

# Insults in *Of Mice and Men* : Expression of Power or Solidarity ?

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## Abstract

*Insults are verbal attitudes that exist in people daily conversations whatever their culture. They are mainly used to demean, frustrate, to express contempt and to show domination. This paper addresses the issue insults in characters' speeches in the novel 'Of Mice Men'. Focusing on the Theory of politeness, the central aim of this work is to analyse insults: swear words, animal metaphors to see if they express solidarity or power. The study revealed that the use of these pejorative terms by characters expresses not only power and solidarity but also emphasis on the quality or quantity of something.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Insults – Power – Solidarity – Emphasis – Politeness .*

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## Résumé

*Les injures sont des attitudes langagières qui existent dans les conversations quotidiennes des gens quelque soit leur culture. Elles sont principalement utilisées pour rabaisser, frustrer, exprimer du mépris et montrer la domination. Cet article aborde la question des injures dans l'oeuvre ' Des Hommes et des souris ' de John Steinbeck. En nous basant sur la théorie de la politesse, l'objectif principal est d'analyser les injures: les maux de malediction, les metaphors se rapportant aux animaux pour voir si elle sont l'expression d'une relation de pouvoir ou de la solidarité. L'étude a révélé que l'usage des injures par les personnages du roman exprime non seulement le pouvoir, la solidarité mais surtout l'emphase sur la qualité ou la quantité de quelquechose.*

**MOTS CLES:** *Injures – Pouvoir – Solidarité – Emphase – Politesse.*

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## Introduction

Human activities are almost organized through the use of language. With language, instructions are given, emotions, love and hate are expressed. In anger, people use offensive terms to refer to

each other; this is insults. For Agyekum: “insults are painful and offensive expressions that are emotionally oriented, inappropriate and embarrassing and intended as a reproach to offend the addressee.” (2021, p. 1) The objective of using insults is to smirch the reputation of a person and to affect him morally. In this regard, Nisreen affirms that: “insults are derogatory terms or expressions used to demean, humiliate or exclude individual or groups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability” (2024, p. 172) For Chomsky insults are linguistic abuses used to oppress and uphold social control. In working place, chiefs may use offensive terms to express their power; workers may also use them to address each other not compulsorily with the intention to hurt and demean. In real life, at car station, at market, among teenagers and even downstreet you can hear insults of any sort from teenagers, adults, men and women. These insults may lead to laugh and express pleasantry; but they can also provoke anger, violence. At working place some superiors resort to insults to reign over their collaborators. Talking about working place, the novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937) which is the corpus of this study depicts one indeed. Fictional works are sometimes the reflection of real life and in literary works, social facts are reported on purpose. The study in hand is based on a fictional work by John Steinbeck, the novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937). When reading this novel, just like in our daily life, I realized that insults are intensively used by characters. The main characters George and Lennie who share a relation of intimacy used insults; the Boss and his son Curley who incarnate the power and share a relation of domination with the other workers use them; the other characters use among the insults too. All these observations made from reality to fiction urge me to delve into this field for investigation. In delving into this field of research, I set my key concern on analyzing offensive words such as “hell”, “God damn”, “bastard” and animal metaphors “son-of-bitch”. Are these words always expressing offensiveness? If not, at which moment do they express intimacy? Apart from having the properties of expressing power and solidarity relation, are not there any other functions underlying insults in characters’ speeches? The central objective of this study is to analyze insults to see if the relation among characters is the one of solidarity or power. To do so, I will use only characters’ speeches that display instances of insults.

In order to conduct the study, here is the roadmap I will follow up. Firstly, I review some related works under the heading of literature review. Then, in the theoretical and methodological framework, I make a brief account of the theory of politeness, the one that frames this study. In this same section, I present the data, their nature and their mode of elicitation. Finally, I analyze the data, present the results and draw the conclusion.

## 1. Literature Review

Insult which is a cross-linguistic phenomenon has recently been the concern of researchers. The works in this domain are numerous, all of them cannot be reviewed in this section. Nonetheless, I will present some of them for perspective enlargement.

Joseph A. Hedger (2012) worked on a sort of insults called slurs specifically racial slurs. For Hedger “slurs are offensive words that can hurt people (...) their offensiveness projects through almost any type of linguistic construction” (2012, p.74). The linguistic construction in question can be swear words, animal metaphors that is to compare the insultee to an animal. Talking about these linguistic constructions, Leech stated that “some swear words can be used alone as an impolite illocution(...) others need to be combine with other expressions in a longer illocution” (2014, p. 230). Some example of these constructions are found in the corpus under analysis through expression such as “god damn”, “hell” and “son-of-bitch”. Hedger defends the idea that slurs lack descriptive content, for him slurs are purely expressive; they express contempt. This mean that if somebody insults another one, he expresses his ire or contempt towards this one. To make is point understandable, Hedger gave the following examples:

- a) The blasted TV is not working.
- b) The TV set is not working.

He would say that these to sentences don't have different truth condition. Whatever the term used in these sentences, the reality is that the TV is not working. The use of “blasted” in (a) is to express anger or contempt not to describe. To sum up, Hedger affirmed: “ the view here offered for your consideration is that slurs contain merely

expressive content – i.e. they display an attitude of contempt of the part of the speaker towards targets- but they lack extension, and hence don't make truth-apt contribution to semantic content". (2012, p. 78)

Croom (2014) viewed in the approach of Hedger (2012) some limitations. Croom defends the idea that considering slurs are purely expressive is questionable. Under certain circumstances, the insultee may not find the insult offensive but in another context the face of the insultee is rather threatened. For this reason, Croom criticizing Hedger said:

“In holding that slurs contain purely offensive expressive content, Hedger (2012) not only fails to account for the fact that in certain contexts a speaker would find one slur more linguistically apt than another for use (lexical aptness) and that in certain contexts some targets would find one slur more directly offensive than another (target aptness), he further fails to account for the fact that the use of a slur doesn't always or necessarily express offense” (2014, p. 22)

Croom proposed then a hybrid account to analyze racial insults that is slurs since Hedger (2012) account fails to observe and discuss thoroughly actual instances of slurs in natural languages. Sometimes, insults target a specific group or community; this sort of insult is called slur. Bianchi and Spotorno (2015) analyzed slur from an experimental standpoint. They investigated in this domain with the objective to show first that experiments could play a central role in slurs' analysis and secondly that slurs can provide research avenue in trying to see how our cognitive system reacts or processes insults. Two techniques were at stake to conduct the study namely off-line experiment and on-line experiment. The first one is based empirical method using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews; it permits to elicit valuable data for research according to them. The second model that is on-line experiment used modern device to account for the state of our cognitive system while we are engaged in activities such reading, reaction time, breadth and heart rate. For Bianchi and Spotorno: “slur may be seen as a prototype of aggressive behavior concentrated in a

few words” ( 2015, P.1) Using the word ‘nigger’ suffice to insult an African. Some more example of racial slurs are brought into light by Croom when he said: *“slurs are commonly understood to target those descriptive features typically considered to be associated with members belonging to certain classes; for example, the expression chink typically slurs Chinese Americans, the expression gook typically slurs Korean Americans, and the expression nigger typically slurs African Americans”* (2014, p. 17)

The study is all about a cognitive analysis and in this regard, Bianchi and Spotorno affirm that: “our brain ‘reacts’ to an insult as well as to an expression that contrasts with personal values” (2015, P.246). In their work, they also approached the question of off-line studies appropriation and they would say that under this heading that the context influences. In an in-group context, a slur can be used as a norm and consequently lose its offensiveness. The notion of context impacting slur offensiveness and non-offensiveness is central in Koffi Agyekum (2021) who investigated in the domain of jocular insults among artisans.

Agyekum (2021) aim was to find out the role of jocular insults among artisan in their working place and their impacts on productivity. For him, jocking and humour are speech play used to create a stress-free atmosphere in workplaces and also to entertain. Just like slurs, insults are painful for the target as they are embarrassing. For an insult to operate, there must an insultor, the person who utters the insult and the insultee, the receiver of the insult the target. These roles are interchangeable. Agyegum asked artisans about the moment on which they resort to insults and: *“The artisans stated that the jocular insults were more prevalent at times when they felt a little bit bored or tired; the jocular insults were thus employed to reinvigorate them to work harder to stabilise or increase their productivity.”* (2021, p.3) The interrogation that raises is to know how these workers react, do they feel hurt? Insults harmfulness is bound to the nature of the relation among individuals and it is also context bound. Holmes affirms that: *“ insults between those who know each other well are also signals of solidarity and markers of in-group membership”* (2000, p. 174) So, Akan artisans considered mutual insults at workplace untrue lacking serious intent. The conclusion that

Agyegum came to is that insults in an informal workplace like the one of Akan carpenters aim at solidarity and inclusion. In working places, the chief sometimes uses insults to express their power and control over the workers. To have an understanding about the use of insults to maintain one's power, let us go through the work by Nisreen Juma M. (2024)

Nisreen (2024) approached the issue of insult from a pragmatic viewpoint with two main objectives in her line of sight. The first objective was to examine how insults work as a cursor to maintain social control, to perpetuate stereotype and to reinforce social hierarchies; the second objective was to address the psychological impact of insults on individual and to show how insults can contribute to degrade social environment. For Nisreen, insults are complex phenomena since they can either harm and empower. The complexity of insults lies also in its varieties among which slurs. Nisreen sees in slurs which are specific insults targeting a particular group a mean to hurt emotionally. Consequently, there are many types of slurs: partisan slur, ideological slur, racial and ethnic slur. Partisan slurs are used to attack one's political opponents. It is used in politics to fuel political discourse toxically. Ideological slurs are used to demean individuals because of their beliefs, world view. Ethnic and racial slurs disparage individual based on their ethnicity or race. In societies power is generally maintained through laws and protocols; but sometimes this power is kept by using degrading terms with the aim to silence, to frustrate and even humiliate that why Nisreen said: "the use of slurs is closely related to the idea of appropriation and silencing. Slurs have been and still are instruments of oppression, shifting the opinion of disadvantaged people and maintaining unfavorable power relationship" (2024, P. 178). In fact, the relation between the insultee and the perpetrator is asymmetrical, the perpetrator is generally the superior of the target in social status. In nutshell, Nisreen affirms that slurring is a linguistic phenomenon that is deeply enrooted in society and is context bound. Its key role is to uphold social hierarchies and make the promotion of stereotypes. To insult or to slur an individual, people resort to metaphors, phrases and gestures. Slurring individual without resorting to words is what interested Di Franco in *Derogation without words*.

Insulting an individual does not always call for words or utterances, the performance of certain types of gestures may witness the fact indeed. DiFranco (2017) went through pejorative gestures in his study. The aims of DiFranco were:

- to provide a taxonomy of Non-Verbal Pejoratives,
- specify the conditions the theory of NVPs may meet to be successful
- motivate an original theory of the derogatory power of a subset of Non-Verbal Pejoratives (NVPs). (2017, p. 1)

The pejorative gestures are facial expressions, miming, extra-body communication and middle finger gesture. Facial expression is when we configure our face to express emotion. To mock somebody, getting your tongue out and moving it out and in will be enough for that. Insulting a person may be also done by miming the way the person speaks, walks or even dresses. Extra-body communication is manifested by using objects and things to vehicle a message. Middle finger gesture is an offensive gesture used to sully a person, it is considered “as an iconic sexual violation gesture” (2017, p. 9)

Just like slurring words, NVPs are used to humiliate, to demean the target in an exchange and they have a power and this power according to DiFranco : “ is due to the imagery they invite recipient to entertain (...) it involves the portrayal of an individual or group, or a depiction of an action” (2017,p.13). The work by DiFranco shows that insults can go far beyond the word; what can be uttered with a word can also be said with a gesture in some regards. It happens that your friend who has not seen you for a couple of days, insults you as soon as you meet. Instead of getting hurt or frustrated, you smile and reply to him friendly. Suppose that you are not friend to somebody and this person insults you at the first time you meet. For sure, you will be offended. We see that insults are person bound or context bound, not all the insults are equal. The inequality of insults due to context and to the relation individuals share is what Popa-Wyatt developed in his article ‘not all slurs are equal’.

The types of insults approached by Popa-Wyatt (2016) are slurs. He defines slur as a sort of hate speech used to oppress a target group. They express contempt based on some specific traits. Popa-Wyatt

main objective was to show that not all the slurs are equal, the context and the pertaining to a specific group play a central role in the study of slurs, insults targeting a specific group or community. And talking about the context, he said that: *“different context would modify the contempt expressed semantically.”* (2016, p.154) In-group members use slurs against one another does not offend. An African American may refer to his fellow black by using the term ‘nigger’, this latter will not feel any offence but if this insult was uttered by a white person, then an offence will be generated. The variation of the degree of offense according to the context and the group is brought into light in the following terms: *“sometimes if members of the same group use a slur word against one another, there is no offense. If a black refers to another black with the term ‘nigger’, it won’t have the same impact if the insulter was a white guy”* (2016, p. 153). This brought into light that not all slurs are offensive. One can deduce that there are oppressive slurs, slurs meant to hurt, demean and non-oppressive slurs, slurs used to express friendship, and intimacy just like in the case of artisans in Agyekum (2021) where insults are used to encourage and reinvigorate. Popa-Wyatt came to the conclusion that there is the necessity to differentiate between broader group of slurs and smaller group; the smaller group of slurs is called oppressive. As mentioned in the previous lines, slurs are context bound and their offensiveness depends on the nature of relation individuals share with one another. Talking about slurs in relation to the context is what drew Bolinger (2015) attention in *‘The Pragmatics of slurs’*.

Bolinger (2015) addressed the question of slurs from a pragmatic standpoint. Three main aims underlie his work firstly, to establish that slurs and offensive speech act work together and as such they should receive parallel explanation. Secondly, to show that the contrastive account is the one that suits well the study of slurs and finally to give some illustrations and generalities related the pragmatic account on slurs. For Bolinger, the context where an insult is uttered constitutes a key factor that grounds the insult that why he says: *“I am inclined to say that it is the use of the slur per se that grounds the offense, but rather one of the other contextual factors”* (2015, p. 12). An individual may be slurred by another, the insultee may not find the insult offensive at all because of the friendly relationship he shares with the insulter or just because of the familiarity of the context. In



fact, for an insult to be offensive, it must fill up some conditions. Bolinger (2015) determined three conditions: the intention, inappropriateness and its association. Among these three conditions, the intention is the most important and Bolinger would say: *“speaker intent is the most general warrant for offense: any phrase may be used to offend if the intention to do so is clear”*. (2015, P. 4) It means that any speech act deprived of the clear intention to offend is not to be considered as an insult, the context where the insult is held must be appropriate. Being insulted in public does not have the same impact as being insulted in isolation. Under certain circumstances, the slur may lose its potential to hurt; this is called insulation. Insulation intervenes when a speaker is forced to use an insult in a direct quotation or dictionary. This speaker does not fill up none of the three conditions formerly presented. In artwork for example, using insulation is subjected the legitimacy of the purposes. It might be accepted if its role is to “improve the social position of the group targeted by the slur”. (2015, p. 17) and to denounce injustice. From the analysis of Bolinger (2015), one notices that slurs offensiveness is bound to context, the study of meaning based on the context is pragmatics. So, just like Bolinger (2015), Arianna Falbo (2021) addressed the issue under the heading of neutral counterparts of slurs.

Falbo (2021) was concerned in her study with a specific aspect in the study of slurs, their neutral counterparts. Neutral counterparts are in fact co-referential terms that are used to refer to a given group or community. The terms ‘nigger’ and ‘Afro-American’ are co-referent because they depict the same reality. Falbo’s work aimed at exploring the theoretical role and limits of the neutral counterpart in the explanation of the offensiveness of slurs in pragmatic framework. The pragmatic account of slur defends the idea that the meaning of a slur is the same like its neutral counterpart. This view is objected by semanticists who stipulate that there is no synonymous relation between slurs and their neutral counterparts. For expressivists, slurs have an expressive content that their neutral counterparts do not have, consequently they are not equivalent in terms of meaning or offensiveness. Bolinger (2015) said that the most important component that ground offense is the intent, but for Falbo: “the offense generated by slurs happens at the level of pragmatic inference: it is the result of conversational implicature”. (2021, p.10) and he would say

that the offensiveness of slurs results in the fact that the speaker deliberately chooses slurring terms instead of its neutral counterpart just because the intention is to hurt in first place. But all slurs do not have neutral counterparts; in this case it becomes difficult for the speaker to utter his thought. In his analysis, she also developed the concept of weapon uses of slurs; weapon slurs “*are among the most toxic and offensive way (if not the most offensive way) that slurs can be used to harm others*” (2021, p. 16). For the maintenance of social stability and promote cohesion Falbo privileged the silence to avoid embarrassing and hurting others and she said “*the most salient alternative is not even an expression at all , but rather choosing not to express oneself*” (2021, p. 16). In other words, it is rather good to stay taciturn than uttering offensive words. Slur is a multi-facet phenomenon the study of which leads each researcher do adopt a specific orientation.

The orientation chosen by Berkovsky (2022) is to analyze slurs and redundancy. If something is redundant it means that it occurs more than required. The occurrence of an utterance more than requires violate the maxim of quantity in Grice framework. In order to avoid redundancy in the use of slurs, derogation appears to be an alternative. Berkovsky (2022) affirms that: “derogation is an objective feature of the semantic content of pejorative terms. Derogation is the result of the actual predication, or application of a slur or pejorative term to its intended group”. (2022, p. 1). Slurs redundancy lies in the type of usage the speaker applies to them be it high frequency usage or alternating usage. High frequency usage happens when the same speaker in a conversation uses a slur in multiple of utterances; alternating usage is all about substituting a slur by its neutral counterpart. In his analysis of slurs, he discovered that “ as the conversation progresses, the high frequency and alternating usages become more prominent”. But is redundancy an impediment to the coherence of the conversation? Berkovsky (2022) defends the idea that the coherence of a conversation is not affected by redundancy of slurs. For Berkovsky just like Bolinger (2015), the usage of slur must be prohibited for moral and social reasons: “their use threatens public order and for all sorts of other sundry reasons, speaker are prohibited from using them. (2022, p.12) Framed under the maxim of quantity, associating slurs with derogation lead to the violation of the maxim

quantity; the main claim of this maxim is “don’t make your contribution more informative than is required” (1975, p. 45) in other word don’t say more than what is required; The slurs must be uttered just like the way they are. Slur is a linguistic phenomenon that has received countless of analysis from different theoretical standpoint. An insult may be offensive or inoffensive depending on the context and this is the aspect Milić (2018) developed.

Milić (2018) said that an insult may be generated through the imitation of someone voice or way of walking from a derogative way. In fact, an utterance is considered as an insult when its main objective is to demean, hate and discriminate and this Milić (2018) brought it into light in the following terms “ something counts as insult only if the addressee ( and the target group he belongs) ought to be subjected to certain discriminatory practices.” (2018, P. 5)

Many views coalesce to determine the circumstances under which an insult become offensive. Pragmaticians affirm that the key element to ground an insult is the relevance of the context, For subjectivists, the relevant criteria is the nature of the relation the insulter and the insultee shares; our emotional responses to insults vary from one individual to the other. As far as adverbialism view is concerned, something is considered insulting if it is said insultingly. The last view is the one of the objectivists, the offensiveness of insults varies across culture and he would say: “we are in portion to judge whether an act is an insult or not with regard to a given social community and due to being its members... an act is considered as an insult when it bears properties of demeaning or derogatory. Something is demeaning if it hurts our honor and self-respect” (2018, p. 12-13). This is the case of Afro-American using the term ‘nigger’ in in-group context. The term ‘nigger’ used by a white man will turn to offensiveness. When we report an insult from an insulter to the insultee, are we responsible for the insult? This is the aspect Maria Paola Tenchini (2021) in her ‘words in motion’.

Tenchini (2021) defines slurs as : “pejorative epithets that express negative attitude towards a class of individuals sharing the same race (nigger, chink), country origin (daggo, flip, wop), sexual orientation (faggot), religion (kike, fenian), health status ( mongo, spaz), and other group-based identificatory properties” (2021, p. 153). The specificity of slur lies in their dual property of referring to

individual and expressing hate toward them. In analyzing slur in reported speech, many theoretical positions spring out. The first position is the one of the prohibitionists, for them be it in reported speech or any other sort of situation, a slur keeps always its ability to hurt as such their use must be forbidden. For the literalist, the person who reports the sentence is not responsible for the offence but the person who uttered it in first place and they would say: “the fact that the meaning of slur is literal (...) prevents the reporting speaker from being charged with the derogation (2021, p. 159). The last position is the one of pragmatician, for them the context is the central element to take into account when it comes to approach slur in indirect speech. For pragmatician: “the context of evaluation need not to be the context of the actual utterance, the original speaker is not responsible for the slur’s derogatory content (...) the responsibility depends on the context of the utterance” (2021, p. 160). I analyzed some works on insults and slurs, these works are the representatives of the great amount found in literature they cannot all be presented in this work. Nonetheless, I come to the conclusion that the following topic ‘insults in *Of Mice and Men*: expression of power or solidarity?’ has not yet been covered. Consequently, this work gets all its rationale. We all know that insults whatever their nature gestural or verbal are in nearly all cultures prohibited because they hurt and express contempt. As announced in the introductory section, this work is grounded on the Politeness Theory and to know about this theory, let us move to the theoretical framework.

## 2. Methodological And Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Method

#### 2.1.1. The data elicitation

A research may start by a simple observation of a daily phenomenon. This one on insults has been motivated by noticing insults in characters’ speeches *Of Mice and Men* (1937) by John Steinbeck. Consequently, they are second hand data. The collection of data requires that any person interested in this kind of study reads the novel thoroughly, list out the insults uttered by characters. In order to conduct the analysis, I precise that only the characters’ speeches will

be taken into account. The data will be presented in grapes and numbered continuously till the end of the article.

### **2.1.2. The characters**

Characters are of two sorts: the major characters George and Lennie; the minor characters: The boss, curley, curley's wife, whit, Carlson, Slim, Crook, the Old Swamper. From the review that has just been done, Popa-Wyatt (2016) defended the idea that not all slurs must be considered as insults. So, in order to see what to consider as insult among characters, I will take into account the nature of the relation between interactants. Is the relation symmetric or asymmetric? By symmetric relation, I refer to solidarity and by asymmetric relation, I mean power, distance. The data under analysis are offensive terms made of swear words: *God damn, hell*; animal metaphors: *son- of-bitch* and *bastard*. These offensive terms are so much used that delving into their analysis is quite essential to determine their semantic functions. Lennie and George are the main characters. The relation that links them is the one of solidarity, intimacy. All these factors will analyze just after the theoretical framework.

### **2.3. The Theory of politeness**

Politeness is a behavioral phenomenon found in all the cultures but it is subjected to the principle of variability; something may be polite in one culture and considered impolite in another. Politeness adorns our communication and maintain a climate of peace among members of a given community. Geoffrey Leech (2014) defines politeness as : “ a form of communicative behavior found very generally in human language and among human cultures...it is to speak or behave in such a way as to (appear to) give benefit or value not to yourself but rather to the other(s) person(s) you are conversing with. (2014, p. 3). In this section, I will go through some key tenets of the theory that frame this work.

Lakoff (1973) is considered as the father of the politeness theory. His theory of politeness goes through three main rules:

- Don't impose,
- give options,

- Make feel good

Make feel good is to avoid any utterances that will get our addressee uncomfortable or offended. Leech extended his politeness rules with three other rules: Distance – deference and camaraderie. Note that P. Grice (1975) with his ‘Logic and conversation’ influenced many researchers among whom Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). They developed the notion of ‘face’ and all the strategies of politeness implemented to redress and mitigate Face Threatening Acts. In this regard, any speech act which intend to harm our addressee one way or another is called Face Threatening Act (FTA). And any speech act aiming at assuring respect and honor of our interlocutor is said Face Saving Act (FSA).

Geoffrey Leech (1977) influenced by Grice cooperative maxims proposed a Tact Maxim. This principle goes through the Politeness Principle complementary to Grice Cooperative Principle. The Politeness principle “postulates that the interactants on the whole , prefer to express or imply polite beliefs expressed by S are beliefs favorable to the other person (O) whereas impolite beliefs are beliefs unfavorable to (O)” (2014, p.34). It is better to be polite than impolite since the latter carries conflict genes. It turns out that the model proposed by the ones may find it hard to apply to certain realities that is why Yueguo Gu (1990) though following Grice, proposed some amendment to fall true with the requirements of Chinese realities. Gu (1990) thinks that the Theory of Politeness needs some modifications so that Chinese tradition and practices of politeness be covered. He would say: “Politeness Principle is regarded as sanctioned beliefs that individual’s behavior ought to live up to the expectation of respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth and refinement” Gu (1990) in Leech (2014, p.35). So, avoid any feeling of being sanctioned Gu generated four polite maxims: self-denigration, address, Tact and Generosity. When we talk about politeness, it is also worth talking about impoliteness. Impoliteness is any disrespectful and offensive a speaker A has towards a co-speaker B and Leech quoting Culpeper (2005, p. 38) said: “ impoliteness comes about when : (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, of (2) the hearer perceives and / or contracts behavior as intentionally face-attacking, or the combination of (A) and ( B). Leech, (2014, p. 218)

The novel under analysis shows in characters' speeches many swear words namely 'god damn', 'hell' and animal metaphors; For Leech (2014), these words are emotional aggravators. Consequently, they violate the cooperative principle of manner which requires that one contribution must not be more than necessary.

Generally speaking, insulting a person is saying something more than required just because insults are offensive. Despite their offensiveness, some insults turn to lack their potential of being offensive under certain circumstances. So, analyzing insults to work out their offensiveness (power, domination, humiliation) and inoffensiveness (sympathy, friendship, solidarity) gives our using of politeness theory all its rationale since politeness and impoliteness are considered as the two sides of the same coin. As it has been stated further back in this work, insults' offensiveness and inoffensiveness are context bound that is why in the next section, I will analyse the data taking into account their context of utterance to be able to answer the central interrogation: are insults the expression of power, solidarity or else?

### 3.Data analysis and interpretation

In this section, the analysis will be organized into three main angles in accordance with the nature of relation that links characters. Is the relation the one of power or solidarity? Do insults express other thing apart from power and solidarity?

#### 3.1. *Relation of intimacy and insults*

George and Lennie are closely related just because together they were looking for better living conditions and as Lennie suffers from mental disability George cared about him all the time. The solidarity and mutual attention are expressed in the following line:

- (1) "Lennie's lip quivered and tears started in his eyes. "Aw, Lennie!" George put his hand on Lennie's shoulder. "I ain't takin' it away jus' for ' meanness. That mouse ain't fresh, Lennie; and besides, you've broke it pettin' it. You get another mouse that's fresh and I'll let you keep it a little while."

Though there is a closeness between them, George has much more authority on Lennie. This domination was not to hurt but for their success. He also gave him instructions to follow just to secure a job; he would ask him to stay quiet during the interview:

- (2) “We’re gonna go in an’ see the boss. Now, look - I’ll give him the work tickets, but you ain’t gonna say a word. You jus’ stand there and don’t say nothing. If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won’t get no job, but if he sees ya work before he hears ya talk, we’re set. Ya got that?” (p. 6)

Lennie is referred to as “crazy bastard” by George, but Lennie did not express any feeling of being offended, nevertheless he obeyed George and made an effort not to forget and he said:

- (3) “ I ain’t gonna say nothin....I ain’t gonna say nothin.... I ain’t gonna say nothin....” (p.7).

The principle is that if the addressee doesn’t find the term offensive, then there is no face threatening act. Offensive terms may also be used to describe people capacity to perform a task. So, In order to express the capacity of Lennie to work hard, George said:

- (4) “ no, he ain’t , but he’s sure a hell of a good worker. Strong as a bull. Lennie smile to himself. “Strong as a bull,” he repeated...But I say he’s God damn good worker.” (p.24)

An animal metaphor ‘strong as a bull’ and a swear word ‘God damn’ are used to describe the ability of Lennie to perform physical task. If Lennie was offended, he would express it but he smiled as a sign of his acceptance of such attribute. Not all insults are considered as insults; the offensiveness of an insult is deeply enrooted in context. Insults are used to express intensity of something and that was the case with George:

- (5) - “ I used to have a hell of a lot of fun with’im (George) P.44



- He was so damn nice to me (George) p.44
- The cream is so God damn thick (George) p.63
- Bill was a hell of a nice fella (whit) P.52
- Damn right, I could (Lennie) p. 62

In this set of data, one sees that the pejorative damn, God damn do not express any insult. They are sometimes used to substitute the quantifier ‘very’ or ‘a large amount of’ to describe a large quantity of something. For example, “damn nice” may mean “very nice”, God damn thick may mean ‘very thick’, “hell of” may express “very” and “damn right” may stand for “for sure”. Consequently, not all insults are to be considered as insults. For an insult to bear insult properties, It must meet certain requirements which are three according to Bolinger (2015) the intention, the inappropriateness and its association and he would say: “when intending to offend, the speaker commonly select tabooed insults (...) to communicate their ire – but the severity of the offense warranted varies with grounds for offense.” (2015, p. 3) So, characters at least most of them used swear words, animal metaphors not compulsorily to offend but for some other purposes namely to express emphasis. Crooks talking to George and Lennie about their project said:

- (6) “you guys is just kidding yourself. You’ll talk about it a hell of a lot, but you won’t get no land”.

The word ‘hell of’ play the role of a quantifier. These terms seem to be enrooted in their verbal behavior and have consequently lost their potential to hurt. But, the potential to offend is warranted according to the context and to the individual targeted by the insult. Apart from the Boss and his son who incarnate power and use insults to express this power, the other characters verbal behavior is characterized by the massive used of insults, though “insults include attack on one’s personality, intelligence (foolishness, stupidity, animal categories, villager insanity, madness” Agyekum (2021, p. 20) their used by characters in the ranch lack any property to offend. They are used to

emphasize on the merits or quality of a person. So, the Old Swamper talking about the cleanliness of a blacksmith said:

- (7) “last guy that had this bed was a blacksmith – hell of nice fella and as clean a guy as you want to meet” (p.20)

Here the expression ‘hell of’ is used as a quantifier to insist on the quality of the blacksmith.

### ***3.2. Insults and the expression of Power***

The characters who incarnate power are the Boss, the owner of the Ranch and his son Curley. In this section, I will present excerpts and contexts that present a relation of power and domination. The boss’s son Curley speaking to George said:

- (8) “ by Christ, he’s gotta talk when he’s spoke to. What the hell are you getting into it for?” (p. 28)

The used of the swear word “hell” when talking to George is the expression of power since the relation between Curley and George are asymmetrical, the one of distance. The reply of Curley is consecutive to George utterances:

- (9) “s’pose he don’t want to talk”.

To express his power, the boss’s son asked the question: “what the hell are you getting into it for?” For Curley, George must let Lennie by himself. The use of insulting terms by the Boss is also reported by the Old Swamper when he said:

- (10) “ I guess the boss’ll be out here a minute. He was sure burned when you wasn’t here this morning. Come right in when we was eatin’ breakfast and says ‘where the hell’s them new men?’” (p.20)

The swear word ‘hell’ is used by the boss when talking to the Old Swamper. He used insulting because he was angry against George and Lennie missing the oppointment. Apart from the boss and his son, the

relation of power is sometime expressed by George when talking to Lennie. George said:

- (11) “ be a damn good thing if it was,” said George viciously. “ Save ever’body a hell of a lot of trouble”. “You said I was your cousin, George”. “Well that was a lie an’ I’m damn glad it was. If I was a relative of yours I’d shoot myself” (p.26)

The word ‘viciously’ used to express to anger towards Lennie shows that George had an influence on Lennie and reproached him of making him lost any new job opportunity. While George was talking to Lennie, the swamper came slowly when George suspected him of overhearing them he said in anger:

- (12) “ you was pokin’ your big ears into our business”, George said. “ I don’t like nobody to get nosey” (p. 27)

Using the insulting term “ big ear” to talk to a stranger does not express any friendship, it is an act of impoliteness addressed to an old person. The insult of George got the old man in an embarrassing situation and in reply he said:

- (13) “the old man looked uneasily from George to Lennie, and the back. “ I jus’ come here,” he said. “ I didn’t hear nothing you guys was sayin’. I ain’t interested in nothing you was sayin.” (p.27)

The answer of the old man shows that he felt humiliated just because he was accused of spying. In Soledad, specifically in the ranch there were two categories of people those who had power and the worker. Curley was one of those who had power and this power was perceptible whenever he talked to worker just like in the following context:

- (14) “Curley looked threateningly about the room. “where the hell’s Slim?” (p.59)

the word “threateningly” used by the author and the word “hell” in Curley’s utterances depict the authoritarian attitude of Curley towards the workers in the ranch hence the notion of power. If you have the capacity to threaten a person, it means that you have a power over this person. Sometimes, in anger, the boss in companies resort to insult to maintain their power and control others. Nisreen (2024) brought this issue into light when she said: “the use of slurs is closely related to the idea of appropriation and silencing. Slurs have been and still are instruments of oppression, stifling the opinion of disadvantage people and maintaining unfavorable power relationship”. (2024, p. 178) Anger fuels insults. Curley’s wife got killed by Lennie while he was trying to pet her hair. When Curley got informed about that he said using animal metaphors:

(15) “ he worked himself into fury. “ I’m gonna get him. I’m going for my shotgun.

I’ll kill the big son-of-a -bitch myself. I’ll shoot’im in the guts” (p.105)

The intention of Curley to kill Lennie was not appreciated by George and pleading for Curley to leave him alive, George used an offensive word when referring to Lennie and he pleaded:

(16) “But listen Curley. The poor bastard’s nut. Don’t shoot’im. He di’n’t know what he was doin’.” (p.107)

George pleaded in solidarity to Lennie and because of the mercy he had for him. Despite he was in the presence of Curley who was the boss’s son, George used the term ‘poor bastard’ which is an offensive term. What is to be retained is that be it the boss, his son and the other workers of the ranch, the use of the insulting expressions is very common. They are used to express power, solidarity and emphasis on something.

### 3.3. *Insults and the expression of emphasis*

Words meaning varies according to the context in which they are used. An utterance may be considered as an insult in context A and not as an insult in context B. Similarly, what may be considered offensive by one person may turn inoffensive by another one. In fact, not all insults are offensive. The word “hell” and “damn” are used to emphasize on the quality or quantity of something. The following exchange between George and Lennie help to know about the emphasis.

- (17) “George said coldly, “you gonna give me that mouse or do I have to sock you? Give you what, George? You know God damn well what. I want that mouse” (p.9)

The word ‘God damn’ can be substituted by ‘very’ and the utterance will be “ you know very well what”. So “God damn” play the role of adverb to express emphasis. Consider now the utterance of Carlson when referring to Candy old dog:

- (18) “Carlson said thoughtfully, “well, looka here, Slim. I been thinkin’. That dog of Candy’s is so God damn old”(P.39)

Here, just like in (17), god damn expressed an emphasis, an exaggeration. “God damn” can be replaced by “too” or “very. In this case, one would say “that dog of Candy’s is too/very old. Under certain conditions, the term ‘damn’ and ‘hell of’ are combined with adjective to insist on the quality of something. The set below brought this issue into light. George talking about the quality of Lennie said:

- (19) “but I say he’s a God damn good worker. He can put up a four hundred pound bale” (P.24)

The expression ‘God damn’ is combined with the adjective good to qualify Lennie capacity to do hard job. The expression “hell of” is

combined with an adjective and therefore play the role of quantifier and Whit talking about Bill quality said:

(20) “Bill was a hell of a good worker” (p.52)

Using a swear word combined with the adjective ‘good’ is far from expressing insult rather an emphasis. This reality is depicted when Candy referring to his dog said:

(21) “Hell! I had him so long. He was the best damn sheep dog” (p.48)

Candy compares his dog to many others. He uses the superlative ‘the best’ before ‘damn’ to insist on its quality. In this section, I have analyzed the data and I noticed that the use of offensive term does not always bear pejorative properties. Insults are used by characters to express solidarity as all the characters use them be it the boss, his son Curley or the other characters. Insults are used interchangeably sometimes to express solidarity when they are used among workers; the other time to express power and emphasis. In the sections (3.2) and (3.3) I analyzed the offensive terms hell, damn, God damn, son-of-a-bitch and bastard to see if they express power or solidarity. The central observation that is made is that, apart from expressing power, solidarity and emphasis insults are enrooted in the ranch workers verbal behavior. All of them excepted the boss and Curley’s wife who is the only one female character, use insults permanently to express both power and solidarity and also to insist on a specific quality or quantity of something. In her exchange with Lennie though in anger, she didn’t use any of the offensive terms under analysis and she said:

(22) “Her face grew angry. ‘what’s the matter with me? She cried. ‘Ain’t I got a right to talk to nobody?’”

And the boss during the interview asked Lennie but George gave answer on behalf of Lennie. The boss was not happy with that and he asked George:

(23) “then why don’t you let him answer? What are you trying to put over?” (p.25)

Would it be George or any other characters apart from the boss, he would say ‘why the hell don’t you let him answer?’ But just like Curley’s wife, the boss used a formal language deprived of insults. To show how insults are frequently used in characters’ utterances, I will introduce each character with one of his utterances.

(24)

George: “what the hell you yellin’ about” (p.113)

Lennie: “I’ll break the God damn neck (p.64)

Curley: “ What the hell you laughing (p.69)

Old swamper: “ Don’t tell curley....He just don’t give  
a damn (p.30)

Slim: “he damn near killed his partner” (p.42)

Candy: “them God damn turnips give it to me (P.48)

Whit: “hell of a nice place” (p.57)

Carlson: “I’ll kick your God damn head off” (p.68)

Crooks: “what the hell’s talking about” (p.77)

As I mentioned earlier, the use of insults is common among characters but their offensiveness is context bound and individual bound as well.

#### 4. Results And Discussion

The central issue under discussion is the analysis of insults in characters’ utterances in *Of Mice and Men*. The objective of this work was to see if the insults used by characters is the expression of power, distance or the expression of intimacy, solidarity. The analysis of data permits to say that insults express solidarity, power and emphasis as well. Insults are deeply enrooted in ranch workers’ verbal attitude. When the exchange is between the son of the ranch owner and the other workers, his insults are the expression of power. This aspect is perceptible in the following passage:

(25)Curley looked threateningly about the room. “where the hell’s Slim” P.59

The use of the term “threateningly” expresses the power of Curley over the other workers among whom is Slim. On another occasion,

Curley had an exchange with Lennie and to express his domination on him he said:

(26) Then Curley's rage exploded. "Come on ya big bastard. Get up on your feet. No big son-of-a-bitch is gonna laugh at me. I'll show ya who' yella." P.68-69

These two excerpts show the use of insult to express power over the workers that is why Nisreen (2024, P. 178) said insults are: "instruments of oppression, stifling the opinion of disadvantaged people and maintaining unfavorable power relation". This study reveals that even though there is a relation of intimacy between people, this relation can be degraded and the insult which was considered inoffensive becomes offensive this is the case for Curley and Slim. In fact, Curley looking for his wife asked Slim who is a worker in the ranch. The passage below shows their exchange:

(27) Curley said: "Well, I didn't mean nothing, Slim. I just ast you". Slim said: "well, you been askin' me to often. I'm getting' God damn sick of it. If you can't look after your own God

damn wife, what you expect me to do about it?" P.68 Here, Slim who works for Curley's father and consequently for Curley expressed his embarrassment. This also means that the relation between them is symmetrical in some regards. This same fact is brought into light in the following exchange between Lennie and George who share a relation of solidarity. Lennie collected a dead mouse and hid it. When George found it, he took it and threw it away then said:

(28) "you crazy fool. Don't you know think I could see your feet was wet where you went acrost the river to get it?" p.10

These passages confirm the degradation of the relation of intimacy, friendship or solidarity between friends when they are embarrassed or in anger. Mihaela Popa-Wyatt (2016) affirmed that not all slurs are slurs in other terms not all insults are insults. She is right just because



apart from expressing power and solidarity, the study revealed that insulting terms are used to express emphasis and to account for this, let us read

(29)“and he’s so God damn strong, you know.” P.46

George describes Lennie like a person who is ‘very’ strong. Instead of using the adverb ‘very’ the expression ‘God damn’ is used to express emphasis. The massive used of insults among characters expresses much more solidarity than power; under certain circumstances they are used to express emphasis. Consequently, not all insults are insults. The study also reveals that the only one woman in the ranch never used any offensive term, her utterances were rather formal just like the one of Curley’s father, the boss, the owner of the ranch.

This study has analysed insults in a fictional work but insult in itself is a real phenomenon that has always existed in human daily interactions. This work on insults from a social perspective is important. Many conflicts in our society start by words and the way they are used. In fact, understanding how insults works may enlarge our perspectives and permits us to avoid the pitfall of face threatening act, a condition for mutual respect and social stability. It will also permits to be aware that not all insults must be considered as offensive and that the best solution for peace is to avoid insulting others.

## Conclusion

Insults are offensive terms that are used in all human societies. They may be triggered by ire and hate towards individuals and motivated by the aim to demean a person and even take advantage of them. In undertaking this study, the main objective was to see if the insults used were to express solidarity or power. Attaining such objective required that i framed my work around a body of thoughts that organizes and supports my claims, I called this the theoretical framework. The theory of politeness was privileged and the maxim of manner too. For any scientific work to be authentic, the researcher must know about the state of the literature, the review of literature equipped me with informations related to theories, concepts that helped me back up my work.

The study that I conducted on insults in *Of Mice and Men* (1937) revealed that insults have three main functions. Firstly, when there is a familiarity or intimacy among individuals, insults express intimacy, friendship and solidarity. Secondly, when the relation is asymmetrical then insults express power. The third function is that insults are also used to express emphasis on the quality of someone or something. This study confirms the idea of pragmaticians that not all insults are insults. The symmetrical or asymmetrical relation between people and the context have more to do in the offensiveness and inoffensiveness of an insult. Another finding is the fact that, in the whole novel, nearly all the characters use offensive terms apart from Curley's wife the only one wife in the plot and the boss. One may deduce that women are less vulgar than men and that the higher social status may impose a certain formal linguistic attitude just like the boss in the novel.

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