sciendo
ExELL (Explorations in English Language and Linguistics)
10.1 (2022): 1-21
DOI: 10.2478/exell-2022-0008
Original scientific article

# The language of insults: A look at Theme, Rheme and negative inferences

**Alvin Ping Leong**

*Nanyang Technical University, Singapore*

## Abstract

This paper examines the thematic structure of a corpus of insults using the inference-boundary model of Theme and Rheme. It focuses on the concept of negative inference—which must be generated for an insult to be successfully delivered—and shows how it allows us to better understand and characterize the form that insults generally take. The analysis suggests that insults are typically structured to generate backward-looking negative inferences from the decoder, much in line with how new information (in this case, the thrust of the insult) is generally located in final position. The paper also proposes a summary statement capturing the general configuration of insults and suggestions for further research.

**Key words:** insults; Theme; Rheme; inference; inference-boundary model; systemic-functional linguistics.

## 1. Introduction

Insults offer an exciting area for linguistic analysis. Sometimes regarded as an art, verbal warfare is a fascinating instance of imaginative language use, delivered with wit and style. As McPhee (1978: 10) notes, "throughout centuries, human beings have exercised their highest powers of invention and wit in speaking ill of one another." Some insults are legendary and are often cited:

(1) Lady Astor: *Winston, if you were my husband, I should flavor your coffee with poison.*
Churchill: *Madam, if I were your husband, I should drink it.* (McPhee, 1978: 22)

Others are directed at a country or its people:

(2) *America is one long expectoration.* (Oscar Wilde)

(3) *The Irish are a fair people; they never speak well of one another.* (Samuel Johnson)

And yet some are found in proverbs:

(4) *Fire, the sea, and woman: these are three ills*. (Latin proverb)

Insults take numerous forms and cover a myriad of diverse topics, ranging from politics to religion and from food to even the English alphabet (McPhee, 1978). Research interest in the language of insults among linguists has tended to focus on the discourse and ritualistic aspects of insults (Labov, 1972; Leary, 1980; Tannock, 1999). More recent studies have demonstrated how insults carry the presumption of dissimilarity between the speaker and the target of the insult (Wee, 2015) and how a certain category of insults—ableist insults—differs from slurs (Cousens, 2020). But work in this area remains scarce.

The paucity of prior work in this area, however, is seen as more of an advantage than a handicap since this allows a fresh approach to be undertaken in research and analysis. In this paper, I shall attempt to describe and generalize the Theme-Rheme[1] structure of clauses in insults using the inference-boundary (hereafter IB) model (Leong, 2000, 2004b). This approach builds on Halliday's systemic-functional framework (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) by paying close attention to the role of inference activation during language processing. For our purpose—and particularly since Theme and Rheme are clausal elements—only insults that take the structural form of a clause or clause complex will be examined. Expletives, vocatives, and other non-clausal expressions (e.g., "Hey, dickhead!") will not be considered. In the analysis, I shall focus on the idea of negative inference and show how it helps to characterize processing of insults.

This paper is organized as follows. An overview of past studies on insults is outlined in Section 2. The features and components of the Hallidayan framework and the IB model are outlined in Section 3. The corpus and the general analytical approach are described in Section 4. The notion of negative inference is introduced and expanded. The findings of the analysis are presented in Section 5. Based on the analysis and discussion, a general configuration of the thematic structure of insults is proposed. A summary of the main points in this paper and a brief discussion of further areas of study are presented in Section 6.

[1] In accordance with the notational convention of the Hallidayan framework, the terms Theme and Rheme are capitalized throughout this article.

## 2. The language of insults

Labov's (1972) groundbreaking work on the black English vernacular spoken in south-central Harlem in New York City highlights numerous aspects of its function and structure. In particular, his description of ritual insults in this dialect represents an early attempt at understanding how they operate in the discourse community. Labov characterizes ritual insults as an extended, competitive exchange of offending utterances between or among participants, with each new insult potentially becoming more outrageous. Labov's analysis of such insults reveals that they are rule-governed. Importantly, as illustrated in (5) below, ritual insults (a) are understood not to be literally true, which makes them distinct from *personal* insults; and (b) cannot be denied in a ritual setting since one cannot deny something that is not taken to be true.

(5) J1: *Your mother take a swim in the gutter*.

J2: *Your mother live in a garbage can*.

J1: *Least I don't live on 1122 Boogie Woogie Avenue, two garbage cans to the right*. (Labov, 1972: 319)

Subsequent studies have investigated the notion of ritual insults in other communities and settings. These have included the discourse practices among white males (Leary, 1980), white female adolescents (Eder, 1990), and middle-school students of a variety of races (Rivers, 2012), among others. There is even an in-depth look at the insulting routine between two teenagers from different racial and socioeconomic groups—a white, upper middle-class female and a black, working-class male (Tannock, 1999). In broad terms, ritual insulting is seen as "playful and ritualized contests" (Tannock, 1999: 321), although it also has the potential to lower self-esteem, reinforce inequalities, and cause negative psychological effects (Rivers, 2008; Tannock, 1999).

While these observations on the ritualized use of insults are insightful, they paint but a partial picture of insults. This is because the insults that we are more familiar with are malicious, not playful, and are *specifically* intended to be offensive and abusive (Wee, 2015: 4). In the case of ableist insults, Cousens (2020) has shown that they are not just discriminatory but oppressive. For instance, in (6) below, the derogatory term 'faggot' unjustly separates gay men from others – i.e., how is being gay relevant to keeping quiet?—and the target is intended to feel demeaned by being associated with that group.

(6) *Shut up, faggot*. (Cousens, 2020: 8)

However, studies on the core features of insults in general are few. The work of Wee (2015) represents a welcome exception in offering an elegant

account that captures how intentionally offensive insults are understood. He argues that insults—including ableist insults and slurs—presume dissimilarity between the speaker and the target in the sense that the devalued attribute assigned to the target is not something that the speaker possesses. Further, given that insults are intended to demean and belittle, this dissimilarity carries the implication of speaker superiority over the target. In example (6), for instance, no offense is quite possible if the speaker is himself a faggot. Wee's characterization of insults applies well to other forms of insults, including racist terms such as "nigger." It in fact helpfully explains why this term is viewed as non-offensive if uttered by an in-group member but offensive if otherwise. As Wee notes:

> The fact that racist terms such as 'nigger' are no longer seen as insulting when used by members of the targeted group among themselves is of course consistent with the claim that an insult derives its force from an assumption of dissimilarity between the speaker and the target. (Wee, 2015: 13)

The work of Wee (2015) is valuable in shedding light on the key features of insults. This is not to say, of course, that finer distinctions separating different types of insults are unimportant. Given the scarcity of studies in this area, though, broad generalizations are needed as a frame of reference from which further studies on other specific uses of insults can proceed. This present study seeks to offer such a description and generalization of insults but approaches the task from a different perspective. It takes, as its starting point, the insult as a message, albeit a disagreeable one, and proposes that a useful way of furthering our understanding of insults is to examine its message structure more closely. Insults, however, are more than mere messages; for them to achieve their negative effect, they need to be perceived by the target to be an affront to her/his dignity. An intended insult fails if it is not perceived to be so by the target. The account here thus needs to consider not merely the thematic structure of insults, but how the message elements are inferred by the target. This approach relies on the Theme-Rheme framework of Halliday's systemic-functional grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), but builds on it using the inference-boundary (IB) model, which incorporates insights from schema theory and the role of inferences. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no prior work on the language of insults using an inferential approach or the Hallidayan Theme-Rheme framework; a search of the *MLA Directory of Periodicals*, *Web of Science*, and *ProQuest* databases yielded no usable sources. The present study addresses this gap by investigating the typical organization of Theme and Rheme in insults from an inferential perspective. The Hallidayan framework and the basis of the IB model are next described in detail in the following section.

## 3. The Hallidayan framework and the inference-boundary model

We begin with Halliday's systemic-functional theory of language. As the name implies, language is viewed as being multi-functional. The key functions, also termed 'metafunctions,' are (a) experiential, allowing users to construe their experience of the world; (b) interpersonal, allowing users to establish different discourse roles (through the use of declaratives, interrogatives, and imperatives) and subjective views (through the use of disjuncts); and (c) textual, enabling the experiential and interpersonal metafunctions to be packaged as a "contextualized text" (Matthiessen & Martin, 1991: 42). In this light, the textual metafunction is an enabling function in the sense that it allows the meanings in the experiential and interpersonal modes to be organized as a cohesive and coherent text. The Theme-Rheme framework belongs to the textual metafunction.

The notions of Theme and Rheme were first extensively developed by the Prague circle of linguists (e.g., Mathesius, 1928) and further refined by Halliday in the 1960s (Halliday, 1967a, 1967b, 1968). It has remained largely unchanged since then, and today, the Hallidayan framework is widely used in a range of studies (e.g., Leong et al., 2018; North, 2005; Rose, 2001). Theme and Rheme are clause-internal elements and together constitute the message structure of the clause. In English, Theme is always in clause-initial position; it establishes the starting point of the message and sets the local context for the rest of the message in the clause to be developed. For this reason, Theme has variously been glossed as "the peg on which the message is hung" (Halliday, 1970: 161) and "the point of departure of the message" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 89).

The framework recognizes three types of Themes—textual, interpersonal, and topical Themes—mirroring the three metafunctions of language. Each type of Theme is realized by specific linguistic constituents from the start of the clause, as shown in Table 1 (adapted from Halliday, 1994: 94; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014: 79–87).

Table 1: Textual, interpersonal, and topical Themes

| Type of Theme | Linguistic items |
|---|---|
| Textual Theme | Continuatives<br>Conjunctions or wh- relatives<br>Conjunctive adjuncts |
| Interpersonal Theme | Vocatives<br>Modal adjuncts<br>Finite operators<br>Wh- (content interrogatives) |
| Topical Theme | Subject, object, complement, main verb, or adverbial |

Of the three Theme types, the topical Theme is obligatory and the most important one. Textual and interpersonal Themes, by contrast, are optional. The topical Theme is the first occurrence of the grammatical subject, object, complement, main verb, or adverbial and ends the thematic segment of the clause. The remainder of the clause is the Rheme. The Theme-Rheme analysis is exemplified below in (7–9); all the examples are taken from the corpus used in this study:

(7)

| *As an outsider,* | *what do you think of the human race?* |
|---|---|
| Adv.<br>Top. Theme | Rheme |

(8)

| *At least* | *you* | *are not obnoxious like so many other people –* |
|---|---|---|
| Mod. adj.<br>Int. Theme | Subj.<br>Top.<br>Theme | Rheme |

| *you* | *are obnoxious in a different and worse way!* |
|---|---|
| Subj.<br>Top.<br>Theme | Rheme |

(9)

| *Please* | *breathe* | *the other way.* |
|---|---|---|
| Mod. adj.<br>Int. Theme | Main verb<br>Top. Theme | Rheme |

| You | 're bleaching my hair. |
|---|---|
| Subj.<br>Top.<br>Theme | Rheme |

In an alternative interpretation, Leong (2004b) proposed the inference-boundary (IB) model, which views the topical Theme as an initial element capable of generating a boundary of acceptability within which it is permissible for the Rheme to occur. Since the processing of the message in the clause is cumulative, initial segments generate expectations that the message will proceed in a certain way. The topical Theme, it is argued, is that element which succeeds in constraining the development of the clausal message in the Rheme (Leong, 2004a). This constraining function of Theme can be demonstrated quite easily by mismatching the Theme with an unsuitable Rheme. For instance, given the initial element "The gentleman" (assuming normal context), it is possible for the gentleman to smile or play tennis, but it is not possible, at least not in the normal context, for him to become pregnant or drizzle all day. Such latter developments, in other words, lie outside the boundary of acceptability. Bizarre messages containing unacceptable Rhemes show precisely that the starting point, while having the potential to proceed in a number of directions, is constrained to move in only one or a restricted number.

### 3.1. *Schema theory and inferences*

As a concept of initialness, a reasonable claim about Theme is that it not only reorientates the decoder to what has gone on before (in earlier clauses) but prepares her/him for what is to come. If this is not fulfilled—i.e., if the expectation is dashed—the decoder will be forced to either revise the earlier expectation or reject the construction entirely. Two notions in cognitive psychology—schema theory and inferences—permit us to explain this more formally.

Schema theory, first proposed by Kant in 1787, and later developed by Head (1920), Bartlett (1932), and Piaget (1955), is a powerful yet flexible account of the way we store and process our world knowledge, whether in terms of understanding language or making sense of events. A schema is "a set of organized concepts that provides expectations about the world" (Kellogg, 2016: 180). Rumelhart's (1980) analogy of schemata as theories is particularly helpful. He remarks:

> Theories, once they are moderately successful, become a source of predictions about unobserved events. Not all experiments are carried out. Not all possible observations are made. Instead, we use our theories to make inferences with some confidence about these unobserved events. So it is with schemata. (Rumelhart, 1980: 38)

When activated, schemata facilitate the generation of inferences, regarded as "any piece of information that is not explicitly stated in a text" (McKoon & Ratcliff, 1992: 440). These include both transient activations of information, word-based inferences, and any information that is partially or completely derived from background knowledge or memory (van den Broek, 1994: 557). In this article, I shall make the basic assumption that inferences are generated during text comprehension (Graesser & Kreuz, 1993). This premise builds on the constructionist view, which holds that inferences are automatically encoded during language processing as a necessary step to represent the situation described in a text (Graesser & Clark, 1985; Kintsch, 1977; van Dijk, 1977; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Various models of text processing adopt this constructionist position, namely, the script-based model of Schank & Abelson (1977), and the situation model of van Dijk & Kintsch (1983), and Johnson-Laird (1983). These models extend the basic notion of the schema as a mental representation of generic conceptual knowledge by highlighting its crucial role in generating inferences during the processing of texts.

Two types of inferences—forward and backward inferences (van den Broek, 1990, 1994; van den Broek et al., 1993)—are acknowledged. Forward inferences are constructed during language processing as a necessary step to represent the situation as described in language (Graesser & Kreuz, 1993). Backward inferences, on the other hand, are typically activated to establish

local coherence and connections with text details that are easily recoverable (Singer, 2014).

### 3.2. *Language processing*

During language processing, the schemata that are consciously activated are of three types—our knowledge of the world, the surrounding context, and pragmatics (Goatly, 1997: 137). Our knowledge of the world is an inventory of generic knowledge of concepts in our long-term memory. Contextual knowledge refers to our awareness of the range of socio-cultural and situational factors that have a direct or indirect bearing on the discourse. Our knowledge of pragmatic principles, on the other hand, alerts us to the discourse strategies that are used in the communicative encounter. The knowledge of such strategies is a part of world knowledge and supplies information as to why language is used in a particular way (see Seifert, 1990).

Other than these schemata, the IB model also recognizes the operation of a language schema, representing what we know about language. In truth, the language schema is highly complex. For our purpose, we shall only be concerned with our knowledge of the structural form of the clause (for a discussion of the other aspects of the language schema, see Bybee & Slobin, 1982). We shall term the language schema as S1 and all other schemata that affect our interpretation of any clausal message as S2. In terms of consciousness, it is surmised that S1 operates at a lower level than S2; there is an apparent ease by which we are able to produce and comprehend novel constructions (Wingfield, 1993: 201). That is to say, we have become so fine-tuned to language that only minimal effort is needed to maintain our language schema.

In contrast, our other schemata (S2), serving as anticipators for some future development, are constantly brought to our consciousness. Clearly, no anticipation can occur if language users have no prior knowledge to work from. For instance, presented with a foreign phrase, one would be at a loss as to what to expect next. But given (10):

(10) *The school teacher* […]

we would expect a declarative to surface and some relevant message to follow from it. We know enough, however, not to expect the teacher to reproduce like an amoeba or lay an egg. Indeed, what we (are able to) make of a clausal message depends greatly on our S2.

### 3.3. *The IB model illustrated*

Given an initial element, then, it is postulated that S1 is subconsciously activated. However, since language cannot be meaningfully processed independently from S2, the interpretation of any linguistic input requires the operation of both S1 and S2 in tandem. The activated schemata are guided "both by the local clues and by consistency among the various levels of analysis" (Rumelhart, 1980: 46). This returns us to Rumelhart's analogy of schemata as theories; we are constantly engaged in hypothesis-testing on the goodness of fit of the input to the activated schemata.

In the generation of inferences, forward inferences allow the decoder to anticipate upcoming outcomes. The decoder uses her/his schemata to predict what will follow; backward inferences, on their part, establish a tie of coherence between one stretch of language and its antecedent, operating on the premise that there is a degree of appropriateness that links the Rheme of the clause with the Theme that governs it.

The IB model, then, conceptualizes Theme as that element that is capable of activating a boundary of acceptability, serving as a constraint on how the clausal message in the Rheme will develop. The boundary of acceptability is shaped by the interplay of forward inferences in the relevant activated S1 and S2 in the context of the communicative encounter. The IB model is illustrated in Figure 1 (Leong, 2004b: 189).

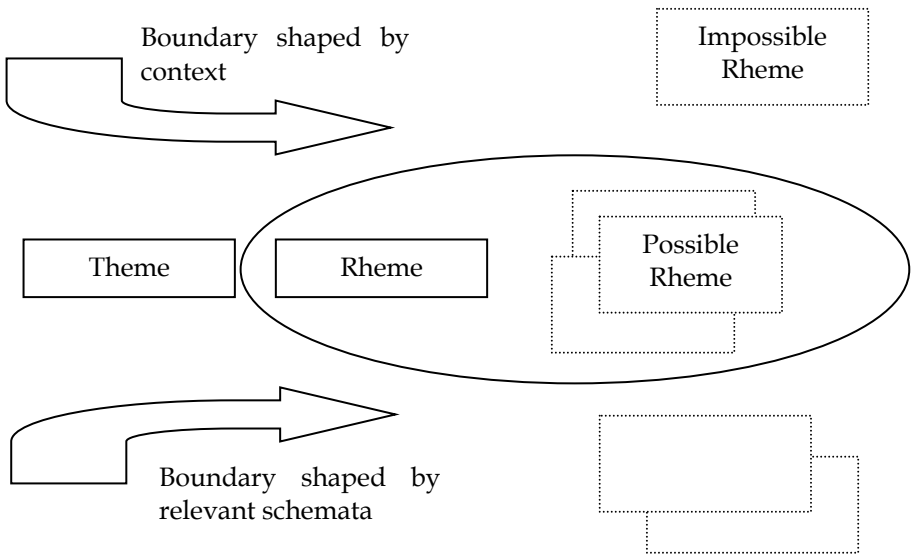


Figure 1: IB model (version 1)

The ellipse in Figure 1 represents the boundary of acceptability generated by the thematic element. Of the possible Rhemes within the boundary, only one is eventually selected by the encoder as the actual Rheme. Rhemes that fall outside the boundary are blocked from co-occurring with the Theme since this will result in a mismatch. In terms of inference activation, the IB model is alternatively represented in Figure 2 (Leong, 2004b: 190):

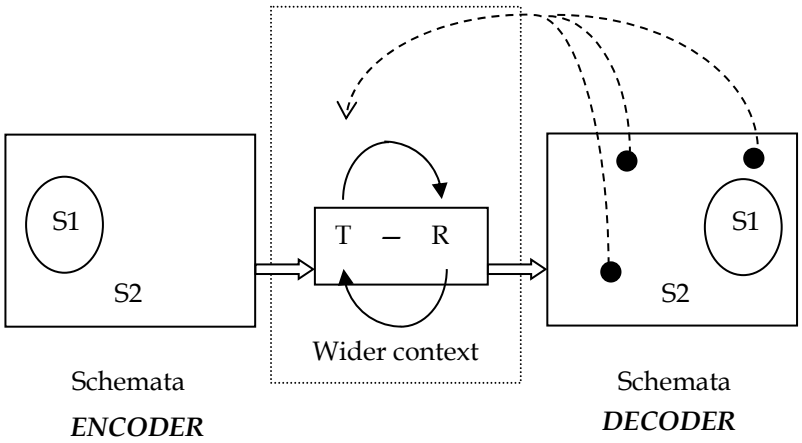


Figure 2: IB model (version 2).

where
- message direction from encoder to decoder
- schema-based inferences activated during language processing
- forward and backward inferences (as indicated by the arrow sign)
- relevant activated schemata
- T Theme
- R Rheme

In summary, underlying all decoder decisions on the acceptability of the relationship between Theme and Rheme are schema theory, inferences, and context. The activation of schemata and inferences and the influence of context do not operate in isolation, but in tandem with, each other. In explicitly acknowledging the operation of these factors, the IB model takes into full account the individual's total cognitive environment, "the set of all the facts that he can perceive or infer: all the facts that are manifest to him" (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 39).

## 4. Methodology and analytical approach

We turn next to the application of the IB model to the language of insults. The insults in this paper, totaling 932 (16,332 words), were taken from two sources—McPhee (1978) and an Internet website ("Insult Quotes, Insulting Sayings," 2021). Each insult was broken up into clauses and analyzed for Theme and Rheme according to the Hallidayan framework. The internal structure of embedded clauses, however, was excluded from the analysis as embedded clauses are themselves grammatical constituents within the larger clause.

As noted earlier, an insult achieves its intended purpose when it is negatively perceived by the target. In the context of the IB model, negative perception is achieved through inference activation, which may be either forward- or backward-looking. We shall term the forward or backward inference that explicitly leads one to recognize the offensive intent of the clausal message as a negative inference (NI). In the analysis, the direction of negative inferences is indicated simply by the arrow sign (→ for forward NIs, and ← for backward NIs).

It should also be pointed out that insults become malicious and hurtful when they are not expected. This impact is compromised if otherwise. For instance, in his work on "sounding," an exchange of insults amongst the black community in New York, Labov (1997) notes that even though these insults do describe obscene images, the ritualized nature reduces their negative force. He adds: "[w]ith long familiarity the vividness of [the obscene image] disappears, and one might say that it is not disgusting or obscene to the sounders" (Labov 1997: 482). The focus here, then, is not on such ritualized or expected insults, for clearly, if the target already anticipates an insult from the other party, then the NI can only be forward-looking. Instead, we assume here a context where the target has no such anticipation. In this light, all perceived insults must be able to activate at least one NI for them to be successful, although not all clauses in the insulting remark need to result in an NI (e.g., framing statements).

Forward NIs (T→R), which raise expectations of an impending insult, tend to be formed when the thematic portion of the clause either contains an offensive word or is blatantly inapplicable insofar as the target is concerned. In the examples below, vertical lines separate units of analysis, and topical Themes are in boldface.

(11) | ***Calling you stupid*** *would be an insult to stupid people.* $^{T\rightarrow R}$ |
(12) | ***Any similarity between you and a human*** *is purely coincidental!* $^{T\rightarrow R}$ |

Offensive Themes, such as those in (11–12), immediately set up a forward expectation that the clausal message will be uncomplimentary to the target

in some way (Ervin-Tripp, 1972) and, in view of the unequivocal impact of its use, it is often regarded as a power issue (Coulthard, 2014: 53).

As opposed to forward NIs, which raise expectations of an impending negative message, backward NIs (T←R) force the decoder to hold the thematic portion and/or the preceding clausal message(s) in mind until the full release of the offending remark.

(13) |***A guy with your IQ*** *should have a low voice too!* $^{T\leftarrow R}$ |

In (13), the Theme itself does not generate any negative inference in a normal context; it could even be perceived as signaling a compliment (e.g., "A guy with your IQ should have many admirers"). The negativity is established only after the decoder relates the Rheme to the Theme.

## 5. Findings and discussion

The broad findings of the analysis are categorized and presented in Table 2 (where T–R represents a non-NI clause):

Table 2: Negative-inference (NI) sequences in the corpus

| **Category** | | **Freq.** | **%** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Backward NIs | Single T←R | 463 | 49.68 |
| | Repeated T←R | 104 | 11.16 |
| Forward NIs | Single T→R | 6 | 0.64 |
| | Repeated T→R | 4 | 0.43 |
| Mixed NIs | T–R + T←R | 252 | 27.04 |
| | T→R + T←R | 3 | 0.32 |
| | T–R + repeated T←R | 100 | 10.73 |
| **Total** | | 932 | 100.00 |

The observed frequencies in the above thematic patterns are significantly different from those expected of a uniform distribution. At 6 degrees of freedom, the $\chi^2$ statistic is 1311.83, which is considerably higher than the critical value of 12.59 (at $\alpha = 0.05$). The *p*-value is $2.9759e^{-280}$.

Table 2 clearly shows the preferred form that insults take. More than half of the insults in the corpus (60.84%) carry the T←R or repeated T←R sequence. Taking into account the occurrences of mixed-NI sequences, we arrive at a situation where more than 9 out of 10 insults achieve their intended effect through the use of backward NIs (98.93%). In marked contrast, insults bearing the T→R or repeated T→R sequence are considerably less common (1.07%).

The various categories in Table 2 are illustrated and discussed below. We start with the rarer forward NI sequences. These are initiated by an offensive

term or a term with a negative connotation (e.g., *broad*, *curse*), although the co-text can at times influence how seemingly neutral Themes are interpreted, as in (15).

(14) | ***Every minute this broad spends outside of bed*** *is a waste of time.* T→R |

(15) | ***Curse*** *the blasted, jelly-boned swines, the slimy, the belly-wriggling invertebrates, the miserable soddingrotters, the flaming sods, the sniveling, dribbling, dithering, palsied, pulse-less lot that make up England today.* T→R | ***They****'ve got white of egg in their veins,* T→R | *and* ***their spunk*** *is that watery it's a marvel they can breed.* T→R | (D. H. Lawrence)

In the case of (15), the pronoun 'They' in the second clause relates back to what is mentioned in the Rheme of the first clause (i.e., *swines*, *invertebrates*, etc.). By this association, the pronoun ceases to be neutral but takes on a malicious meaning.

The more pervasive type of insults contains backward NIs, as illustrated in (16) and (17).

(16) | ***He*** *has the lucidity which is the by-product of a fundamentally sterile mind.* T←R |

(17) | *Are* ***you*** *always so stupid* T←R | *or is* ***today*** *a special occasion?* T←R |

The negativity in such sequences is caused by the same mechanisms as in forward NIs, except that the direction is reversed. As the examples above show, the offensiveness of the remark can be either direct through the use of derogatory expressions (*stupid*, *sterile mind*) or indirect by how it relates to the co-text (*always* […] *stupid* ~ *special occasion*).

The dominance of backward NIs characterizes insults for what they are. Insults generally have a greater impact if the offending nature of the remark is revealed toward the end. The build-up leading to this revelation adds to the effect, and it is only through a connecting inference (i.e., a backward NI) that the offending message becomes apparent, as in (18–20). More unkindly for the target, perhaps, the additional processing effort required to interpret such a message adds salt to injury.

(18) | ***Americans*** *always try to do the right thing* T-R | *—after* ***they****'ve tried everything else.* T←R | (Winston Chu | —rchill)

(19) | ***He*** *has no enemies,* T-R | *but* ***[he]*** *is intensely disliked by his friends.* T←R | (Oscar Wilde)

(20) | ***I*** *didn't like the play,* T←R | *but then* ***I*** *saw it under adverse conditions* T-R | *—****the curtain*** *was up.* T←R | (Groucho Marx)

As we see here, the 'punch line' of the insult is borne by one NI clause located at the end of the insult. The term 'punch line,' admittedly, is typically associated with jokes or amusing stories, but it can also be extended quite easily to refer to the main thrust of an insult. The positioning of such punch-

line clauses mirrors the general nature of our utterances, where New information—that which is focal and important—is typically positioned last: "The end of the clause is important in English, as that is where the most 'weight' falls in terms of the focus on new information, sometimes referred to as endweight" (Carter & McCarthy, 2006: 778). At this juncture, it should be noted that the thematic and information structures of language are handled differently in the Hallidayan framework. Whereas Theme and Rheme are clause-internal elements, the information unit, on the other hand, "may extend over more than one clause" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014: 115). Also, unlike the strict sequential order of Theme and Rheme in the clause, the positioning of Given and New in the information unit is variable, depending on which segment in the unit receives prominence. It is in the *unmarked* or default condition that the Given precedes the New. In this light, we may therefore regard the punch-line clause at the end of the insult as its unmarked position. By contrast, a collection of NI clauses without a clear punch line resembles a mere list of insults and loses a bit of its focus.

(21) | ***Germans*** *are flummoxed by humor,* $^{T\leftarrow R}$ | ***the Swiss*** *have no concept of fun,* $^{T\leftarrow R}$ | ***the Spanish*** *think there is nothing at all ridiculous about eating dinner at midnight,* $^{T\leftarrow R}$ | *and* ***the Italians*** *should never, ever have been let in on the invention of the motor car.* $^{T\leftarrow R}$ | (Bill Bryson)

The various categories in Table 2 can be further generalized by way of summary statements or configurations. This is taken up in Sections 5.1–5.3.

## 5.1. *Forward-NI insults*

We first address the thematic structure of forward-NI insults. By definition, such insults must contain at least one T→R clause. These include scenarios where such T→R clauses follow or precede one or a number of non-NI clauses, as in (22–23):

(22) | ***Tell*** *me …* $^{T\text{-}R}$ | *Is* ***being stupid*** *a profession* $^{T\rightarrow R}$ | *or are* ***you*** *just gifted?* $^{T\rightarrow R}$ |

(23) | ***Faggots like you*** *should be banned from this place!* $^{T\rightarrow R}$ | *Nope,* ***I*** *apologize for my thoughtlessness;* $^{T\text{-}R}$ | ***that*** *is clearly a mistake.* $^{T\text{-}R}$ | ***Faggots like you*** *should just be banned!* $^{T\rightarrow R}$ |

We may therefore express the general thematic structure of forward-NI insults as (A):

(A) ('T–R'$^{n}$) ⋈ ('T→R'$^{n}$) 'T→R'$^{n}$

where (…) optionality

$n$ appearance, $n$ times (e.g., $n$ = 1 means that the clause appears once)

⋈ reversible sequence, but only between the clauses on the left and right of the symbol (cf. Hasan, 1979)

Theme-Rheme pairs are enclosed within single quote marks to avoid ambiguity—for instance, the absence of quote marks in T→R$^n$ may leave the impression that it is the Rheme, rather than the Theme-Rheme pair, that is repeated $n$ times. Notice that the obligatory clause(s), as represented by 'T→R'$^n$, is/are positioned at the end of the configuration in (A). Such clauses, being obligatory, must also function as punch-line clauses. As discussed earlier, such clauses, whether singly or collectively, are typically positioned in the final position.

### 5.2. *Backward-NI insults*

We turn now to backward-NI insults. As Table 2 shows, these insults occur far more frequently than forward-NI insults and are arguably more effective in achieving a punch-line effect.

In the corpus, backward-NI insults fall into three broad groups:

(a) Single backward-NI clause—as in (16), and the following additional example:

(24) | ***He*** *has the attention span of a lightning bolt.* $^{T\leftarrow R}$ |

(b) Repeated backward-NI clauses—as in (17), and the following:

(25) | ***I****'d like to kick you in the teeth,* $^{T\leftarrow R}$ | *but* ***why*** *should I improve your looks?* $^{T\leftarrow R}$ |

(c) Non-NI clause(s) preceded or followed by one or a number of backward-NI clauses, with the possibility of repetition—as in (20), and the following:

(26) | ***Here****'s 20 cents.* $^{T\text{-}R}$ | ***Call*** *all your friends* $^{T\text{-}R}$ | *and* ***bring back*** *some change*! $^{T\leftarrow R}$ |

Based on the above groups, the general thematic structure of backward-NI insults may be expressed as (B):

(B) ('T–R'$^n$) ⋈ ('T←R'$^n$) 'T←R'$^n$

As in (A), notice that the obligatory clause(s), functioning as punch-line clauses, is/are also positioned at the end of the configuration in (B).

### 5.3. *General configuration*

We can now combine the configurations proposed in (A) and (B) into a single summary statement. This general configuration should be flexible enough to handle the range of clausal combinations permitted in insults, including those containing both T→R and T←R clauses:

(27) | ***His ignorance*** *covers the world like a blanket,* $^{T\rightarrow R}$ | *and* ***there****'s scarcely a hole in it anywhere.* $^{T\leftarrow R}$ | (Mark Twain)

Mixed insults such as (27), which are rare in the corpus, are also accounted for in the general configuration. Although such insults contain both forward- and backward-NI clauses, only one or the other is used as the punch-line clause. In the case of (27), the punch-line clause is clearly the second one, emphasizing that the target's ignorance is truly bad.

Combining (A) and (B) and making adjustments for variations, we arrive at a more general representation in (C) below:

(C) $(\text{'T–R'}^n) \bowtie (\text{'T}\rightarrow\text{R'}^n) \bowtie (\text{'T}\leftarrow\text{R'}^n)\ \text{'T}\rightarrow\text{R'}^n \triangle\ \text{'T}\leftarrow\text{R'}^n$

where △ indicates an 'either-or' selection.

As in (A) and (B), the configuration in (C) allows for repetition and the flexible occurrence of non-NI clauses. The configuration also positions the obligatory punch-line clause(s) at the end—the only difference here is the introduction of the symbol △, which dictates that only a forward-NI or backward-NI clause can serve as the punch-line clause.

## 6. Conclusion and areas for further research

This paper has proposed a Theme-Rheme configuration of the language of insults based on the idea of negative inference. The main conclusions and findings of this paper are listed as follows:

(a) Although taking a number of forms and covering a great number of topics, insults are reducible to a general Theme-Rheme configuration.

(b) Insults activate NIs, which may be either forward- or backward-looking. Backward-NI insults are considerably more pervasive than forward-NI insults. Backward-NI insults occur in more than 9 out of 10 insults in the corpus.

(c) Multi-clausal insults comprise punch-line clauses, which carry the thrust of the offensive remark. These punch-line clauses occur in the final position of these insults.

(d) Not all clauses in multi-clausal insults are NI clauses. Non-NI clauses tend to precede NI clauses, although other orders are possible.

To be sure, the clause-based approach adopted in this study presents merely one way of approaching the language of insults. The observed patterns in Table 2 and the examples cited in this paper reveal only the thematic structure of insults at the clause level. One is, of course, perfectly entitled to ask if the thematic structure of insults can also be examined using a text-based rather than a clause-based approach.

This can certainly be done by extending the notions of Theme and Rheme to the text level. Here, the initial segment that constrains the development of the message in the rest of the text functions as the text-level Theme, what we

may refer to as the macro-Theme (Martin, 1992). The text is seen as a single unit of analysis with its own macro-Theme (MT) and macro-Rheme (MR), much like the Theme-Rheme bipartition in clauses. Traditional approaches to the study of the thematic structure of texts, however, have tended to concentrate on the patterned development of clausal Themes (Daneš, 1970; Fries, 1995; Leong, 2022). While such a clausal approach may reveal the development and progression of the thematic elements within the text, it cannot tell us much about the Theme of the overall text. These are clearly two separate issues since the former captures the departure points of the clauses within the text, but the latter is the departure point of the text itself.

The functions of text-level Themes have been investigated and discussed in Leong (1999). Based on the work of Tadros (1985, 1994), several thematic categories—setting, instruction, question, etc.—were proposed (see Leong (1999) for a full list and discussion of these categories). Some of these labels appear to be applicable to the insults in the corpus, as illustrated in the following:

Setting as MT, establishing the main participant(s) or circumstance(s):

(28) *His mind was like a soup dish, wide and shallow; it could hold a small amount of nearly anything, but the slightest jarring spilled the soup into somebody's lap. (Irving Stone)*

Instruction as MT:

(29) *Go ahead, tell them everything you know. It'll only take 10 seconds.*

Question as MT:

(30) *Is that your nose or are you eating a banana?*

More, however, certainly needs to be done to find out if these categories need to be refined and/or expanded to characterize the MTs of insults.

Work in this area (i.e., text-based studies) is likely to differ in focus from the present study since, at the text level, only two configurations are possible—MT→MR or MT←MR—and the punch-line clause(s) cannot occur anywhere else but in the MR portion. Rather, at the text level, our attention is drawn to the semantics of the MT and how it constrains the development of the offending remark in the MR. Some research questions along this line include:

- Do insults favor a particular thematic category (e.g., setting, instruction, question) as the MT?
- Are forward or backward NIs at the text level typically associated with the use of a particular thematic category?
- Is it possible for the MT to be realized by not one but a combination of thematic categories?

The work of Giora (1985) on the well-formedness of texts based on the Relevance Requirement adds a further interesting dimension to the investigation of insults. According to Giora (1985), a text is said to be well-formed if its main propositions are relevant to a topic of discourse. It would be interesting to investigate how the Relevance Requirement operates in insults, particularly since punch lines often achieve their insulting effect by deviating in a marked way from the established context in the MT (as in examples (29–30)). These questions—and, hence, the focus of text-based studies—address a broader, semantic consideration of Theme, and are useful in further enhancing our understanding of this notion.

On a concluding note, I should reiterate that the language of insults is a relatively unexplored area, and much certainly needs to be done to better understand the form and nature of offensive language. As briefly outlined above, a crucial area for further study is the investigation of insults from the macro, text-level perspective. From the micro, clause-level perspective, and building on the findings of this study, the general configuration in (C) will need to be tested more extensively and refined with data from outside the corpus. It remains to be seen if (C) is true of all insults, and whether any deviations from the configuration will result in an ill-formed insult. We might also want to explore if (C) is true of other languages and, by extension, whether Theme as a concept of initialness is equally applicable across languages.

## References

Bartlett, Frederic Charles (1932). *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bybee, Joan L., Dan I. Slobin (1982). Rules and schemas in the development and use of the English past tense. *Language* 58: 265–289.

Carter, Ronald, Michael McCarthy (2006). *Cambridge Grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coulthard, Malcolm (2014). *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* (2nd edn.). London: Routledge.

Cousens, Chris (2020). Are ableist insults secretly slurs? *Language Sciences* 77: 101252. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2019.101252

Daneš, František (1970). One instance of Prague School methodology: Functional analysis of utterance and text. Garvin, Paul L., ed. *Method and Theory in Linguistics*. The Hague: Mouton, 132–140.

Eder, Donna (1990). Serious and playful disputes: Variation in conflict talk among female adolescents. Grimshaw, Allen D., ed. *Conflict Talk: Sociolinguistic Investigations of Arguments in Conversations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 67–84.

Ervin-Tripp, Susan (1972). On sociolinguistic rules: Alternation and co-occurrence. Gumperz, John J., Dell H. Hymes, eds. *Directions in Sociolinguistics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 213–250.

Fries, Peter Howard (1995). Patterns of information in initial position in English. Fries, Peter H., Michael Gregory, eds. *Discourse in Society: Systemic Functional Perspectives*. Norwood: Ablex, 47–66.

Giora, Rachel (1985). A text-based analysis of non-narrative texts. *Theoretical Linguistics* 12: 115–136.

Goatly, Andrew (1997). *The Language of Metaphors*. London: Routledge.

Graesser, Arthur C., Leslie F. Clark (1985). The generation of knowledge-based inferences during narrative comprehension. Rickheit, Gert, Hans Strohner, eds. *Inferences in Text Processing*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 53–94.

Graesser, Arthur C., Gordon H. Bower, eds. (1990). *Psychology of Learning and Motivation* (vol. 25). San Diego: Academic Press.

Graesser, Arthur C., Roger J. Kreuz (1993). A theory of inference generation during text comprehension. *Discourse Processes* 16: 145–160.

Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood (1967a). Notes on transitivity and theme in English (part 1). *Journal of Linguistics* 3: 37–81.

Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood (1967b). Notes on transitivity and theme in English (part 2). *Journal of Linguistics* 3: 199–244.

Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood (1968). Notes on transitivity and theme in English (part 3). *Journal of Linguistics* 4: 179–215.

Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood (1970). Language structure and language function. Lyons, John, ed. *New Horizons in Linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 140–165.

Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood (1994). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2nd edn.). London: Arnold.

Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood, Christian I. M. Matthiessen (2004). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (3rd edn.). London: Arnold.

Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood, Christian I. M. Matthiessen (2014). *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar* (4th edn.). London: Routledge.

Hasan, Ruqaiya (1979). On the notion of text. Petöfi, Sándor János, ed. *Text vs Sentence: Basic Questions of Text Linguistics*. Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 369–390.

Head, Henry (1920). *Studies in Neurology*. London: Frowde.

Insult Quotes, Insulting Sayings (2021). https://www.coolnsmart.com/insult_quotes/

Johnson-Laird, Philip Nicholas (1983). *Mental Models: Towards a Cognitive Science of Language, Inference, and Consciousness*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Kant, Immanuel (1934). *Critique of Pure Reason* (Meiklejohn, John Miller Dow, trans.; 2nd edn.). London: J. M. Dent & Sons.

Kellogg, Ronald T. (2016). *Fundamentals of Cognitive Psychology* (3rd edn.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Kintsch, Walter. (1977). On comprehending stories. Just, Marcel Adam, Patricia A. Carpenter, eds. *Cognitive Processes in Comprehension*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 33–62.

Labov, William (1972). *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Labov, William. (1997). Rules for ritual insults. Coupland, Nikolas, Adam Jaworski, eds. *Sociolinguistics: A Reader*. New York: Macmillan Education, 472–486.
Leary, James P. (1980). White ritual insults. Schwartzman, Helen B., ed. *Play and Culture*. West Point: Leisure Press, 125–139.
Leong, Ping Alvin (1999). Text-level themes: A cognitive psychological perspective. *Text* 19: 25–55.
Leong, Ping Alvin (2000). The inference-boundary model: Reinterpreting theme and rheme. *Language Sciences* 22: 1–26.
Leong, Ping Alvin (2004a). Delimiting the theme of the English clause: An inference-boundary account. *Sky Journal of Linguistics* 17: 167–187.
Leong, Ping Alvin (2004b). *Theme and Rheme: An Alternative Account*. Bern: Peter Lang.
Leong, Ping Alvin (2015). Topical themes and thematic progression: The 'picture' of research articles. *Text & Talk* 35: 289–315.
Leong, Ping Alvin (2022). Thematic and rhematic progression in scientific writing: A pilot study. *Journal of Language and Literature* 22: 238–254.
Leong, Ping Alvin, Audrey Lin Lin Toh, Soo Fun Chin (2018). Examining structure in scientific research articles: A study of thematic progression and thematic density. *Written Communication* 35: 286–314.
Martin, James R. (1992). Theme, method of development and existentiality: The price of reply. *Occasional Papers in Systemic Linguistics* 6: 147–183.
Mathesius, Vilém (1928). On linguistic characterology with illustrations from modern English. Vachek, Josef, ed. *A Prague School Reader in Linguistics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 59–67.
Matthiessen, Christian M. I. M., James R. Martin (1991). A response to Huddleston's review of Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar. *Occasional Papers in Systemic Linguistics* 5: 5–74.
McKoon, Gail, Roger Ratcliff (1992). Inference during reading. *Psychological Review* 99: 440–466.
McPhee, Nancy (1978). *The Book of Insults: Ancient and Modern*. London: Paddington Press.
North, Sarah (2005). Different values, different skills? A comparison of essay writing by students from arts and science backgrounds. *Studies in Higher Education* 30: 517–533.
Piaget, Jean (1955). *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (Cook, Margaret, trans.) London: Routledge & Kegan.
Rivers, Nathaniel A. (2008). Some assembly required: The Latourian collective and the banal work of technical and professional communication. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 38: 189–206.
Rivers, Tyrone (2012). *Ritual insults among middle school students: Causing harm or passing time?* Master's thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
Rose, David (2001). Some variations in Theme across languages. *Functions of Language* 8: 109–145.
Rumelhart, David E. (1980). Schemata: The building blocks of cognition. Spiro, Rand J., Bertram C. Bruce, William F. Brewer, eds. *Theoretical Issues in Reading*

*Comprehension: Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology, Linguistics, Artificial Intelligence, and Education*. Matwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 33–58.
Seifert, Colleen M. (1990). Content-based inferences in text. Graesser, Arthur C., Gordon H. Bower, eds., 103–122.
Schank, Roger C., Robert P. Abelson (1977). *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
Singer, Murray (2014). *Psychology of Language: An Introduction to Sentence and Discourse Processes*. London: Psychology Press.
Sperber, Dan, Deirdre Wilson (1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition* (2nd edn.). Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
Tadros, Angela (1985). *Prediction in Text*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham.
Tadros, Angela (1994). Predictive categories in expository text. Coulthard, Malcolm, ed. *Advances in Written Text Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 69–82.
Tannock, Stuart (1999). Working with insults: Discourse and difference in an inner-city youth organization. *Discourse and Society*, 10: 317–350.
van den Broek, Paul. (1990). Causal inferences and the comprehension of narrative texts. Graesser, Arthur C., Gordon H. Bower, eds., 175–196.
van den Broek, Paul (1994). Comprehension and memory of narrative texts: Inferences and coherence. Gernsbacher, Morton Ann, ed. *Handbook of Psycholinguistics*. San Diego: Academic Press, 539–588.
van den Broek, Paul, Charles R. Fletcher, Kirsten Risden (1993). Investigations of inferential processes in reading: A theoretical and methodological integration. *Discourse Processes* 16: 169–180.
van Dijk, Teun A. (1977). Semantic macro-structures and knowledge frames in discourse comprehension. Just, Marcel Adam, Patricia A. Carpenter, eds. *Cognitive Processes in Comprehension*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 3–32.
van Dijk, Teun A., Walter Kintsch (1983). *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*. California: Academic Press.
Wee, Lionel. (2015). Adding insult to inquiry. *Pragmatics and Society* 6: 1–21.
Wingfield, Arthur. (1993). Sentence processing. Gleason, Jean Berko, Nan Bernstein Ratner, eds. *Psycholinguistics*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 199–235.

## Author's address:

Language and Communication Centre
School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University
48 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639818
Singapore
e-mail: alvin.leong@ntu.edu.sg

Received: May 30, 2022

Accepted for publication: October 17, 2022