In this paper we want to develop a model for the diachronic analysis of speech acts by tracing one particular speech act through the history of English, viz. insults. Speech acts are fuzzy concepts which show both diachronic and synchronic variation. We therefore propose a notion of a multidimensional pragmatic space in which speech acts can be analyzed in relation to neighboring speech acts.

Against this background we discuss both the changing cultural grounding in which insults occur and the changing ways in which they are realized. Our data is drawn from the Old English poem Beowulf and the Finnsburh fragment, from Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales and from Shakespeare’s plays, and from a variety of non-literary sources such as personal letters, court records and an internet discussion group. The scale ranges from everyday communication to ritualized behavior. When written materials of the past periods are analyzed, the bias towards the conventionalized insults is evident. Most early examples are found in literary texts and seem to reflect generic conventions of the time and the culture that gave rise to these literary forms.

1. Introduction

The study of the history of languages has traditionally been restricted to their structure (i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics). It is only recently that an interest has arisen in the historical development of pragmatic units. Speech acts are particularly interesting units for such an analysis because they define specific speech functions whose structural realization can be traced over time. Such an analysis is similar to contrastive speech act
analysis (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al.’s 1989 cross-cultural speech act realization project or Trosborg 1995), in which the realization of specific speech acts such as requests and apologies are compared in different cultures. In both cases it is important to identify similar speech functions in different contexts, that is to say a tertium comparationis that remains constant across space or time. However there are also important differences. In a contrastive analysis of modern languages, analysts can rely on data gathered from native speakers. Audio and video recordings can be made either of actual situations or of staged role plays. The analysts can use their own intuition and they can probe the intuition of native speakers with the help of interviews or questionnaires. A diachronic comparison, in contrast, must rely on different types of data and in most cases on written data.

A contrastive analysis, moreover, compares two or more disparate contexts, which, in spite of possible cross-influences and possibly a common history, are discontinuous. In a diachronic analysis, on the other hand, there may be continuity through various stages in the sense that the more recent stages of the language are a continuation of the older stages. A diachronic comparison is therefore always a linear analysis from older stages to more recent stages of the language.

In this paper we want to argue that, in spite of the difficulties, a diachronic speech act analysis is possible and fruitful. In the following section we develop the comparison between a contrastive and a diachronic speech act analysis in some more detail. In Section 3, we discuss the data problem and introduce the sources that we use for our illustrative analysis of insults. In Section 4 we turn to the speech act of insults itself and introduce our analytical categories. In Section 5, we propose the notion of “pragmatic space” as a tool for diachronic speech act analysis on the analogy of semantic fields. We want to suggest that speech acts should be analyzed in relation to their neighboring speech acts in the same way that natural language expressions are analyzed within semantic fields in relation to expressions with related meanings. In the remainder of the paper, finally, we illustrate this methodological apparatus by applying it to insults.

2. Contrastive analyses of speech acts

There is a wide range of contrastive analyses of speech acts across different cultures (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Blum-Kulka 1997; Oleksy 1988;
These approaches are methodologically important for a diachronic speech act analysis since in both cases the realization of a particular speech act is compared in different linguistic and cultural contexts, that is to say, historical distance and geographical or indeed social distance pose very similar if not identical methodological problems. In the following we briefly list and discuss the three main methodological problems.

First, a comparison across time or across geographical distance requires comparable units in both contexts that are to be studied. The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) for instance analyzes requests and apologies in different cultures. This is based on the assumption that requests and apologies exist as language functions in all the languages under investigation but that they may be realized differently in these languages. That is to say, the function (in this case more precisely the illocutionary force of a particular speech act) stays stable while its actual form (i.e. its realization) may differ and is the object of investigation. However, it has been recognized for quite some time now that different cultures may in fact use a different range of speech functions, so that there is no easy correlation, let alone any identity of speech functions across languages. An apology in Japanese, for instance, may not only be a realization of a universal language function that differs from the corresponding realization in English, but it may be a significantly different social act.

In the history of a language, the range of speech functions changes in the same way as the range of genres and text types changes as a result of social changes, changes in political institutions, advances in technology, language contact and so on (Görlach 1992; Fritz 1995, 1997; Taavitsainen 1997). Thus it is imperative to be very careful in the identification of specific speech acts for a diachronic investigation. The different realizations across time may well reflect, at least partly, differences in function.

The second problem concerns the fuzziness of speech acts. Utterances can be vague or even ambiguous as to their illocutionary force. An utterance like *Do I hear a noise?* may be used by a teacher as a reprimand, by somebody listening to a violinist practicing on her instrument as an insult, by somebody caught in the deafening roar of an airplane taking off as an ironic statement, or it may be used as a genuine request for information. Even in one given situation the illocutionary force may be deliberately vague. The
utterance *I wouldn’t do this*, for instance, can be used as a statement, a piece of advice and a warning all at the same time. In some cases explicit performatives can be used to realize a particular speech act, especially in the case of illocutionary speech act verbs (*I hereby ask you …*, *I hereby promise to you that I will …*, *I hereby tell you …*, etc.), but only some speech act verbs may be used in this way, and some speech act verbs may be used to perform other speech acts (indirect speech acts), as for instance in *I promise that you will fail the exam if you do not study more diligently*. Thus speech acts as functional units do not correspond directly to speech act verbs of a particular language.

The third problem concerns the inventory of speech acts. A precise description of a speech act cannot be achieved without reference to neighboring speech acts (semantic field theory here conceptualized as pragmatic space). As we will see later, a careful description of insults must also take into account such neighboring speech acts as slanders and slurs, oaths, swearing, disparaging remarks about non-present third parties and of course agonistic or ritual insults.

3. Data in historical pragmatics

The material of our analysis can be divided into two main kinds: fictional and non-fictional, i.e. reports on real-life verbal aggression. In fiction the instances are removed from reality and need not reflect actual ways of insulting people. Instead, these speech acts may show generic developments that can be conventionalized and typicalized. The advantage of fictional material is that the speech events are often given *verbatim* in direct quotations and described in their context, from the situation that gave rise to the exchange to the perlocutionary effects of the words used and the possibly ensuing actions.

Examples of insults from the Old English period are limited: there is a predominance of heroic poetry and total lack of some others, e.g. of nonliterary materials. This fact determines what we have and highlights one of the dimensions in our theoretical frame. These ritual insults reflect the Old English literary tradition, but the trend runs through time up to the present day so that it is still recognizable (see below). Middle English literature shows more variety, and fictional insults from this period seem to have two extreme poles. A specific generic development is found in the genre of
saints’ lives in which the use of verbal aggression acquired a functional role. The predominance of religious thought in the Middle Ages is perhaps reflected in this development. The other end of the scale consists of personal and particularized insults that abound in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

Real-life materials emerge for the first time in the Late Middle English period as private letters give us a glimpse of everyday life even with its less harmonious aspects. We have an eyewitness’s report in the Paston letters from the fifteenth century. Our assumption was that we would find many more examples of personal insults in Early Modern English letters as the materials increase, but this was not the case. Letters may contain accounts of impolite behavior and people’s reactions, but they do not usually contain the events that caused them. Descriptions of insults are rare. There are several reasons for this, e.g. the letters are mostly about business transactions, or in more personal letters we do not know what caused the offence and the perlocutionary effect as the letter of the other party is missing. A further difficulty is that we do not know enough of the context and interpersonal relations of the people involved. Besides letters, reports on courtroom trials contain insults, but the power relations of the participants are extremely biased. The judges with power seem to have developed special interrogation practices with verbal aggression that may be extremely persuasive.

Insults are frequent in Early Modern English fiction and drama. Shakespeare is a particularly rich source and examples of insults and adjacent speech acts can be found in his works. In Modern English the data is far more varied. The researcher has no longer to rely on written sources, but can use all the data-gathering techniques developed by sociolinguists and pragmatists. Among the many possibilities we focus briefly on two types of data that could not have been analyzed directly or that did not exist in earlier periods. Ritual insults of black adolescents are an oral form of interaction, and flaming is a type of insulting behavior that is germane to the new medium of electronic communication.

4. **The nature of insults**

4.1. *A first approximation*

Insults are offensive to the target and damage his or her reputation. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* they are defined as follows:
To assail with offensively dishonouring or contemptuous speech or action; to treat with scornful abuse or offensive disrespect; to offer indignity to; to affront, outrage. (*OED* ‘insult’ v.)

An act, or the action, of insulting (...); injuriously contemptuous speech or behaviour; scornful utterance or action intended to wound self-respect; an affront, indignity, outrage. (*OED* ‘insult’ n.)

To treat, mention, or speak rudely; offend, affront. An offensive or contemptuous remark or action; affront; slight. A person or thing producing the effect of an affront. (*Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus* 1993 (based on the Bank of English) ‘insult’ vb.)

The most important feature that derives from these definitions is the fact that insults describe to a large extent the effect on the addressee, that is to say a perlocutionary effect. This makes insults a difficult unit for investigation. Indeed the vast literature in speech act theory concentrates mostly on utterances of a particular illocutionary force such as questions, requests or apologies. The analysis of perlocutionary effects is difficult because the same utterance may achieve different effects for different addressees. One particular insult may be insulting for one particular addressee while it might not be insulting for another. Moreover it is even possible to insult unintentionally. An addressee may feel deeply offended by an utterance that was meant as a statement. In the following section, we develop the distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary aspects of insults.

### 4.2. Illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect of insults

In the following we wish to distinguish between the illocutionary force of insults and their perlocutionary effect. Speech act theorists distinguish between three aspects of utterances: the locutionary act, the illocutionary force and the perlocutionary effect (see *Austin* 1962: 98–117; or for a recent summary *Sbisà* 1995: 498–499). The locutionary act pertains to the physical act of producing an utterance. In everyday language this aspect is described by such speech act verbs as “say” or “utter”. The illocutionary force of an utterance can be described by verbs such as “order”, “advise”, “promise”, “state”, “ask”, “thank” and so on. It focuses on the act that is performed by the speaker in issuing an utterance. The perlocutionary effect, finally, describes the effect the utterance has on a particular hearer, that is the feelings, thoughts or actions that the utterance stirs in the hearer. These are
three aspects that co-occur in a single utterance. Thus a speaker may utter a number of words (locutionary act) in order to ask a question (illocutionary force), which may have the unintended effect of annoying the target (perlocutionary effect).

In this sense, then, the illocutionary force of an insult describes the primary act the speaker performs such as attack, assault, contemptuous remark, nasty comment and so on. Hill and Öttchen (1995) have this aspect in mind when they classify Shakespearean insults into name-calling, general abuse, knavery and villainy, and expletives. These are forms of insults, whatever the reaction of the target. The perlocutionary effect, on the other hand, consists of offence, wounded feelings, affront, or outrage.

Thus an insult in spite of all the variety can be reduced to the following three essential elements: First, a predication about the target (or about some part of his/her social identity, e.g. his/her profession). That is to say the speaker utters something about the target or uses words to characterize him/her, or uses an epithet to address him/her. Second, this predication is perceived as inappropriate and demeaning by the target. And third, the target experiences this predication as a face-threatening speaker intention, that is to say he or she believes that the speaker made the predication with the intention to hurt or demean him or her.

The first two of these three are obligatory defining criteria. If there is no predication about a target, we do not want to define it as an insult. Similarly if the predication is not seen as disparaging, we do not include this speech act in our analysis. The last feature tends to be present in the speech acts that we are interested in, but we would also allow for situations in which a person feels insulted even though he/she is aware that an insult was not intended. We are well aware that other researchers might draw the line differently, but we wish to introduce this terminological convention as a means of delimiting our object of investigation.

A disparaging remark about an absent third party on this analysis cannot be an insult unless the third party is closely connected to somebody in the audience, in which case this latter person becomes the target. Thus a rude remark about the present government would not count as an insult unless a member of the government is present or somebody who feels personally close to the government (for political or personal reasons). In this case the target of the insult would be this person and not the government.
4.3. **Personal insults in the pragmatic space of face threatening acts**

Hill and Ötetchen (1995: 22) in their collection of Shakespearean insults use a broad definition: “We define insults broadly. Some sit smug at the center of the definition, clearly intended to cast aspersion. Others come from around the edges — like disparaging insinuations, self-judgements or cynical observations.” This suggests a prototype approach, the insults varying in their degree of conformity to prototypical insults. We would like to develop this idea and argue that speech acts are fuzzy concepts which show both diachronic and synchronic variation in a “pragmatic space”. We use the term “space” in analogy to the concept of semantic fields in which expressions are analyzed in relation to neighboring expressions (Lyons 1977: 583; Hofmann 1993: 298; Welte 1993: 158–179). We prefer the term “space” to “field” because it indicates the multidimensionality of criteria that are relevant in the description of specific speech acts.

We suggest that at least the dimensions shown in Table 1 below are important for the pragmatic space of insults.

The first two dimensions concern the formal level of the insults. In the literature on insults there is usually a distinction between ritual and personal insults. However, the ritual should not be seen in direct opposition to the personal. There are two dimensions involved: the ritual as rule-governed versus the creative as not following conventionalized patterns, and the ludic

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<th>Table 1: Pragmatic space of insults</th>
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<td><strong>Formal level:</strong></td>
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<td>ritual (rule governed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>typified</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Semantics:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>truth-conditional</td>
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<tr>
<td>conventional</td>
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<td><strong>Context dependence:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>conventional</td>
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<td>ludic</td>
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<td>irony</td>
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<td><strong>Speaker attitude:</strong></td>
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versus aggressive, which we will introduce below. The insults reported in the *Canterbury Tales*, in court proceedings or in private letters are creative in the sense that they do not follow any conventionalized patterns. The structure of courtroom insults is cumulative and goal-driven as it aims at influencing the target’s behavior in a planned and premeditated way. On the same formal level we distinguish between typified and *ad hoc* insults. In some fictional genres insults have developed into speech acts in which a brief discourse has a typicalized form so that it schematically represents an entire speech event (see Fludernik 1993:411). Such speech acts may serve as functional *loci* in the plot (see below in the section on insults in saints’ lives).

On the semantic level, we distinguish between truth-conditional and performative insults. This distinction is useful in order to distinguish between slanders and slurs, on the one hand, and name-calling and expletives, on the other. The former category includes utterances that would be testable in a law-court (according to Lindahl 1987 such law-suits were common in the Middle Ages). The latter category comprises utterances that are face-threatening without predicking any testable description about the target. This distinction is important for various forms of verbal dueling. The insults that the contestants hurl at each other must be perceived to be blatantly untrue. Abuse which has some basis in truth is likely to turn the verbal dueling from playful to serious (see Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990:130; Labov 1972a, 1972b; Arnovick 1995). Oaths and swearing are not in themselves insults since they do not encode a predication about a target, but they may be perceived as insults if the addressee perceives them as disrespectful. This may be an intrusion into the addressee’s personal territory to the extent that swearing in the presence of the addressee suggests that the speaker deems this to be appropriate in the presence of the addressee.

The dimensions on the next level are concerned with the attitude of the speaker. The sounding of African-American adolescents (Abrahams 1962; Labov 1972a, 1972b) as well as the sporting of Anglo-Saxon warriors and medieval knights (Arnovick 1995; Bax 1981) follow strict patterns and in this sense are rule-governed. However, the former is mostly ludic, that is to say a mere contest of verbal prowess, while the latter may lead to physical violence in the form of a duel or a battle. Banter as a form of playful insults between intimates is another and probably widespread form of ludic insults (Leech 1983: 144–145).

Insults may also be unintentional. As we have outlined above, insults
are primarily perlocutionary. An utterance may have the effect of wounding the addressee even if the speaker did not mean to offend him/her. To cite a real-life example, at an international conference a speaker severely overstepping his time limit was interrupted and felt to be offensive by one member of the audience, but not by all. This means, of course, that unintentional insults can only be recognized for the analyst of historical data if a reaction by the target is recorded.

Furthermore, we distinguish between conventionalized insults and particularized insults (on the analogy of conventionalized and particularized implicatures). Conventionalized insults are those which in normal circumstances are understood as insults by all members of a speech community, e.g. slanderous remarks, contemptuous remarks, name calling, and demeaning expletives. In this area the analyst is on fairly safe ground since the illocutionary force of the utterance encodes the intention to have a particular perlocutionary effect. The identification of such conventionalized insult illocutions becomes more difficult of course the further removed the analyst is from the speech community under investigation.

Particularized insults, on the other hand, are those which do not have this conventional force. They are more difficult to identify for the analyst because they depend on the reaction of the target to an utterance that does not have this conventional force. And it is in this category that unintentional insults may occur. The target (who was not targeted by the speaker) perceives a predication about himself/herself as face-threatening and as having been made with the intention to demean, wound or outrage him/her.

The last dimension concerns the reaction of the target. A personal insult requires a denial or an excuse, while a ritual insult requires a response in kind (Labov 1972a: 153; Arnovick 1995: 604). Flytings may either end in actual violence or in silence, with which one of the contenders admits his inferiority. The Canterbury pilgrims react by counter-abuse, physical violence or silence. Reactions in courtrooms reflect the power relations of the participants, and in letters we often have the reactions only (see Section 5.4).

5. Insults in the history of English

In the following we shall give an outline of a partial history of insults in English by drawing from a variety of sources from Old English to Modern
English, though such a description cannot even attempt to be comprehensive. We shall try to assess the position of specific insults within the dimensions of the pragmatic space of verbal aggression and apply the analytical grid outlined above. The examples we have used when developing our theory highlight spots in the pragmatic space of antagonistic behavior. It is not possible to draw an evolutionary line of development, but the examples serve to illustrate various types of insults. We shall also give the sociohistorical context of the speech event as accurately as possible and we also pay attention to the generic developments when relevant.

5.1. Anglo-Saxon warriors: Boasts and rituals

In the Old English heroic tradition insults occur in the pragmatic space of boasts and challenges. The flying of the Anglo-Saxon warriors follows strict rules. The standard sequence consists of Claim, Defense, and Counterclaim, where the Claim and the Counterclaim consist of boasts and insults, which relate to the past deeds of the contenders, and threats, vows and curses, which relate to the future (Clover 1980: 452). The setting is outdoors, where the contenders meet face-to-face, a body of water often separating them, or it is indoors in the drinking hall.

Clover (1980: 453) lists the typical insults and reduces the topics to a few major categories that focus on cowardice, failure of honor, and irresponsible behavior; crimes of kinship emerge as a central theme. He also argues that Germanic flying cannot be analyzed as ritual insults in Labov’s terms because they provoke very strong responses. The preliminary incident is never disputed even by the offended partner. “This is perhaps the most striking characteristic of flytings: they argue interpretations, not facts” (Clover 1980: 458). As we mentioned before, flytings may either end in actual violence or in silence. In our terms both Germanic flying and sounding can be described as ritual since both are rule-governed, but the former lacks the ludic quality of the latter.

A well-known example is the Unferth episode in Beowulf, which is related to Norse flying combining both the “senna” tradition (i.e. the formal exchange of insults and threats) and the “mannjafnaðr” tradition (i.e. the formal exchange of boasts) (Clover 1980: 445–446). The flying thus consists of an exchange of verbal provocations between hostile speakers in a predictable and highly stylized way. The scene takes place shortly after Beowulf’s
arrival, after Hrothgar has greeted him in the drinking hall, which is one of the traditional settings for the exchange of threats and insults. Beowulf is invited to sit and tell of his famous victories. But first Unferth addresses Beowulf with a speech that is both heavily ironic and insulting to Beowulf. He accuses Beowulf of having risked his life for a foolish contest with Breca and for having lost the contest. He concludes his speech by saying that he does not expect Beowulf to be successful in an encounter with Grendel. In the words of Clover (1980: 461) “the Claim thus amounts to a double charge of frivolous behavior and heroic inadequacy.” Beowulf counters in the appropriate style by accusing Unferth of being drunk.

Donne wene ic to þe wyrstan geþinga, ðeah þu heahoresa gehwær dohte, grimre guðe, gif þu Grendles deárst nihtlongne þyrst nean bidan.’

Beowulf mapelode, bearn Ecgþeowes: ‘Hwæt, þu worn ðeþa, wine min Unferð, beore druncen ymb Breccan spræce, sægdest from his siðe.’

(2) ac he fraðg ofer eal undearninga

deormod hælþ, hwæða þa duru heolde.

Beowulf recounts the events of his contest with Breca in an entirely different light. Breca was not stronger, and moreover he, Beowulf, destroyed a mighty sea-beast. And he continues, if Breca’s people, the Scyldings, were any match for him, they would not have had to suffer the humiliation at the hands of Grendel. Through this speech Beowulf successfully silences Unferth. Hrothgar, the king, is delighted because Beowulf’s performance suggests that he might succeed against Grendel (on the Unferth episode see also Arnovick 1995: 608–609).

The closeness of boasts and insults in the Old English heroic tradition is also demonstrated in the Finnsburh fragment, a short text preserved in only one manuscript depicting a battle between Danes and Frisians (cf. Östman and Wärwik 1994). The Danes, who are paying a visit to the Frisian king Finn, are attacked at night by the Frisians. Immediately before the outbreak of the physical fight, one of the attackers asks who holds the door.
[and he inquired over it all (above the clamour) quite openly — the
bold spirited warrior — who guarded the door.]

(The Fight at Finnsburh, lines 22A — 23B, our translation)

This constitutes an insult because it violates the proper code of behavior. It
is a behavior that must ultimately lead to battle. One of the Danes counters
the verbal attack by a speech of boasting, after which open violence breaks
out. Both in the flying contest between Unferth and Beowulf and in the
Finnsburh incident, the exchange of insults and boasts follows the traditional
pattern, and in this sense is ritual. However, in the former case one of the
contestants succeeds in silencing his opponent while in the latter it leads to
violence. In both cases the speakers attack their targets directly and insult
them by asking them for their names and thus suggesting that they are not
famous enough. Moreover they express doubts about the valor of their
opponents as warriors, which is a very serious intrusion into the personal
territory of their opponents.

Ritual insults continue beyond the period of heroic poetry. Bax (1981,
1999) reports such behavior in the ritual challenges between later medieval
knights. Sounding or playing the dozens by African-American adolescents
are modern forms of ritual insults (see below).

The patterns are so well recognized even now that a parody works as a
source of humor in a block-busting

film from the 1970’s (Monty Python and
the Holy Grail, 1974).

(3) Arthur (shouting to Guard on the castle wall): If you will not show us
the grail, we shall take your castle by force.
Guard (shouting back in a French accent): You don’t frighten us,
English peacocks. Go and boil your bottoms sundry silly persons. I
blow my nose at you so-called Arthur person. You and your silly
English k-nigets. (rude noises and gestures)
Sir Galahad (to Arthur): What a strange person!
Arthur (to Guard): Now look here my good man …
Guard: I don’t wanna talk to you no more you empty-headed animal
food trough vapors. I fart in your general direction. Your mother was a
hamster and your father smelled of elderberries.

It is noteworthy how similar this is to the situation described in the Finns-
burh fragment. One noble warrior, here King Arthur, arrives at the dwelling
place of another warrior and a battle of words ensues between him and a
guard, who in this case is not at the door but on the wall of the castle. The
second round of insults by the guard is closely related to the African-American sounding tradition by insulting the target’s parents with outrageously absurd claims.

5.2. Saints and tyrants: Typified speech acts

In saints’ lives insults have developed special functions and achieved a typified form (see above). This is a strictly generic development that took place in late Middle English, and culminated in the late developments of the genre. Insults are regularly found in the saints’ bold and insulting speeches to the tyrant. In the course of time they acquired a pattern in which heavenly and worldly power, Christ and the tyrant, are put in contrast. Abusive metaphors like “foul, deadly dunghill” are used of the latter. The perlocutionary effect on the tyrant is anger which ultimately leads to the death of the saint. The saint remains intact and firm in her faith. In Chaucer’s The Second Nun’s Tale Cecile mocks the judge “Lo, he dissymuleth heere in audience; He stareth, and woodeeth in his advertence!” (SNT VIII (G) 466–7). This is a personal insult, a predication about the judge’s looks and behavior. The perlocutionary effect according to the pattern “Unsely wrecche, Ne woostow nat how fer my myght may streche?” (SNT VIII (G) 468–9), and martyrdom ensues. It may be that Chaucer’s narrative skill served to shape this literary tradition which seems to have culminated in the late ME prose version of the legend of St Katherine in MS Southwell Minster 7 (c. 1500; eds. Nevanlina and Taavitsainen 1993). The confrontation scene shows the use of typicalized phrases and metaphors:

(4) “Now vndyrstond, I pray the, juge /whi/che of these I ouȝt to choose: a feyr euerlastyng kyng and a gloriose, or ellys a fowle dedly dong-hyll?” And then themperour, full of dispyte and woodnes, seyde to hur, “Cheose þe oon of þese .ij.: do sacrifice, or ellys suffre deþe.”
(lines 874–878)

A cumulative sequence of insults is used in another scene between the tyrant and fifty rhetoricians who have become converted to the Christian faith. The saint has overcome them in a debate: they admit Katherine’s superiority, but the tyrant mocks them. The insult consists of a predication overcomyn by a mayde with a demeaning illocution, an attack on the rhetoricians’ renown as learned scholars. The reaction is in kind, but realized by more subtle means:
the illocution of contempt is achieved by a shift of pronoun, from respectful address with ſe to the second person singular thou, an address to an inferior. This marks a change of attitude in the speaker, and the target realizes the change. The perlocutionary effect of this insult is anger and madness woo and wood, leading to the grim action of killing. This is a common pattern in confrontations between the tyrant and the saint or people who have become converted into the Christian faith as in example (5):

(5) Themperour, seeyn that, hastyly blamyd them and seyde, “Cursid be ſe that suffre youreſelfe thus to be ouercomyn of a mayde.” Then seyde oon of them thus, “Syr empemour, wyt ſe well þat this mayde schowyth vs so myche of Jhſu Crist … but yf þu cannyst geve vs provable sentence of suche goddys as we haue worschippid, we be all conuertyd to Jhſu Crist.” And when themperour hard this, he was full woo and wood, and in madnes commaundyd þat þey schuld all be brent in the myddis of the cite.
(lines 804–812)

5.3. Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims: Truth-conditional and creative

Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales offer a panoply of characters from almost all social ranks and from all three estates of Chaucer’s England. These fictional characters interact on various levels in a wide range of situations, in a wide range of genres (cf. Taavitsainen 1995), and in a wide range of styles ranging from the polite and refined to the rustic, lewd and insulting. The insults in the Canterbury Tales are personal and not ritual in the sense that every single insult is highly original (for more details see Jucker in press). There is no general pattern, and many of the reactions clearly indicate the highly charged perlocutionary effect achieved by the insults which the characters hurl at each other.

In the first example the Host, Harry Baily, talks to the Cook and describes his cooking in terms that sound like food-poisoning.

(6) Now telle on, Roger; looke that it be good, 4345
For many a pasteē hastow laten blood,
And many a Jakke of Dovere hastow soold
That hath been twies hoot and twies coold.
Of many a pilgrym hastow Cristes curs,
For of thy percel yet they fare the wors, 4350
That they han eten with thy stubbel goos,
For in thy shoppe is many a flye los.
(CkPro, I 4345–52)

This extended insult is creative because it is not rule-governed but it is also what we have termed conventional. Even without a reaction from the Cook it can be classified as an insult, because of the seriousness of the accusation. In this case the Cook reacts in a good-humored way, but promises to repay Harry Bailly later by telling a story of an inn-keeper in turn.

In the second example, the Pardoner asks Harry Bailly to kiss his bogus relics. Such a request is neither true nor false, but it infuriates Harry Bailly.

(7) I rede that oure Hoost heere shal bigynne,
For he is moost envoluped in synne.
Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon,
And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon,
Ye, for a grote! Unbokele anon thy purs.”
(PardT, VI 941–5)

In speech act terms, this utterance might be classified as a polite invitation or an offer if it were not for the Host’s violent reaction. It is the perlocutionary effect, that is to say the reaction of the target, which turns the utterance into an insult. Thus, this is an example of a particularized and non-truth-conditional or performative insult.

Chaucer does not always tell us the effect of insults on their targets, but those that he does relate are just as varied as the forms of verbal aggression themselves. Very often the targets react in kind, that is to say with counter-abuse. The Miller insults the Reeve by telling a story of a duped and cuckolded carpenter, and the Reeve retorts with a story of a miller who fares even worse. Similarly in the conversations between antagonistic pilgrims, one insult induces another. Other reactions to insults in the Canterbury Tales comprise stunned silence as in extract (8), physical violence as in extract (9) or the intervention of the Host as in extract (10).

(8) This Pardoner answerde nat a word;
So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye.
(PardT, VI 956–7)

(9) And he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun,
And with his fest he smoot me on the heed
That in the floor I lay as I were deed.
(WBPro, III 794–6)
5.4. ME Letters: Real-life aggression

The earliest example of a non-fictional insult is perhaps the letter from Margaret Paston to John Paston I, written in 1448. It gives a detailed account of how a situation with personal insults could develop. It started with non-verbal disrespectful behavior, a violation of the polite code. This served as a provocation to verbal assaults, name-calling with derogative terms and accusations, accompanied by the violent action of throwing stones. The aggression was extended to other people associated with the target, the narrator and her mother. Unfortunately the writer has censored the word-for-word account of the outburst of verbal aggression, the “large langage”, because she considered it taboo in written language:

(11) And whanne Gloys was a-yenst Wymondham he seid þus, ‘Couere thy heed!’ And Gloys seid ageyn, ‘So I shall for the.’ And whanne Gloys was forther passed by þe space of iij or iij strede, Wymondham drew owt his dagger and seid, ‘Shalt þow so, knave?’ And þerwith Gloys turned hym and drewe owt his dagger and defendet hym, fleynig in-to my moderis place; and Wymondham and his man Hawys kest stonyæ and dreve Gloys into my moderis place. And Hawys folwyd into my moderis place and kest a ston as meche as a forthyng lof into þe halle after Gloys; and þan ran owt of þe place ageyn. And Gloys folwyd owt and stod with-owt þe gate, and þanne Wymondham called Gloys thef and seid he shuld dye, and Gloys seid he lyed and called hym charl, and bad hym come hym-self or ell þe best man he hadde, and Gloys wold answere hym on for on. And þanne Haweys ran into Wymondhams place and fechæ a spere and a swerd, and toke his maister his swerd. And with þe noise of þis a-saut and a-spray my modir and I come owt of þe chirche from þe sakeryng; and I bad Gloys go in to my moderis place ageyn, and so he dede. And thanne Wymondham called my moder and me strong hores, and seid þe Pastons and alle her kyn were (…) Myngham (…)e seid he lyed, knave and charl as he was. And he had meche large langage, as ye shall knowe her-after by mowthe. (p. 224, italics removed)

Such a detailed account is, however, rare.
5.5. **Shakespeare: The Forest of Beasts**

Language use is a central concern in Shakespeare’s plays, e.g. in *The Tempest* and in *Timon of Athens* in which the antagonistic speech of curses and other rude language demonstrates the disintegration of social bonds — man ceases to be man, and Athens becomes a “forest of beasts” (Troupp 1992). Disharmony is mirrored in verbal exchanges, and the scale of adjacent speech acts, with distinguishing shades in either illocutions or perlocutions, or both, rises from these examples.²

5.5.1. **Shakespeare’s courtiers: verbal aggression and perlocutionary effects**

Shakespeare’s plays are full of name-calling and insults; Hill and Öttchen (1995) list over 4000 individual instances from Shakespeare’s plays, unfortunately decontextualised. Most of them combine two adjectives (or participles) and a noun epithet after *thou* e.g. *Thou loggerheaded pale-hearted hugger-mugger!*, *Thou roynish knotty-pated horn-beast!*, *Thou infectious unchin-snouted barnacle!* In these phrases, the second person singular seems to be a marked form of address, and in some cases the use of the pronoun could itself be an insult, as it may contain a predication about the social status of the target. Its use as a sociolinguistic marker was not, however, constant (see Calvo 1992).

Insults by name-calling are amply illustrated in the opening scene of *The Tempest* when the courtiers are introduced. The scene is contrary to audience expectations: instead of courtesy, impolite and insulting language with curses follows (cf. Caliban below). The boatswain is superior to the noblemen in this situation, and the scene serves to point out that human social hierarchies do not apply when nature enforces equality. The arrogant behavior of the courtiers towards their social inferiors is typified by name-calling. The boatswain’s reply *Work you, then* is a typical reaction to misjudged criticism, that of responding in kind. The boatswain swears as an outburst of emotions in his toil, and when the courtiers interrupt him again, he makes sarcastic remarks. These are answered by insults.

(12) *Boats.* A plague upon this howling! they are louder than the weather, or our office.

*Enter Sebastian, Antonio, and Gonzalo*

Yet again? What do you here? Shall we give o’er and drown? Have you a mind to sink?
Seb. A pox o’ your throat! you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog!
Boats. Work you then.
Ant. Hang, cur! hang, you whoreson, insolent noisemaker! We are less afraid to be drown’d than thou art.
(The Tempest, I.i.36–45)

Name-calling seems to be the most common type of insult in Shakespeare’s plays, but other kinds can be found as well and the whole scale of conflicts and impolite speech acts emerge. The perlocutionary effect of such speech acts is often negotiated. A non-verbal gesture may serve as provocation and be perceived as an insult, leading to derogative words (cf. the Paston letter mentioned above). Such a course of events is found in Romeo and Juliet. The opposite sides are introduced in a confrontational situation and the expectations of the audience are aroused; thus the scene has a thematic function in the play and is typified in that sense (cf. saints’ lives). Non-verbal provocation leads to verbal dueling that constitutes a negotiation whether the biting of a thumb is an insult or not. This scene also shows how polite behavior and its violations are culture-specific; the significance of the gesture itself may be lost to the modern audience.

(13) Gre. I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list.
   Sam. Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it.
   Abr. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
   Sam. I do bite my thumb, sir.
   Abr. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
   Sam. [Aside to Gregory] Is the law of our side if I say ay?
   Gre. [Aside to Sampson] No.
   Sam. No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir.
   Gre. Do you quarrel, sir?
   Abr. Quarrel, sir? No, sir.
   Sam. But if you do, sir, I am for you.
(Romeo and Juliet I.i.40–54)

In the same way, other speech acts adjacent to insults are negotiated sometimes to a humorous effect, as for instance swearing by oaths and lying in language tricks about the truth value of the speech acts (cf. Chaucer above). The outcome may be common consent on the rules of face-saving:
Where learn’d you that oath, fool?

Of a certain knight, that swore by his honor they were good pancakes, and swore by his honor the mustard was naught. Now I’ll stand to it, the pancakes were naught, and the mustard was good, and yet was not the knight forsworn.

Stroke your chins, and swear by your beards that I am a knave.

By our beards (if we had them) thou art.

By my knavery (if I had it) then I were. But if you swear by that that is not, you are not forsworn. No more was this knight, swearing by his honor, for he never had any; or if he had, he had sworn it away before ever he saw those pancakes or that mustard.

(As You Like It, I.ii.62–80)

Swearing and cursing are speech acts that are adjacent to insulting but both the illocutions and the assumed perlocutionary effects distinguish them. The scene with Caliban’s first entry has them both. Prospero entices Caliban to come forth by using rude language with name-calling and derogatory predications about his generation. This is Caliban’s own kind of language, and perceived as rude and intentionally insulting even by him. His reaction is worse than in kind: it is a curse. Cursing as a speech act had a strong illocutionary force as cursing was connected with magical use of language and believed to have an effect: what was said would come true. This is the speaker intention in cursing; there is no predication about the target. Prospero, in turn, reacts to the curse in kind and uses his magic, which in this case is not much different from Caliban’s, to inflict cramps and itches upon him.

Come, thou tortoise, when?

Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself
Upon thy wicked dam, come forth!

Enter Caliban.

As wicked dew as e’er my mother brush’d
With raven’s feather from unwholesome fen
Drop on you both! A south-west blow on ye,
And blister you all o’er.

Pros. For this, be sure, to-night thou shalt have cramps,
Side-stitches, that shall pen thy breath up; ...

(The Tempest, Li.ii.316, 318–26)

Another speech act adjacent to insulting is taunting. It uses insults as provocation to an action; thus the illocutions and perlocutions are different from insults, though predications about the target are included. For example, after Macbeth has announced his resolution to abstain from murder, Lady Macbeth taunts him by accusations of cowardice in a long, rhetorical speech (I.vii. 35–58). Insults are used for goal-oriented manipulation to provoke the desired perlocutionary effects as part of a more comprehensive speech event, which constitutes the speech act of taunting (cf. court proceedings).

5.6. 17th century court officials

Court proceedings from the 17th century record very aggressive real-life insults with name-calling and demeaning predications about the honesty and character of the target. In these documents the power relations between participants are explicit and the insults are unilateral, from high to low. On August 27, 1685 Lady Alice Lisle was tried on charges of high treason. In the process a witness was heard by the name of Dunne, a baker, who was involved as a messenger in the activities of which Lady Lisle was accused. In the course of the interrogation he keeps contradicting himself and gives a very confused account of the events. As a result the Lord Chief Justice, who asks the questions, grows increasingly impatient. He keeps admonishing Dunne to say the truth and he repeatedly accuses him of lying, and he does this in terms which can only be described as insulting. This can be seen in affective features like exclamations and a cumulative list of abusive terms, aggressive questioning, irony and mocking, accusations and strong threats, which all reflect speaker attitude. The pattern in name-calling is exactly the same as in the examples found in Shakespeare’s plays. The target is in no position to defend himself.

(16) L.C.J. Why, thou vile Wretch didst not thou tell me just now that thou pluck’d up the Latch? Dost thou take the God of Heaven not to be a God of Truth, and that he is not a Witness of all thou say’st? Dost thou
think because thou prevaricatest with the Court here, thou can’st do so with God above, who knows thy Thoughts, and it is infinite Mercy, that for those Falsehoods of thine, he does not immediately strike thee into Hell? Jesus God! there is no sort of Conversation nor human Society to be kept with such People as these are, who have no other Religion but only Pretence, and no way to uphold themselves but by countenancing Lying and Villany: Did not you tell me that you opened the Latch your self, and that you saw no body else but a Girl? How durst you offer to tell such horrid Lies in the presence of God and of a Court of Justice? Answer me one Question more: Did he pull down the Hay or you? 

Dunne: I did not pull down any Hay at all. (p. 114)

(17) L.C.J. Thou art a strange prevaricating, shuffling, sniveling, lying Rascal.

Mr Pollexsen. We will set him by for the present, and call Barler, that is the other Fellow. (p. 115)

(18) L.C.J. And why did’st thou tell so many Lies then? Jesu God! that we should live to see anysuch Creatures among Mankind, nay, and among us too, to the Shame and Reproach be it spoken of our Nation and Religion: Is this that that is called the Protestant Religion, a thing so much boasted of, and pretended to? We have heard a great deal of Clamour against Property and Dispensations, what Dispensations pray does the Protestant Religion give for such Practices as these? I pity thee with all my Soul, and pray for thee, but it cannot but make all Mankind to tremble and be filled with Horror, that such a wretched Creature should live upon the Earth: Prithee be free, and tell us what Discourse there was? 

Dunne. My Lord, they did talk of Fighting, but I cannot remember what it was. (p. 122)

Several elements are striking about these examples. First, insults are only used by the Lord Chief Justice to this one witness. There is a very big power differential between him and Dunne. The court transcripts do not betray any reaction by Dunne at all. He keeps answering in the same fashion in short sentences, addressing the Lord Chief Justice with the phrase my Lord in virtually every utterance. The outbursts quoted above do not provoke any defensive or even counter-attacking reactions.

The insults recorded in extracts (16) to (18) can also be classified as accusations, warnings or intimidations. This pragmatic space is of course genre specific. The Lord Chief Justice tries to intimidate Dunne to such an extent that he tell the truth. The strategy seems to work since Dunne eventually tells the events in a way which corresponds more closely and in a more plausible way with the events told by Lady Lisle and by the other witnesses.
In the global structure of these court transcriptions, these passages appear at crucial points, when Dunne admits to something that he denied earlier. In the case of (16) he had earlier claimed that he himself had opened the stable door. Upon persistent questioning, he admits that Carpenter had done it for him, which causes the Lord Chief Justice’s outburst recorded in (16). This gives the proceeding a new turn. It is now clear that there were more people on the scene than Dunne had at first admitted, and Dunne proceeds to tell a quite different version of the events of that particular night.

In (17) the Lord Chief Justice is exasperated by Dunne’s answers which he clearly does not believe. He decides to call another witness.

In (18) it again turns out that earlier claims by Dunne that a girl had shown him the way to a room in the house was wrong and he admits that this too was Carpenter. After the Lord Chief Justice’s outburst recorded in extract (18), Dunne remembers more of the events and even some details of a conversation that he must have overheard on that evening but which so far he had claimed to know nothing about.

Thus Dunne does not react in any overt way to the insults levied at him by the Lord Chief Justice, but the fact that he afterwards admits to events and knowledge that he had previously denied indicates that the strategy was successful and he was sufficiently intimidated.

5.7. 20th century adolescents: Sounding and flaming

The twentieth century has its own inventory of forms of insults. Two particularly noteworthy specimens that shall briefly be mentioned at the end of this paper are on the one hand the ritual insults of urban black adolescents and related forms, and on the other hand the recent practice of flaming on the internet. The ritual insults of urban black adolescents and other subcultures in the English-speaking world have attracted the attention of researchers for a long time (e.g. Abrahams 1962; Labov 1972a and 1972b; Smitherman 1977; Eder 1990; Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990: Chapter 6; Arnowick 1995; Bronner 1996; and Murray 1996). These practices are variously known as “playing the dozens”, “sounding”, “screaming”, “joining” or “signifying”.

The purpose of playing the dozens is to better one’s opponent with caustic and humorous insults that are seen as patently untrue. Thus the practice is fundamentally ludic but with the inherent danger of seriousness as soon as insults are perceived to be too close to reality. As Arnowick (1995: 604)
states, “personal, individualized statements work best as insults, but they also have the greatest potential to incite violence. Ritualized or formulaic insults are the more conventional weapon in the sounding game.”

The appropriate response to a ritual insult is a response in kind. If the target of a ritual insult reacts with defensive action such as a denial, the ritual insult is redefined as a personal insult. Arnovick (1995: 611): “sounding is rooted in game. It is essentially ludic in its mode of reference.” This means again that the insults must be perceived to be untrue and that denials would be inappropriate reactions.

Similar data have recently been collected from London teenage culture. Unlike similar disputes among Afro-American adolescents, girls participated in disputes with ritual insulting exchanges with face-threatening, unmitigated strategies. They were used to express intimacy and closeness in friendship rather than to negotiate status or rank (Hasund and Stenström 1997: 127, 129). There seems to be a clear pattern: swearing and demeaning predications about the target form the core, the tone is ludic, and the reaction is in kind. Ritual insults of this kind should perhaps be seen as part of the learning process on how to respond to insults in a non-serious manner (cf. teasing children and banter).

The other institutionalized form of insults is the practice of flaming on the internet. It appears to be particularly common in news groups, where a large number of participants can submit email postings under the cover of anonymity. In this context, flaming is considered to be bad style and is rejected by the code of behavior on the internet, the so-called netiquette. However, there are now news groups that have adopted flaming as their sole purpose e.g. the news group alt.flame. On its home page it defines the three main types of activity for this news group:

1. WHAT TO DO ON ALT.FLAME:
   Basically, anything you damn well want. The three main types of activity on this ng (NewsGroup) are:
   a) Flaming: ie rude comments, insults, personal attacks, etc.
   b) Trolling: ie fishing for flames. Usually takes the form of inane postings like smarmy love chatter, useless pieces of boring information, McClatchie’s FAQ, etc.
   c) Cascades: Endless meaningless threads the posters repeat the same phrase over and over, sometimes with a little variation. They are amusing to the ones participating in them, boring to everyone else. (http://www.ifi.uio.no/~christop/index.html, Sept 11, 1998)
This quotation already suggests that the flame wars in the news group itself are of an entirely ludic nature. It is the explicit purpose to insult other participants and to provoke insults from others. As far as it was possible to verify this empirically, the controversies seem to deal with fairly trivial issues of behavior in news groups, and the insults take the form of name-calling. The following is a typical extract. The angled brackets at the beginning of a line indicate portions of the text that have been taken over from an earlier posting. Those lines with the highest number of angles indicate the original posting to which the others replied in turn. The lines without angles are the most recent additions to the message.3

(19)

>>>>>How come you cut out the part about your “deliberate trashing” of
>>>>>>a newsgroup? Are you too much of a coward to debate the real issues?
>>>>>
>>>>>Deliberately trashing a newsgroup isn’t net abuse,
>>>>>
>>>>>If the newsgroup is unread by others I’ll concede this point.
>>>>>However, if other people are active and ontopic to the group it IS net
>>>>>abuse: Try walking in on a wedding, seminar, party, or other public
>>>>>gathering, spray painting the room with acrylics, and explaining that
>>>>>it isn’t ‘abuse’ since you didn’t spray any readable messages on the
>>>>>walls, furniture, and/or attendees.
>>>>>
>>>>>I’ll concede that point, I’ve read a couple of FAQ’s since and even
>>>>>alt.net’s abuse FAQ says it’s abuse.
>>>>>
>>>>>Skippy isn’t trashing any newsgroups. He’s getting other people to do
>>>>>it for him. That doesn’t appear to be net abuse.
>>>>>
>>>>>Then why did you say deliberately trashing a newsgroup wasn’t net.abuse?
>>>>>Why say an action isn’t net.abuse when you claim the action never happened.
>>>>
>>>>>Whoops — messed up again.

Did you even read my last post? Idiotic whiny little netcop.

>>>>>spamming, on the
>>>>>other hand, definitely is net abuse. You need to learn of few things.
>>>>>
>>>>>You need to either stop abusing USENET or stop pretending and start
taking pride in your work. If you are going to be a vandal, be a
vandal and don’t say you’re not because you don’t pillage, rape, rob,
AND burn: You only pillage, rape, and start small fires that are
easily put out with a household extinguisher.

I am “not” abusing Usenet,

"I am not a crook …"
But you are a whiny little netcop.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to outline a framework for the diachronic analysis of speech acts. Speech acts have to be seen in a multidimensional pragmatic space that they share with neighboring speech acts. Specific realizations are therefore context-specific, culture-specific and time-specific. Moreover it is not only the realization that changes over time but the underlying speech function may change too. Quite clearly, medieval flying, Shakespearean name-calling and present-day flaming are not realizations of one and the same speech function of insult but they are different speech functions located in the pragmatic space of antagonistic behavior.

Justus Liebig University, Giessen
University of Helsinki

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2. We are grateful to Lotte Troupp for fruitful discussions on Shakespeare’s language.
3. Our thanks to Katja Briegel for her help in locating this material.
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