Insults in the History of English

The objective of my Ph.D. project is to investigate insults in the history of English. While there has been some previous research on the topic, most of it has focused on individual text types, single periods, or relatively small datasets. Consequently, many assumptions about changes in insults are based on exemplary evidence, which is why this dissertation aims to provide a systematic and diachronic overview of insults in the history of English. The three research questions will address changes in different levels of language: (1) word structure and semantics of insulting lexemes, (2) morpho-syntactic constructions of insults, and (3) socio-pragmatic functions of insults.

To this end, it will be crucial to adhere to a clear definition of insult that distinguishes insults from neighboring speech acts, such as oaths and curses. Accordingly, insults will be regarded as utterances that are demeaning predications about a hearer who has to perceive them as a face-threatening act (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2000, 72).

One of the main challenges of the project is likely to be the development of a methodology that allows for the identification and compilation of insults, given that insults are context-dependent, time-specific, and culture-specific (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2000, 92). Thus, I have opted for a combination of different approaches: Lexicographical sources, particularly thesauri (such as the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary*), will be used to identify insulting lexemes, which can then be analyzed according to their morphological structure and semantic source domain. To identify possible changes in the constructions in insults, it will be recurred on a variety of corpora, including the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* (*DOEC*), the *Corpus of English Dialogues* (*CED*), and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (*COCA*). Various constructions that are attested as typical for insults (cf. Culpeper 2010, 3242), such as *you*+NP, as in "You coward" (*COCA*, 2015, MOV, David and Goliath), or *you+are*+NP, as in "You are a fucking asshole" (*COCA* 2016, MOV, Cabin Fever), can be easily retrieved from corpora and then investigated in terms of function. Lastly, high-density passages of insults will – for a start – be manually analyzed in two genres: comedies of manners and political communication.

This combination of methods facilitates the systematic diachronic overview of forms and functions of insults, which can help to improve our understanding of impoliteness, conflict, and conflict solution. Moreover, a methodology that partially relies on automation but simultaneously includes manual intervention can be applicable for large-scale diachronic investigations of other pragmatic phenomena that, like insults, have few conventionalized manifestations.

References:

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Jucker, Andreas H., and Irma Taavitsainen. 2000. "Diachronic Speech Act Analysis: Insults from Flyting to Flaming." *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 1 (1): 67–95.