Honour or face? Which theoretical concepts should we use for the (historical) study of insults?

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Abstract

In this contribution it is argued that the concept of honour as developed by social historians in their research on insults can serve as a fruitful framework for the linguistic study of insults as well. Based on analyses of two historical cases of insult taken from court papers from Northern Germany, the communicative patterns underlying honour conflicts are revealed and related to the concept of honour as discussed by the contemporaries. It is shown that the concept of honour can be linked to the notion of face as interactional and relational. Thus, it can help to account for the social dynamics of insults that recent linguistic approaches claim to be crucial for today's forms of impoliteness, too.

1. Introduction

Insults belong to the central topics of linguistic impoliteness research, which is mostly defined as the study of face-aggravating language use (cf. Locher/Bousfield 2008: 3). While early models tend to ignore the diachronic dimension, recent research takes into account historical impoliteness, too (cf. Culpeper/Kádár (eds.) 2010). Yet, here as well as in studies on insults within diachronic pragmatics in general (cf. Jucker/Taavitsainen 2000; Nevala 2010: 433–437), insults are mostly defined as face attacks.

However, much research on historical insulting practices has already been done by social historians (cf. Moogk 1979; Dinges 1994; Fuchs 1999), who conceptualise insults as conflicts of honour rather than face attacks. In the following, I wish to argue that the concept of honour as elaborated by historians can serve as a fruitful framework for the linguistic study of insults as well.

2.   Two cases of insult

I start with two cases of insult taken from historical court papers concerning libel actions in Northern Germany (today's Lower Saxony). They will serve as examples for my theoretical considerations later in this paper.

Le Cam (2011: 113–15) reports on the proceedings of a court hearing concerning an honour conflict from 1645, which today are deposited in the regional church archive of Braunschweig. The tribunal, referred to as "Consistorium", questions Zacharias Schardius, cantor at the school of Königslutter, and the chamberlain Heinrich Kuhpeitz, who accuses Schardius of insult. When Schardius rejects the initial charge of drunkenness on a feast day, the Consistorium responds:

> If he wasn't inebriated he wouldn't have been shouting loudly of cuckold and so on, so that the neighbour Kuhpeitz woke up and attended to the matter, because such conduct indicates a drunken man.

> *Wen Er keinen rausch gehabt hette, so würde Er ie so nicht von Hanreen vnd sonst über laut geruffen haben, das der Nachbar Kuhpeitz darüber erwachet vnd sich deßen angenommen hette, dan solches arguierte einen trunckenen Menschen.[1]*

Schardius replies:

> Doesn't know, what made him utter words like that. But he did not mean Kuhpeitz by them […].

> *Wiße nicht, wie Er auf solche Wort kommen. Er hette aber Kuhpeitz damit nicht gemeint […].*

The claimant's version of the story is slightly different. After a drinking bout with the accountant,

> the cantor shouted chop-chop cuckold's father, his name is no longer Kuhpeitz but Jew's Peitz, thus he is an old traitor, it was midnight, and because he was a chamberlain and was scolded that rudely, he had to abandon his seat [at the town council] for a while. In the following he sent two men to him, whereupon he apologised that he had been drunk and could not remember the swear words.

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1   All translations in this paper are my own.

dan hette der Cantor geruffen hop hop Hanrehs Vater, Er hieße nicht mehr Kuhpeitz sondern juden Peitz, Item Er were ein alter Verether, were des nachts vmb 12 Vhr gewesen vnd weil Er Raths Cämmerer vnd so grob gescholten, hette Er sich deßwegen ein Zeit lang des Rahtstuhls eußern müßen. Er hette ihn folgends mit 2 Mans Personen beschicken laßen, do Er sich entschüldiget, Er were trunken gewesen vnd wüste, sich der scheltwort nicht zuerinnern.

As the protocol shows, the trial was continued two days later with a settlement. The claimant Kuhpeitz is quoted as follows:

If the defendant apologises and declares that he does not know anything other than honour and good of him, he finally would be satisfied […].

Wan Reus Ihm abbitte thete vnd sich erclerete das Er von Ihm nichts anders dan ehr vnd gutes wüste, so wolte Er endlich zufrieden sein […].

Schardius finally accepts the conditions, utters the formulaic declaration of honour and adds that

he will not scold him henceforth and would not decrease his estate and honour.

das Er ihn auch forthin ungescholten vnd bey seinen ehren vnd stande vnverkleinert laßen wüste.

The protocol concludes with the finding that the conflict

was settled amicably without any damage to *both* with regard to their honour and reputation […].

damit Ihnen beiden an ihren ehren vnd leumund vnschädlich, in güte gentzlich vergliechen […].

The source of the second case I would like to present is taken from Jensen (2011: 167–8), who reports on a written complaint submitted to the university court of Göttingen in 1824. The maidservant Dorothee Schwedhelm accuses the catholic priest Friedrich of "outstanding fare and wages as well as rough physical and verbal insults" (*Kost und Lohn, auch grober Real- und Verbal-Injurien*). Soon after commencement of contract he had allegedly called her

without any legitimate reason […] a bloody ass, scoundrel and even a thief.

ohne die mindeste rechtmäßige Ursache […] einen Sauhammel und Canaille, ja sogar eine Diebin.

Moreover,

his usual form of address was no other than 'you animal, you human being' […]. Used in the neuter, the expression 'human being' is known to be among the most shameful labels applied to humble women that usually only the rudest indecency would employ.

seine gewöhnliche Anrede keine andere als 'du Their, du Mensch' […] [I]m neutro gebraucht, gehört dieser Ausdruck: das Mensch! bekanntlich zu den schimpflichsten Bezeichnungen niedriger Frauenzimmer, die sich sonst nur die roheste Indecenz zu erlauben pflegt.

Furthermore, "without any external cause […] only driven by inner emotions" (*ohne die mindeste äußere Veranlassung […] blos von innere Regung seines Gemüths getrieben*), the priest had allegedly beaten her unconscious. As the priest is "obliged to a vita honesta by his status" *([durch seinen] Stand zu einer vita honesta verpflichtet)*, his misconduct was unexpected and therefore the insult was even severer. Among other things, the maidservant sued for compensation of the insults by 'Christian apology' and a 'declaration of honour'. Finally, the case was settled out of court.

In the following, I will present an analysis of these cases, adopting the descriptive concepts of social history which will reveal the communicative patterns underlying honour conflicts. First, however, I will discuss some methodological issues concerning the use of this kind of data.

3.   Methodological issues

It would be very tempting to treat court papers as sources of historical insulting practices, swear word vocabularies and so on. Substantially more data would be needed, of course, but there *are* studies that analysed a great number of cases in order to find semantic changes of insults and so on. For this paper I consulted 22 studies that investigate court papers from Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, England and Canada. The period of time reaches from the late 14th to the mid-19th century, and the number of cases analysed varies from one up to 173 cases. Still, some objections can be raised. The written documents presented above

are the result of a whole series of transformations that make it difficult to say anything reliable about the initial interactions. First, we have to keep in mind that the conflicting parties are not the 'authors' – the author is the scribe, or, in the second case, the lawyer involved. Secondly, the narrations of the insults in question are clearly biased, for every party wants to enforce its own standpoint and will therefore weigh the details differently (cf. Dinges 1994: 72–85). Thirdly, we see the insults through the eyes of the contemporary judicial system. The initial interactions are boiled down to those issues which seem to be juridically relevant (cf. Ramge 1999: 391).

However, if one refrains from taking the presented cases as direct representations of reality, the transformations exposed above might be seen as an advantage of this kind of data. They not only give a record of what was said, which from today's perspective might be difficult to assess. As a kind of metapragmatic comment (cf. Culpeper 2011: 73), they rather deliver some kind of pre-interpreted reality and thus give us some hints concerning the "relevance structures" (Schütz/ Luckmann 1973: 183) of the historical actors that predisposed them to act and to react in the way they did. The data show that the historical actors conceive insults as parts of bigger communicative units – units that can be termed "affairs of honour", for 'honour' is the folk term of the matter being negotiated in the presented cases as well as in the other studies on court papers I consulted for this paper.[2] In the following, I will take a closer look at the communicative patterns underlying honour conflicts and relate them to the 'emic' concept of honour as discussed by the contemporaries.

4.   Communicative patterns underlying honour conflicts

According to a German legal text from the year 1616, an insult – in German *Injurie* – occurs

> when a person is touched, decreased and reviled in his good name, estate and good reputation, either orally or in writing, or is beaten and scolded, of which he has to be ashamed in front of honest people.

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2   The concept of honour can hardly be separated from related concepts like "reputation" or "shame" in the sense of loss of honour. Some of the connections will become clearer in the following sections. Considering the research of social history, I take "honour" to be the most general term regarding its meaning as well as its historical persistence.

wann einer an seinem wolhergebrachten namen, standt und gueten leinmeuth […] von einem andern mündtlich oder schrifftlich angetastet, verkhleinert und geschmächet oder auch mit schlegen angegriffen und verschimpft würdt, dessen er sich bei ehrlichen leithen schemen mueß. (cited in Fuchs 1999: 47)

Obviously, the chamberlain Kuhpeitz from the first case frames his complaint around this concept of insult. The labels "cuckold" and "traitor" both refer to behaviours that are incompatible with the behaviour of an honourable citizen. Moreover, the wordplay on Kuhpeitz's name to "Jew's Peitz" can be understood as an insinuation of greed and usury, which hits Kuhpeitz in his public function as a chamberlain. What is attacked by the insults is not just an inner sense of self-worth, not a set of individual "wants" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 62), but his public reputation which is acquired through behaviour that befits his social status. This reputation serves as entitlement to access to the circle of 'honest people', and because of the rumours caused by the mentioned insults, he 'has to be ashamed' in front of them and is dismissed from the town council. Hence, loss of honour finds its expression in social exclusion.

Two things can be concluded: First, publicity plays a crucial role for insults as well as for their compensation, for it is the public rather than the insulter that has to be convinced that the propositions underlying the insults are not true. Secondly, the insult should not be described as a direct damage of honour but rather as a challenge – a "virtual offense" (cf. Goffman 1971: 108–9) – which may be turned into a real offense by the public but still can be remedied through the rituals of apology and declaration of honour. Note that the restoration of the chamberlain's honour has a challenging undertone, too, for the cantor's apology presupposes to concede that he has acted illegitimately. For this reason, the Consistorium needs to emphasise that the conflict is settled "without any damage to both with regard to their honour and reputation". Honour is an interpersonal phenomenon and insults cannot be understood adequately apart from this social dimension.

For the second case presented above, one can refer to Adolph Dietrich Weber's seminal book *Ueber Injurien und Schmähschriften* (1793-1794). Weber defines honour as

other people's good opinion of our integrity, especially concerning our dutiful conduct, the judgement which assigns to us a certain moral value […].

Die gute Meinung Anderer von unsern Vollkommenheiten sowohl überhaupt – als auch besonders von unserm pflichtmäßigen Wandel – das Urtheil, wodurch man uns einen gewissen moralischen Werth beilegt […]. (Weber 1793: 6)

Honour thus obliges to a certain demeanor internally consistent with one's duties, but, in turn, also entitles to a likewise dutiful treatment, for the others are obliged to deferential behaviour:

> One acts dutifully in regard to the other's honour, if one does not decrease their moral conduct, does justice to their virtues and merits, takes account of conventional politeness and favourable demeanour and tries to avoid anything that might be unpleasant and offending.

> *Man handelt den Pflichten in Ansehung der Ehre und Achtung gegen Andere gemäß, wenn man ihr Sittliches Betragen unverkleinert läßt, ihren Vorzügen und Verdiensten Gerechtigkeit erweiset – die Conventionelle Höflichkeit, und ein gefälliges Betragen gegen sie beobachtet – überhaupt, was ihnen unangenehm und kränkend ist, zu vermeiden sucht.* (Weber 1793: 6).

According to Weber, any behaviour – words, gestures, facial expressions and so on – that is in conflict with this claim for deference is indicative of contempt. Yet, for an insult in the full sense of the legal term there has to be the so-called *animus iniurandi* – i.e. the intention to insult (cf. Weber 1793: 44–45).

As in the first case, the complaint of the maidservant is adjusted to the legal concept of insult. Note that in her account, the priest has insulted her "without any legitimate reason", "without any external cause and only driven by inner emotions". This shows that the condition of the *animus iniurandi* is fulfilled. Moreover, the emphasis on the malice of the priest is the first step to restore her challenged honour, for referring to the illegitimate character of the priest's utterances means by implication that she has always conducted dutifully. Also, in this case we can see that the restoration of one's honour includes a challenge of the other's honour in return. By stating that "only the most rude indecency" would act as the priest actually did, while he should be "committed to a vita honesta by his status", the priest's honour is jeopardised as well. Thus, the request for an apology can be interpreted as a tit-for-tat response. Because, as Weber puts it, to apologise means to admit to one's own injustice and to present oneself officially as a violator of honour (cf. Weber 1794: 14). This might be the reason why both parties achieved an out-of-court agreement in the end (cf. Jensen 2011: 169).

As both cases show, the concept of honour, as manifested in the court papers, is first and foremost defined through its interactional aspects. It is neither an inner quality nor a concrete mode of conduct itself that constitute the honour of a person, as long as the claim for respect raised by this conduct is not fulfilled by respectful treatment in return. As Dinges states in his study on honour and insults in 18th

century Paris, "It is crucial for one's honour if and how it can be constituted, defended and saved in public encounters" (Dinges 1994: 25, my translation). It is this interactional character of honour which might be linked to the concept of face that lies at the heart of modern linguistic (im-)politeness theory – especially in those approaches that conceive face as relational and interactional (cf. Arundale 2006) in order to account for the social dynamics of insults and other forms of impoliteness.

5.   Honour and/or face?

Consider Goffman's well-known definition of face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (Goffman 1967: 5). This definition closely resembles the presented concept of honour as something constituted, defended and saved in public encounters. Like honour, face is "supported by judgements and evidence conveyed by other participants" (Goffman 1967: 6). Moreover, just as the honour of a person is constituted by 'dutiful conduct' and its acknowledgement by others through deference (a term used by Goffman (1967: 47) as well), face "will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it" (Goffman 1967: 10). Lastly, many recent approaches to impoliteness and other forms of face-related interaction call upon the notion of "norms of appropriate behaviour within a community of practice" (Locher/Watts 2008: 78) and describe impoliteness as a means for negotiating social relationships. This, too, corresponds with the notion of dutiful conduct, which is related to group norms (like the servant's code of conduct or the rules of convenance among citizens) as well. To sum up, linguistic impoliteness research based on the notion of face can easily be linked to sociological and historical approaches to honour and honour conflicts on a conceptual level.

But, from a linguist's perspective, what would be the benefit of this? First, the special focus that historians give to the social effects of insults and honour conflicts might be useful for linguistics, too. Remember that threats to honour, such as insults, challenge the hearer's claim to being acknowledged as a legitimate member of one's estate and thus may lead to social exclusion. Hence, I propose to also consider contemporary forms of insults as challenging the hearer's status as a legitimate group member. For example, in her study on insults among pre-adolescent boys in Sweden, Evaldsson (2005: 775–77) shows that many insults like "you bought your pokemon cards in the second hand shop" consist in the ascription of deviant behaviours and therefore of non-accepted category membership like poverty and so on. Thus, insults are used to "organize participation and negotiate

the features of what constitute acceptable peer group behaviors" (Evaldsson 2005: 777). They may serve as means of social exclusion and at the same time reaffirm the local rules of appropriateness. This is precisely the social function of honour conflicts as described by historians, too. From this perspective, the study of insults can be understood as a contribution to the study of the linguistic and communicative foundations of social differentiation and integration.

Secondly, remember that from the historians' perspective insults do not appear as direct damages of honour but rather as virtual offenses, as moves within a whole sequence of related communicative acts through which the honour of both participants is negotiated. Thus, conceiving insults as parts of honour conflicts might help to account for the dynamical character of insults. Most of the pragmatic models of impoliteness, although they investigate sequences of interaction as well, still consider insults as unidirectional "impolite containing utterances" (Bousfield 2008: 147). In a more dynamical model, insults could be conceived as impoliteness *as* interaction rather than just "impoliteness *in* interaction" (Bousfield 2008, my emphasis). Especially Bourdieu's (1966: 197–215) model of the dialectic of insults in Kabyle society, which historians applied to Early Modern honour conflicts as well, might serve as a fruitful heuristic framework.[3]

Admittedly, the institutional character of historical court trials is hardly comparable with today's forms of conversation as they are investigated in current linguistic studies on impoliteness. However, once more I would like to quote Goffman, who explicitly compares the corrective process in everyday interaction rituals with the legal system of social control. Within everyday conversation, he states, "the complete cycle of crime, apprehension, trial, punishment, and return to society can run its course in two gestures and a glance" (Goffman 1971: 107). Today's insulting practices might thus be described as small-scale honour conflicts (cf. Meier 2011).

6. Conclusion

As showed, the concept of honour developed by historians as derived from court papers and contemporary legal texts can be linked to the notion of face as used in linguistic impoliteness research – especially in approaches that emphasise the

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3   Similarly to Goffman, Bourdieu emphasises that an insult is only a virtual dishonour, while it is the riposte "in which it is completed and in which it realizes its full significance. […] offence does not necessarily involve dishonour […] because it allows the possibility of riposte" (Bourdieu 1966: 213).

interactional aspects of face and the social dynamics of impoliteness. The possible benefit of linking linguistic impoliteness research with sociohistorical research on honour conflicts can be summarised as follows:

1)   In court papers, with due caution, we can see how the legal concept of honour was put into practice, how it shaped communication, and which social effects the negotiation of honour could have. Moreover, many issues discussed in recent impoliteness research (e.g. the role of intention or the boundaries between verbal and physical violence) are explicitly addressed in the historical sources. Thus, there may be implicit and explicit comparison with today's forms of impoliteness.

2)   As they consider insults as parts of more comprehensive honour conflicts and thus *as* interaction, the historical studies and their theoretical foundation may inspire linguistic impoliteness research as well.

Finally, I want to make clear that I don't propose to *replace* the concept of face with the concept of honour, which in our society may be seen as an anachronism and is often in a fatal vicinity to problematic phenomena like honour killings. Yet, these misconceptions of honour should not prevent us from considering possible connections between different disciplines addressing the interactive practice of insults in order to understand them as culturally and historically situated practices. In order to truly understand insulting practices and related phenomena, we need to study them in their social, cultural and historical contexts, and in order to do this, we need to combine linguistic impoliteness research with social history.

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