
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Linguistic Study of Offensive Language in Online Communication Chatgroups

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| ABSTRACT

Since offensive language, words and expressions are widely used nowadays on the internet; the current paper is an attempt to discover and investigate offensive language that is used in one medium of electronic communication, which is "chatgroups". The study focuses on analyzing and explaining offensive words and expressions found in chatgroups with their types and functions. The data of this study are a type of screenshots, (20) screenshots are randomly gathered from synchronous chatrooms. The analyses reveal different types of offensive language; these types are (vulgarity, insult, epithet, taboo, obscenity, and profanity). Besides, the functions of these offensive words and expressions are (body part, sexual, connotative, metaphoric, and expletive).

| KEYWORDS

The Nature, Definitions, Types, Functions of Offensive Language, Online Communication, Chatgroups.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In cyberspace, in general, and in electronic communication, in particular, people can hide their identity by using fake accounts to be more free in using any abusive and threatening content or offensive language, which has become a serious problem in online interaction. Besides, Online electronic harassment includes sending unwanted messages of a sexual nature via email or social media, abusing people with sexually offensive language, or stalking people online. Nonconsensual pornography or revenge porn, which is the distribution of sexually explicit images of individuals without their permission, is an increasing problem online (Stollznow, 2020:82).

The current study attempts to investigate offensive language, its types, and functions in online communication "chatgroups". It aims to see, explain, know and classify offensive language, which has become widely used in electronic communication. The source of the data is one type of electronic communication which is "chatgroups," because they have fewer restrictions than other types of online communication. The data are limited and gathered through screenshots, 20 random screenshots.

The importance of the study lies in discovering offensive words and expressions that are used by online participants with their types and functions. The main research questions that this study tries to answer are:

1-What are types of offensive language, "words and expressions", that are used in chatgroups, and what are the most frequent ones?

2-What are the functions of offensive words and expressions used in chatgroups?

The study aims to:

1-To know and explain offensive words and expressions with their types.

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2-To shed light on the functions of offensive words and expressions.

The current also hypothesizes that:

1-There are many types of offensive language used by online participants, such as “vulgarity, taboo, profanity, obscenity”, and the most frequent one is taboo.

2-Offensive language has many functions such as “social, sexual, expletive”.

2. The Nature of Offensive Language “A Review of Literature.”

Studies on words or aspects of language use “as inoffensive and taboo languages,” which are considered in some way socially unacceptable, in fact, become numerous. These studies have been undertaken in the fields of psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, communication studies, media studies, philosophy, psychology, and law. But it is perhaps indicative of the distaste generally felt about such languages or at least distaste about talking about them that in these studies, they go by a large number of different names (O’Driscoll, 2020:31).

There are some synonymous labels such as ‘swearing’, ‘expletive’, ‘terms of abuse’, and ‘offensive language. They reflect general parlance in the English language, which has numerous labels for language or the use of language that has the potential to cause offence. Some labels (e.g., swearing, cursing, cussing, and the euphemistic effing-and-blinding or effing-and-jeffing) denote an activity. Others (e.g., swearwords, expletives, four-letter words, dirty words, slang, rude words, terms of abuse) refer to potentially offensive lexical items. Still others (e.g., bad language, vulgar language, strong language, abusive language, offensive language, foul language, lewdness) refer to the flavour of discourse more generally, so still, there is no agreement on a definite term (ibid: 34).

Feeling offended is a universal experience. The emotional experience of having suffered an offence varies from mere irritation and annoyance to profound and intensely felt shock; the more serious the offence, the deeper and more longlasting the wound inflicted by it will be (Hatzis, 2021: 7). However, the offence can be intentional and directed to a specific person. It is also possible to cause offence to others without referring to them directly or even unintentionally. For example, a derogatory comment made on social media about a group with certain characteristics such as religion, race, ethnic origin, or sexuality can make someone who has that characteristic feel insulted even though the comment is not addressed to him as an individual, but the offence can be caused without the offense-giver intending to insult. This can happen because the person is careless, ignorant, or inconsiderate (ibid: 8).

O’Driscoll (2020:5)uses the term “taboo language” as an umbrella when talking about stretches of language which can cause offence or talking about what has actually caused offense on a particular occasion. On the other hand, he states that taboo language is not about the language used on a particular occasion but rather about particular linguistic items abstracted from time, place, and participants. He adds that the distinction between offensive and taboo languages is not simply that fundamental to linguistics between language use and language system. There is nothing inherently offensive about any particular string of sounds or letters. What makes them potentially offensive is the value accorded them in a particular language community; certain words, phrases, and propositions have become associated with offensiveness so that their articulation indexes it.

3. Definitions of Offensive Language

According to Battistella (2005:5), offensive language is hard to be defined because good or bad language cannot be defined in absolute terms; then he mentions that offensive language can be viewed as a language that does not follow the rules. On the other hand, Jay (1992: 161-2) defines the word “offensiveness” as a term that is used to denote the degree to which a certain word or concept possesses negative or aversive properties and adds that offensiveness is related to the concept of taboo in that the more offensive word is more likely to taboo. O’Driscoll (2020: 16) defines offensive language as “any word or string of words which has or can have a negative impact on the sense of self and/or wellbeing of those who encounter it – that is, it makes or can make them feel, mildly or extremely, discomfited and/or insulted and/or hurt and/or frightened”. Stollznow (2020: 2) defines offensive language as “something said to us that we find to be morally repulsive or personally insulting. It is a language that strikes the core of our beliefs or identity and affects us on a fundamental level”.

O’Driscoll (2020:5) also defines offending utterance as “An utterance which, when performed, is experienced by its recipient(s) as deleterious to (one or more aspects of) their sense of self and/or wellbeing – that is, it makes them feel, mildly or extremely, discomfited and/or insulted and/or hurt and/or frightened”.

4. Types of Offensive Language

Battistella (2005: 72, 82) mentions six types of offensive language (epithets, profanity, vulgarity, obscenity, cursing, and slang), whereas Jay (1992: 2-9) classifies offensive or bad language into ten types:

1-Cursing, The intent of cursing is to invoke harm on another person through the use of certain words or phrases. These words are imbued with the power granted to them mainly through religious or social demarcation. A religious curse may be like: *damn you, goddamn you, damn your hide, to hell with you*

Whereas a non-religious curse may be like: *Eat shit and die; I hope you break your neck; You should rot in jail for that crime.* (Jay, 1992: 2)

2-Profanity, which is based on a religious distinction. To be profane means to be secular or behave outside the customs of religious belief. To be profane means to be ignorant or intolerant of the guidelines of a particular religious order. The profane is outside of the doctrines of the church.

An example of profanity would be a word or phrase which seeks not to denigrate God, religion, or holy affairs but would be based more on ignorance of or indifference to these matters. These might be something like:

Jesus H Christ, I'm hungry! For the love of Christ, get off the phone!

Does the Pope shit in the woods? These are common expressions employing religious terminology in a profane, secular, or indifferent manner. (ibid: 3)

3-Blasphemy A blasphemy is an attack on religion or religious doctrine. While profanity is related to the secular or indifferent (to religion), blasphemy aims directly at the church. These verbal assaults would take the form of using the Lord's name in vain or cursing the deities. Blasphemy obtains scorn via the power of the church, such that the greater the power of the institution of religion, the more one could be punished for the use of blasphemous language.

These expressions are particularly offensive to the very devout but may be humorous to the non-believer:

Screw the Pope! Shit on what it says in the Bible!

The church can stick to its new fund drive! (ibid: 3-4)

4-Taboo: A taboo operates to suppress or inhibit certain behaviour, thoughts, and speech. Different cultures, in order to preserve social order, use taboos to control individuals within the group. The power of the taboo or the strength of the taboo is relative to the power of the controlling group to sanction or punish the perpetrator. The larger the threat, the greater the inhibition of the language. The function of the taboo is to prohibit the behaviour of a speaker and preserve social cohesion.

American taboos such as "shutout" during a scoreless game. Children tell each other never to say "red or "red hell". Words for body parts (*dick*), body processes (*piss*), or sex (*screw*) are sanctioned by washing the speaker's mouth out with soap or sending the offender off to the bedroom for a bit of isolation therapy. (ibid: 4-5)

5-Obscenity refers to words or expressions which characterize sex-differentiating anatomy or sexual and excretory functions in a crude way, such as *shit* and *fuck*. Obscene words are considered the most offensive and are rarely if ever, used in public media. Words that gain universal restriction would be *fuck, motherfucker, cocksucker, cunt, or tits*. The obscene speech also means unprotected speech; unprotected speech is not free but subject to the restrictions of a governing (federal, state, or local) body. (ibid: 5)

6-Vulgarity means the language of the common person, "the person in the street", or the unsophisticated, unsocialized, or under-educated. Vulgarity does not serve any particular need or function beyond the normal communication demands of the common human. To be vulgar is to be common, not necessarily bad or evil. Vulgarisms are not necessarily obscene or taboo; they just reflect the crudeness of street language. These words may be considered vulgar: *snot, bloody, up yours, booger, slut, piss, crap, kiss my ass, snatch, on the rag, puke.* (ibid: 6)

7-Slang is a vocabulary that is developed in certain sub-groups (teenagers, musicians, soldiers, drug users, or athletes) for ease of communication. The slang code serves to identify members of the group, while misuse or ignorance of it identifies non-members, which may be especially important in illegal transactions. The words may operate as abbreviations of more wordy or complex notions. Terms such as *pimp, cherry, dweeb, bennies, mid-term, John, cupcakes, s-o-s, jelly roll, and jock* are an example of slang. (ibid: 6-7)

8-Epithets are brief but forceful bursts of emotional language. They are more powerful in presentation (loudness or duration) and inoffensiveness than other types of cursing, for example, joking. The epithet is uttered from frustration, as when you hit your hand with a hammer. Epithets are outbursts, "the person on the street" yelling at a selected wrongdoer, or when a person does

something stupid or frustrating such as *shit, damn, hell, son of a bitch, goddamn it up yours, fuck you, fuck off, piss off, Jesus Christ*. (ibid: 7)

9-Insults and slurs, which are words or verbal attacks on other people. These words are spoken to harm the other person by the word alone. These insults and slurs do not necessarily gain their powers from religious sanctions or social taboos. They gain their power by denoting real or imagined characteristics of the target. Slurs may be racial, ethnic, or social in nature and may indicate the stereotyping or prejudice of the speaker. Insults may denote the physical, mental, or psychological qualities of the target and are commonly heard on the school playground. They both function to hurt the person directly through a particular word or phrase. Some insults use animal imagery such as *pig, dog, bitch, son of a bitch, jackass, and sow*. Some others are based on social deviations such as *whore, slut, bastard, homo, fag, queer*. Children's insults are commonly based on abnormal physical, psychological, or social characteristics such as *fatty, bubble butt, booger nose, four eyes, spaz, brain, dumb, weirdo, blabber mouth, fag, liar, tattletale, fairy, wimp*. Most readers are familiar with the many ethnic and racial slurs. These are spoken derogatorily to members of those groups such as *honkey, dago, spic, nigger, wop, kike, chink, frog, taco, wet back, gook, slope, mick, grease ball, Pollack*. Each of these insults and slurs is intended to hurt the listener. (ibid: 8)

10-Scatology refers to human waste products and processes. Such terms are among the early words that children hear and use when they are toilet trained. Americans have a great penchant for coining childish terms rather than using standardized terms or those of scientific origin. Scatological insults are common among children. Different cultures pay attention to different types of taboos. Since scatological references are about faeces and elimination, they appear as: *poo poo, ka ka, poop, turd, crap, shit, shit ass, shit for brains, piss, piss pot, piss off, fart*. The terms children say are usually different than those that adults would pick for the same referent. Some say only the vulgar would use scatological terms when a more refined euphemism or technical term could be substituted! (ibid: 9)

Finally, Allan and Burrige (2006: 31) distinguish between dysphemism, orthophemism, and euphemism in terms of impoliteness. They add that speakers use dysphemism to talk about people and things that frustrate and annoy them and that they disapprove of and wish to disparage, humiliate and degrade. Dysphemistic expressions contain curses, name-calling, and any sort of derogatory comment directed toward others to insult or wound them. A dysphemism is a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive about the addressed people or overhearing the utterance. Whereas orthophemisms and euphemisms are words or phrases that are used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression or taboo expression. An orthophemism is more formal and more direct, while a euphemism is more colloquial and figurative or indirect (ibid: 32-3).

5. Functions of Offensive Language

Jay (1992: 163,104) mentions some semantic features of offensive language such as (sexual content, aggressive, body functions, metaphoric such as body parts, race, and religion) and pragmatic functions such as "expletive or exclamative". He also states some semantic functions in terms of "connotative and denotative" (ibid: 10). Wajnryb (2005: 89-143) asserts four functions which are (bodily function or sexual organs, referential function, interpersonal or relational, and social function). Finally, Pinker (2007: 350) declares that there are five functions of swearing or offensive language (descriptive function, idiomatic function, abusive function, emphatic function, and cathartic function).

6. Online Communication

Online or electronic communication is the process of sharing information, ideas, and messages with others at a particular time and place by using electronic devices (Olubode-Sawe, 2010: 564). Electronic communication may be divided into two dimensions synchronous, which happens in real-time, and asynchronous, which takes place in postponed time (Crystal, 2006:11 and Baron, 2008:14). Electronic communication without social contact is being digital without humans or going online without leaving the safety of the electronic bunker (Holmes, 2005:94).

Online communication that is written on keyboards and read on screens has many characteristics of both speech and writing, such as telephone conversations. Electronic discourse is supported by a delivery system that replaces face-to-face communication with writing that stands in place of voices, such as messages (Davis and Brewer, 1997:2).

Electronic communication involves strategies and skills which are different from the ones employed to face to face exchange. Computer-mediated communication cannot take advantage of certain social aspects of oral interaction, such as nonverbal cues 'facial expressions' and prosodic features 'intonation' (Lee, 2009: 129). Electronic communication can be useful in circumstances where there is little or no opportunity for real-life contact with native speakers. Therefore, it may be used to learn more about the culture in chat sites or chat groups (Todd and Walker, 2000:64).

7. Chatgroups

A chatgroup is "a group of people who meet regularly at a particular internet site (chatroom) to discuss topics of common interest". Chatgroups are of two types: synchronous, which takes place in real-time, and asynchronous, which take place in postponed time, and messages can be posted at any time (Crystal, 2004: 26).

In synchronous chat groups, participants seek to exchange messages quickly in an approximate real-time face-to-face conversation and the modality of typewritten text. So, communication on the internet tends to represent a casual space for written language use (Sequires, 2010: 462). In synchronous chat groups, electronic interactions take place in real-time. Some systems allow communication between two participants only, such as Unix or "UNIX" in this system, the conversational exchange of texts are displayed as they are typed, and participants are typing at the same time, with input coming in simultaneously with output. The communication in this type is private "one-to-one" (Crystal, 2006: 156-58).

While other systems permit several participants to be in touch with each other, like 'Internet Relay Chat'. In this type, participants connect to one of the IRC servers on a particular network and join one of the channels, "chatrooms". Each room is devoted to a particular topic, and any participant can create a new room and become its operator. Furthermore, this type allows either private communication between participants or public communication in that everyone can see what you type. So, in a synchronous situation, the sender and receiver must be logged on simultaneously in real-time (Herring, 2007, cited in Bieswanger, 2016: 283).

8. Data Collection and Description

The data used in this study are collected randomly from the internet by screenshots. The source of the data is online English chatgroups which are synchronous and occur "in real time". Those chatgroups' "chatrooms" are open access, and there are many different public rooms with different topics. Synchronous chatgroups have participants of different ages, sexes, cultures, education, backgrounds, and regions. So, the data are easy to be collected and available in a large number of public chat groups that do not require any permission because they are 'open access' on many internet sites. The source of synchronous chatgroup data is gathered from the following links:

<https://chat.ukchat.com/room/Lobby>

<https://all4masti.com/>

This type permits either private messaging "between two participants" or public messaging "everyone can see what others type". Besides, this will have value in collecting formal and informal language from electronic communication. Messaging in this type of chat group is free, and the users do not have to pay to enter these public rooms. Online users are looking to communicate with those who share the same interest and those who can collaborate in creating an online dialogue and communicating information.

The data tend to be short because all members are online, and messages are sent and received from the same server. Moreover, the sender does not need to wait for a long time for a response because messages are not stored; messages are arranged according to the time of occurrence from the newer to the older. This means messages are posted and transmitted simultaneously. The norm that is used in this type of exchange is informal, as in the everyday speech in face-to-face communication. The number of participants varies from room to room; some chatrooms have hundreds, and others have more or fewer. Jay (1992), who classifies offensive language with its functions into different types, will be adopted as a model in this study. Wajaryb (2005) mentions some functions of offensive language will also be adopted in classifying the functions of offensive language.

9. Analysis

Quantitative-qualitative analyses are conducted to figure out and classify offensive language or offensive words into types and give the reasons or functions behind using them. Most chatgroups chatters hide their identity, and this makes those chatters to be more free in using or selecting whatever they have in their minds without any restrictions and without thinking or respecting other chatters' feelings. The language used in chat groups tends to be short; therefore, chatters try to use economic expressions in a wide range, and some offensive words are abbreviated in chat groups. The study will analyze these findings as follows:

- 1- *"asshole"* is this offensive word sometimes found abbreviated into *"ass"*. It is usually written by males; it is often used as an aggressive or to express anger, harmful or to indicate insults. Sometimes, it is used as vulgar, and it has a body part function and a social marker such as foolishness.
- 2- *"bull shit, shit"* these offensive words are used as scatology, insult, or epithet. Thus, many offensive or dirty words are used to express connotative meanings, such as the emotional overtones of a word, feelings, moods, attitudes, etc., or used as metaphorical imagery.
- 3- *"fuck, what the fuck, fucking, fuck you, too fucking"*, these words or expressions are widely used in chatgroups and take many different shapes. Some of these expressions are abbreviated by some chatters, such as *"FU"* and *"FK"*. These different expressions of the offensive word *"fuck"* are examples of anger-frustration that is addressed towards other chatters. These

expressions are clearly metaphors of anger, and their type is an obscenity. They indicate that the chatter is treated unjustly or he/s is forced to commit some unwanted or deviant sex act. So, these expressions have a social function.

- 4- (*Jesus, hell*) these two expressions are sometimes used as a religious curse. They consider profane, secular, or indifferent manner. Such religious words are used when a chatter does something stupid or frustrating. They have an expletive function or invocations of religious power. They are sometimes pointed to cause harm that is wished to befall the wrongdoer in the expletives.
- 5- "*dick, gay*" this two offensive "taboo and obscene" words that are used either to refer to body parts or processes related to sexual behaviour. These words are often used as jokes in some chat group discussions or as offensive insults.
- 6- "*gosh*" is this offensive word that is usually used as a euphemism by some online chatters or as an expletive when some other users become angry. It is used as an epithet expression. Some offensive words are used as exclamations to express the degree of anger.

Finally, it is also found in the data that some chatters or online users use taboo or offensive words in their profiles' nicknames, such as "sexy boy or sexy girl", or their profiles contain taboo or offensive photos. These actions are adapted by online chat group participants because electronic systems allow them to hide their identities.

10. Conclusions

The analyses and findings showed different types of offensive words and expressions such as "vulgarity, insults, epithet, taboo, obscenity, and profanity". Besides, there were different functions of these offensive words and expressions, such as "body parts, social, connotative, metaphorical, sexual, and expletive" functions.

The most frequent offensive expression was "fuck", which was widely used in different forms. Some offensive words and expressions were abbreviated in chatgroups; this strategy of economy expressions was widely used in chatgroups because of the high number of participants in each group who participated at the same time.

It was also found that the profiles of the participant also contained offensive nicknames such as "sexy boy or sexy girl" as well as some offensive or taboo photos. The electronic systems allowed the participant to hide their identity, and for this reason, they were more free to select or write whatever they had in their minds.

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