're Beautiful"] was only 3 minutes and 30 seconds long*". Self-denigration, also known as self-teasing, which is a humorous speech genre (see Boxer and Cortes-Conde, 1997, pp. 281–282) increases the comic effect the recipient achieved specifically by

what McVittie et al. (2021) dub co-construction of self-criticism. Joining the criticism levelled against him by deploying self-disparaging and an apparent self-effacing comment, he cannot be taken seriously; his behaviour is implicative of a strategy to fend off verbal attacks on Twitter. Taken together, the reply is indicative of perceiving the insult (even though it was not addressed directly to the target) and acknowledging the offensive load of the predicate, yet the insultee did not fluster, and the fact that the target ridicules and mocks the insulter turning it into a joke rather speaks for perceiving but not for experiencing the insulting load. In fact, the composure and jesting tone emanating from the reply encode witticism, distance, control and self-assurance of a mature artist rather than feeling hurt by the disparagement hurled by anonymous tweeters (i.e., Twitter account owners).

Similarly, Fig. 10 shows a shift in the register, from eulogistic, that is elevated, to general and neutral. The insult invokes a funeral scenario wherein friends mourn someone's death by recalling one's virtues and achievements (*"Can we all take a moment and remember just how terrible James Blunt was"*). Notably, the metaphorical death of Blunt's artistic activities rests on the past tense of the verb 'be', and the quasi-eulogistic tone relies on irony by using the word 'terrible' in lieu of what typically encodes praise in a speech over the coffin of a person who has just passed away. Built on the strength of implicitness, the insult is a highly inappropriate and distasteful reference made to a funeral of somebody who is still alive (or one's artistic measures that have not been suspended). Contrary to what one might expect, the reaction clashes with the insult as it is waggish, reassuring and premised on complacency and mirth (*"NO NEED, I HAVE A NEW ALBUM COMING SOON"*), whereby the insultee trumpets jubilantly his most recent success (signalling thus that he has not died, nor have his artistic measures), as if the insultee did not notice the malicious intention of the author. In this way, the insultee ridicules the ironic attack. As in many cases described above, this context occasions what may be dubbed jocular irony, which contrasts with strong yet implicit insults.

## 6. Conclusion

It has been the aim of this paper to propose three levels of analysis of offensive discourse on Twitter. The study extends some existing theoretical considerations devoted to insults elaborated by several scholars (*inter alia*

Jucker, 2000; Culpeper, 2011) and a recently proposed typology of insults and replies to them offered by McVittie et al. (2021). Generally speaking, in the tweets under investigation, some contrasts could be observed between insults and replies to them, which coincide with the following general measures: shifting the intensity of abusing load, introducing register clash, changing genre, turning insult into a joke (changing pragmatic function), changing the type of insult (replacing explicit insult with implicit one). When dealing with the insulting tweets, essentially, the insultees resorted to three general cognitive strategies: ignoring the offensive load (contexts in Fig.: 1, 10), agreeing with the insulter (contexts in Fig.: 2, 6, 7, 9), and attacking the insulter (contexts in Fig.: 3, 4, 8). More specifically, ignoring was enacted by mockery, conflating it with expressing complacency (Fig. 10). The agreement was realised via self-denigration (Fig. 9), while attacking was expressed by counter-abuse (Fig. 8), demonstration of superiority (Fig. 4) or resorting to figure/ground reversal (Fig. 3). The strategies of dealing with insults as well as the insults involved a gamut of devices by drawing on some rhetorical figures and linguistic means. As regards rhetorical figures, ignoring insults relied on irony (Fig. 1, 10) or was reached through bathos (Fig. 10), expressing agreement also capitalised on irony (Fig. 2, 7) as well as on a play on words (pun: Fig. 6, literal reading of idiomatic expressions: Fig. 5). The linguistic means, in turn, involved deploying offensive vocative terms of address (Fig. 2, 4, 7), drawing on vulgarity (Fig. 1, 2, 4), a rhetorical question (Fig. 6) or syntactic echoing (Fig. 9). It is believed that the study deepens the existing typologies of insulting comments on social media and offers a comprehensive view thereof that may be mapped onto various forms of offensiveness.

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