

PAPER

SPEECH ETIQUETTE AND THE SOCIO-NORMATIVE NATURE OF INSULT

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Abstract

This article examines the interaction between speech etiquette and insult from a socio-pragmatic and cognitive-linguistic perspective. Speech etiquette is conceptualized as a normative communicative system that regulates social distance, hierarchy, and interpersonal respect, whereas insult is treated as a marked deviation from these norms, functioning as a face-threatening act. Drawing on cross-linguistic data from Uzbek and English, the study analyzes the mechanisms through which violations of speech etiquette trigger insults, as well as the social, cultural, and cognitive functions of insulting language. Special attention is paid to culturally specific taboo domains and their role in intensifying pragmatic force. The findings demonstrate that while speech etiquette and insult operate as opposing communicative strategies, they jointly constitute a unified cognitive-pragmatic continuum governing human interaction.

Key words: Speech etiquette; insult; pragmatics; face-threatening acts; politeness theory; taboo; Uzbek language; English language; cognitive linguistics; sociolinguistics.

INTRODUCTION

Human communication is governed not only by grammatical rules but also by socially constructed norms that regulate appropriateness, politeness, and interpersonal relations. One of the most significant regulatory mechanisms in discourse is speech etiquette, which encodes cultural values, social hierarchy, and moral expectations. Conversely, insult represents a communicative

phenomenon that systematically violates these norms and destabilizes interactional harmony. In contemporary pragmatics and sociolinguistics, insult has increasingly been examined not merely as emotional expression but as a functional and socially meaningful speech act. Within the framework of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), insult is classified as a face-threatening act that directly targets the interlocutor's positive or negative face. Despite extensive research on

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politeness strategies, the dialectical relationship between speech etiquette and insult remains underexplored, particularly in cross-linguistic contexts involving non-Indo-European languages such as Uzbek. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comparative socio-pragmatic analysis of insult as a violation of speech etiquette in Uzbek and English discourse.

Speech etiquette represents a structured system of linguistic and pragmatic conventions through which societies regulate communicative behavior, social hierarchy, moral values, and interpersonal norms. It functions as a stabilizing mechanism within interaction, defining degrees of respect, social distance, solidarity, and role-based relations between interlocutors. In contrast, insult emerges as a marked deviation from these conventions, operating as a communicative act that destabilizes interactional harmony and violates socio-normative expectations. Within the theoretical framework proposed by Brown and Levinson, individuals are understood to possess a socially constructed self-image, conceptualized as “face.” Any act of insult constitutes a direct face-threatening act (FTA), targeting the interlocutor’s positive or negative face. This theoretical perspective explains why insult occupies a particularly critical and disruptive position within the system of speech etiquette and is treated as one of the most severe forms of pragmatic deviation in human communication.

Insult typically becomes operational at the moment when the norms of speech etiquette are breached. This process is characterized by three interrelated mechanisms. One of the earliest indicators of impending insult is the deliberate collapse of socially sanctioned distance between interlocutors. Examples: In Uzbek: *Ey sen!* – addressing a teacher or elder and in English: *Hey you!* – perceived as overtly rude. Such forms eliminate asymmetrical respect relations and impose unsolicited familiarity, thereby threatening the interlocutor’s face. In Uzbek discourse, this erosion manifests through replacement of ‘*siz*’ with ‘*sen*’; omission of address terms; absence of mitigating devices. In English discourse, similar degradation is observed through reduction of modal politeness structures (*Could you... → You will... →*

Do it!) ; introduction of inappropriate intensifiers (*What the hell...*)

The emergence of evaluative lexis typically marks the pre-insult stage – *Beandisha odam!* (*You careless idiot!*) Here, *idiot* constitutes a fully realized insult, whereas *careless* functions as a negative evaluative modifier serving a warning function. Contrary to the perception of insult as mere emotional expression, it fulfills several identifiable social and pragmatic functions. In certain cultural contexts, insults operate as informal mechanisms of social control. For instance in Uzbek: *Uyatsiz, nomussiz* or in English: *Shame on you!* Insults are frequently employed to assert dominance and reinforce power asymmetries. As noted by Jay (2009), insult may serve a cathartic function, enabling individuals to release accumulated psychological tension. Following Labov, in-group contexts may reinterpret insults as affiliative or solidarity-building acts. Thus, the pragmatic value of insult is context-dependent and not uniformly negative. Wierzbicka (1999) emphasizes that each culture maintains a culturally specific taboo domain. When communicative acts transgress this domain, the pragmatic force of insult reaches its maximum intensity. In Uzbek Cultural Context there are parental insults (highest severity), violations of honor and chastity, disrespect toward national values. In Western Cultural Context there are sexual profanity, racial slurs, identity-based offenses. Such insults may carry legal and criminal implications. According to Japanese Communicative Norms, insults are predominantly indirect and realized through implication and face loss. For example, “*Anata wa chotto...*” (“*You are somewhat...*”). Direct lexical insults are culturally dispreferred. In Arab Cultural Context, insults involving one’s mother are interpreted as collective attacks on familial and tribal identity rather than individual offenses. The interaction between speech etiquette and insult may be represented through the following sequential model: Norm-governed speech etiquette – Violation of politeness conventions – Emergence of evaluative language – Negative intensification – Full insult – Social sanction or conflict escalation. This model demonstrates cross-linguistic applicability, including Uzbek and

English. From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, speech etiquette is structured around conceptual metaphors of respect, face, and social distance, whereas insult is grounded in metaphors of threat, devaluation, and symbolic annihilation. Despite their oppositional nature, these systems represent two poles within a unified cognitive-pragmatic continuum governing human interaction.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that insult cannot be adequately understood as a purely emotional or spontaneous phenomenon. Rather, it emerges as a systematic communicative act rooted in the violation of speech etiquette and socio-normative expectations. Through comparative analysis of Uzbek and English data, the research reveals that insults are activated through identifiable pragmatic mechanisms, including the reduction of social distance, erosion of politeness formulas, and activation of evaluative lexis. Furthermore, the study highlights the decisive role of cultural taboos in shaping the intensity and social consequences of insult. While the specific taboo domains vary across cultures, their pragmatic function remains universal. From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, speech etiquette and insult represent opposing yet complementary poles within a unified conceptual system regulating human interaction. The findings contribute to the fields of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and intercultural communication and may serve as a theoretical foundation for further research on conflict discourse, impoliteness strategies, and language teaching.

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