



INSULT AS A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PHENOMENON IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH

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Abstract. This thesis investigates the sociolinguistic functions and features of pejorative expressivity—specifically, ritualistic insults and jocular abuse—within in-group communication among friends in English and Uzbek contexts. Moving beyond a simplistic view of insults as purely aggressive, this study analyzes how such language serves to construct and reinforce social solidarity, negotiate group identity, and perform rapport within the boundaries of friendship circles. Employing a comparative pragmatic framework, the thesis examines the linguistic structures, semantic domains, and contextual rules governing this usage in both languages. It argues that while the core phatic and bonding functions are universal, their linguistic realization and contextual constraints are deeply shaped by specific cultural norms, particularly regarding concepts of "face," hierarchy, and permissible humor. Data considerations include ethnographic observation, discourse analysis of mediated communication, and metapragmatic interviews.

Keywords: pejorative language, in-group communication, insults, sociolinguistics, cross-cultural pragmatics, solidarity, face, English, Uzbek

Introduction: Insults as Social Cohesion

Within the domain of pragmatics, insulting language is typically analyzed as a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987) that risks social conflict. However, in the context of stable in-groups such as friendship circles, these acts are often reinterpreted and repurposed. This thesis explores the paradoxical use of



pejorative expressivity—terms and phrases with inherently negative semantic content—as a tool for fostering camaraderie and signaling intimacy among peers in English and Uzbek-speaking communities. This practice, known as "jocular abuse," "ritual insult," or "phatic impoliteness" (Leach, 2016), operates under a mutual understanding of non-serious intent. The research aims to delineate the sociolinguistic rules, thematic content, and cultural parameters that govern this complex speech act in two distinct linguistic cultures, highlighting both universal pragmatic functions and culture-specific variations.

Theoretical Framework: Face, Solidarity, and In-Group Codes

The analysis is grounded in sociolinguistic theories of politeness and solidarity. Brown and Levinson's model of positive and negative face provides a starting point, where jocular insults ostensibly threaten positive face (the desire to be approved of) but do so in a way that ultimately reinforces the in-group's shared identity—a collective positive face. This aligns with the concept of "solidarity politeness" (Scollon & Scollon, 2001), where reduced formality and use of potentially offensive terms signal closeness. Furthermore, the notion of "community of practice" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992) is crucial, as friends develop unique linguistic repertoires where pejorative terms become reappropriated markers of membership. Cross-cultural pragmatics (Wierzbicka, 1991) guides the comparison, anticipating significant variation in acceptable topics, intensity, and participant roles based on cultural values.

Sociolinguistic Features in English In-Group Insults

In many English-speaking friendship circles (e.g., American, British, Australian), pejorative expressivity is a well-documented feature of male-dominated "mateship" but is prevalent across genders. Linguistic Forms: These often include hyperbolic or creative vulgarity ("you



absolute weapon," "legendary muppet"), deadpan understatement, and stereotypical insults that are so generic they lose denotational force ("idiot," "moron"). The use of reclaimed derogatory terms within the group is also common. Themes and Targets: Common themes involve mocking a friend's intelligence, minor failures, personal habits, or taste in media. Physical appearance may be targeted, but usually within strictly understood boundaries to avoid genuine offense.

The friend's skills or assets might be insulted enviously ("you jammy git"). Context and Rules: The key rule is the clear signaling of non-serious intent through prosody (exaggerated tone, laughter), facial expression, and preceding relational history. The "insult" must be clearly implausible or relate to a shared, understood narrative. A failure to recognize this frame can lead to serious face damage and conflict, indicating the precarious balance maintained.

Sociolinguistic Features in Uzbek In-Group Insults

Uzbek in-group communication operates within a different cultural matrix, emphasizing respect for elders and hierarchical relationships, which creates a distinct context for peer solidarity among friends.

Linguistic Forms: Insults may draw from a rich lexicon of colloquialisms and culturally specific metaphors. Terms like "tentak" (fool) or "jinni" (crazy) are used with affectionate tone. Unlike English, there is a significant use of kinship terms in a reversed, jocular manner (e.g., using "aka" (older brother) or "opa" (older sister) ironically to a younger friend or in a context mocking responsibility).

Themes and Targets: Themes often revolve around playful accusations of stinginess ("ziyosat qilganda ham olib kelmaysan" - you wouldn't bring anything even if you went on a pilgrimage), clumsiness, or excessive naivety. Due to cultural sensitivity, insults related to family honor or serious religious matters are strictly taboo, even in jest. Humor is frequently self-deprecating as well as other-directed.



Context and Rules: The context is paramount. Such language is almost exclusively reserved for private, informal settings among age-equals (yoshdoshlar). The hierarchical dimension is crucial; these exchanges are fluid among peers but sharply constrained in the presence of older individuals or in more formal mixedage gatherings, where respect (hurmat) norms take precedence. The speaker's intentionality (niyat) must be perceived as pure and friendly.

Comparative Analysis and Discussion A comparative analysis reveals core shared functions: both linguistic cultures employ pejorative expressivity to build solidarity, demonstrate the strength of the relationship (testing boundaries in a safe space), and create a unique in-group identity. The primary differences lie in constraints and expression: Hierarchy vs. Egalitarianism: Uzbek usage is more sensitive to vertical social structure. The practice is tightly confined to the peer horizontal axis, while Englishspeaking circles, while still context-aware, may exhibit it more readily across slightly more varied power dynamics (e.g., between a senior and junior colleague who are also friends). Taboo Domains: The semantic boundaries of permissible topics are culturespecific. Jokes about family are riskier in Uzbek contexts, whereas certain types of personal appearance jokes might be more sensitive in English contexts influenced by contemporary social awareness movements. Linguistic Realization: English often employs creative exaggeration and profanity. Uzbek may rely more on irony, proverbial humor, and the manipulation of respectful address forms for jocular effect, drawing from a shared cultural reservoir.

Conclusion

The use of pejorative expressivity in English and Uzbek friendship circles is a sophisticated sociolinguistic practice that transforms potentially aggressive speech into a tool of affiliation. It constitutes a "phatic communion" of a provocative kind, serving to strengthen group bonds through the mutual



understanding that the literal meaning of the words is suspended. This study concludes that while the underlying social-psychological function of cementing in-group solidarity is a pragmatic universal, its manifestation is culturally curated. The specific lexical choices, topical boundaries, and situational appropriateness are dictated by deeper cultural values— such as the Uzbek emphasis on hurmat (respect) within hierarchy versus the more egalitarian ideal often privileged in English-speaking friend groups. Further research employing recorded naturalistic data would provide deeper insights into the precise prosodic and paralinguistic cues that maintain the fragile "joking frame" in both cultures, preventing these ritualized insults from escalating into genuine conflict.

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