Politeness and Insult in Computer Games – From a Pragmatic Point of View

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Abstract: In line with the principle of technological determinism, the linguistic context of computer games influences the (linguistic) behaviour of millions of active gamers. This makes it important to explore gamer communication thoroughly with respect to politeness, too. Indeed, the communication of gamers during games may also affect the users' off-game communicative situations. The international literature suggests that the quasi-anonymity of online communication and the lack or weakness of sanction make it ruder than offline communication: it involves a higher number of insults or offensive personal remarks. The paper looks at this issue, in particular by a pragmatic – politeness-centred – investigation of a particular kind of online insults. The corpus of analysis is provided by “taunts”, i.e. inbuilt instructions triggering “mocking” remarks of League of Legends (LoL), a multiple-participant online arena game. The authors interpret in-game insults in the framework of speech act theory, the Cooperative Principle (conversational and politeness maxims), face threatening, and a matrix of aims and functions. The paper wishes to be a contribution to cyberpragmatics, a pragmatically-oriented branch of Internet linguistics.

Keywords: Internet linguistics, pragmatics, cyberpragmatics, insult, politeness, speech act, computer games, gamer communication

Aim of Research: Analysis of Offensive-Mocking Language in Computer Games

International research findings suggest that online communication is ruder and involves more insults and offensive personal remarks than offline media due to its quasi-anonymity and the lack or weakness of sanctions. The paper looks at this matter in the light of “taunts”, a set of inbuilt commands that trigger “mocking” remarks in the multiple-participant online arena game *League of Legends* (LoL), with a politeness-centred pragmatic inquiry of insults. The paper wants to be a contribution to cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2011), a pragmatically oriented extension of Internet linguistics. The paper uses the term *taunt* to designate the text commands (a kind of special speech act).

Statistics by the designer Riot Games (W4) show that *League of Legends* had more than 100 million gamers in September 2016. In line with the principle of technological determinism, the linguistic (and non-verbal, visual) context of the game influences the (linguistic) behaviour of millions of active gamers. This makes it important to take a thorough look at gamer communication in terms of politeness as it may also affect the communicative situations of users’ off-game time.

Politeness Theories and Insult Pragmatics – In Computer Games

Insults are a universal feature of human social behaviour. However, while humour and irony were studied by philosophers in ancient Greece, the communicative acts of gossip and insult (banter, pecking, mocking) seemed too trivial for a long time to encourage major inquiry, and so their research history is much shorter (Brock, 2008: 543).

From a pragmatic perspective, insults may be interpreted within politeness/impoliteness theories. A term with multiple definitions, politeness can mean both a social (non-linguistic) behaviour, a codified set of norms encompassing appropriate and tactful forms of social behaviour that change through history (Fraser, 1990), and the linguistic expression of the former, the linguistic reflection of current expectations of politeness (Szili, 2007). Since Thomas (1995), politeness has been known to have four definitions: 1. an expression of respect; 2. a communicative style; 3. an utterance-level linguistic phenomenon; 4. a subject of pragmatics (cf. Szili, 2007: 2).

In pragmatics, there are two major politeness theories: Leech (1977, 1983) considers politeness as an expression of Grice’s conversational maxims, while Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) describe politeness as a face-saving act. Both approaches “define politeness as the speaker’s strategy adopted for a variety of

purposes, especially to establish or maintain a harmonic relationship. In other words, they put the speaker's intentions in the foreground" (Szili, 2007: 14). This can apply to the interpretation of insults within speech act theory.

Insults within Speech Act Theory

A key pillar of the pragmatics of insults may be the speech act theories of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). Loosely speaking, speech act theory is the analysis of discourse in operation.

Taunt may be defined as a speech act that "involves an element of negative judgement for the interlocutor", "expresses the speaker's aggressive intention against his or her partner", and by it "individuals place themselves above their partners" (Batár, 2007: 452). By the taunt, the speaker wants to cause damage to the hearer or addressee (by discrediting, insulting, or slighting them). In addition, the taunting person naturally reinforces his or her self-image because a negative judgement, as heuristic works, cannot apply to the person making it.

Further criteria include illocution and perlocution in the typology of insults created by Martinez and Yus (2013) according to four variables, specifically 1. the conventional or innovative nature of the utterance; 2. the speaker's underlying intention (insult, praise, social relationship); 3. the hearer's interpretation; 4. the hearer's reaction or lack of reaction (Martinez-Yus, 2013).

Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000) address the speech act of insult in the framework of historical pragmatics, from a diachronic perspective. They propose (2000: 73) that an insult has its illocutionary force in that the speaker performs a speech act by which he or she attacks or offends another person or makes an arrogant, scornful, disdainful remark about the hearer. Certain forms, independently from the hearer's response, count as insults including mocking, swearing, misleading, insolence, and cursing (cf. Hill-Ötchen, 1995). The perlocution (the effect of the utterance on the hearer) may be offence, pique, resentment, confrontation, and indignation.

Whatever its intention or effect, an insult has three basic components. The first is a statement about another person (or any of their qualities or features of identity). The speaker utters or states something about the other person, describes them, or uses an adjective to refer to them. The second component is the target person's perception of the statement/adjective as wrong, improper, indecent, or even degrading. The third component is the target person's perception of the statement as the speaker's face-threatening intention, thinking that the speaker's statement was meant to be an affront, insult, or degradation (Jucker-Taavitsainen, 2000: 73). The latter consideration links this approach to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. The first two components are absolutely necessary for the definition of insult, and the third one also occurs in most speech acts, but this is

not fully supported by evidence (and the hearer sometimes takes offence although the speaker meant no harm; cf. Jucker–Taavitsainen, 2000: 73). Similarly, the present authors do not regard as insult any case where an offensive, insulting statement is made about an absent third party (cf. [malicious] rumour) unless a participant has a (close) relationship with them. In the latter case, the target of the insult is not the third party but the participant.

Insults in Grice's Cooperative Principle

In terms of Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP), an insult is a non-cooperative behaviour. Grice (1975, 1989) views human communication as a cooperative effort where both the speaker and the hearer normally behave in a rational and purposive manner. "Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975: 45). Irony (and, in a certain sense, humour), fraud, lie, and insult constitute a deviation from the Cooperative Principle, a flouting of the conversational maxims that contribute to cooperation.

In Grice's Cooperative Principle, the maxims of quantity, quality, relation/relevance, and manner may be flouted as follows. The maxim of quantity may be flouted by understatement, overstatement, and tautology; the maxim of quality by contradiction, irony, metaphor, and rhetorical questions; the maxim of relation/relevance by giving hints, giving association clues and presupposition; the maxim of manner by ambiguity, vagueness, overgeneralization, ellipsis, and hearer displacement (Brown–Levinson, 1978).

Based on the Gricean terms, Leech's Politeness Principle (PP) is observed in order to "minimize the expression of beliefs related to our impoliteness and to maximize those that reinforce our politeness" (Szili, 2007: 7; cf. Leech, 1983: 81). The Politeness Principle involves seven maxims along the pragmatic scale, including 1. Tact, 2. Generosity, 3. Approbation, 4. Modesty, 5. Agreement, 6. Sympathy, and 7. Phatic Maxim (Leech, 2014).

In addition to the basic principles, Leech proposes another two. One is the Irony Principle: "If you must cause offence, at least do so in a way which doesn't overtly conflict with the PP [Politeness Principle], but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of implicature" (1990: 82). The other is the Banter Principle: In order to show solidarity with the hearer, say something which is obviously untrue and impolite. Using taunt as insult, the speaker normally flouts Leech's Politeness Principle in a conscious way.

Insult as a Face-Threatening Behaviour

Brown and Levinson's politeness theories are based on Erving Goffman's face theory (1959). "The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing of himself" (Goffman, 1967: 5). Goffman claims that a rational speaker wants to create and maintain a positive image of him-/herself in others and to save it from problems, conflicts, and face-threatening acts (FTA) arising in communication (Brown–Levinson, 1978). At the same time, "Goffman's face is not unilaterally egocentric. In fact, it includes the other party's reactions and emotions. Defensive practices (saving the person's own face) and protective practices (saving another person's face) will play a key role in Brown and Levinson" (qtd. in Szili, 2007: 9).

Of such practices, special mention must be made of insult, which, within the politeness and impoliteness theory, is a seriously face-threatening impolite speech act as opposed to the accepted social conventions, an extreme form of impoliteness (Heltai, 2013: 61). Serious face threatening may aim to achieve a particular perlocutionary effect, such as irritating or provoking the addressee, expressing the offender's contempt of the other party, releasing tension or negative feelings. The gravity of the insult depends on the speaker's intention, the content of the utterance, the form of the utterance, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, the participants' personal qualities, the consequences and context of the utterance, social norms, and the expected degree of politeness (Heltai, 2013: 61).

The more an act threatens the face of the parties to the conversation (speaker and/or hearer), the more the speaker attempts to choose a less risky strategy for expressing it. In terms of the rising level of threat, social distance, power, and the degree of coercion in proportion to the desired goods, a face-threatening act may involve the following strategies: off-record, i.e. an indirect main strategy that hides the real intention, and on-record, i.e. a direct strategy clearly expressing the intention, which may occur baldly, without redressive action or by minimizing the threat, with redressive action. Redress may take the form of positive (approximating) and negative (alienating) politeness (Brown–Levinson, 1978).

Insults in Online Computer Games

Interest in online politeness was first raised by anonymous forums and chat sites (Danet, 2013), which may be analysed with the models described in this paper.

Scholars looked at the link between computer games and (linguistic) politeness primarily from the perspective of social psychology and less typically of linguistic

pragmatics. A major contribution to the matter was the gamer linguistics inquiry of Astrid Ensslin, whose *The Language of Gaming* made a number of important claims about gamer communication and politeness (Ensslin, 2011: 103).

So far politeness research related to computer games (Kramer, 2014; Ensslin, 2011) has primarily relied on Brown and Levinson's model.¹ These findings show that games involve both on-mic (bold) and off-mic strategies. This is because efficient communication may have different features in each type of game. In a rapid game, on-mic sentences may add to team efficiency. At the same time, the rationale behind the off-mic strategy is that gamers' communication is mainly aimed at building trust and showing a cooperative image to their fellows for achieving the game objectives (Kramer, 2014: 267–268). In the off-mic strategy, “there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent” (Brown–Levinson, 1978: 69).

Research into politeness, then, should consider the different communicative features of each type of game, including promptitude. The criteria by which an utterance is considered as polite or impolite are different in each type. A role game may involve situations where the point is to perform appropriately and the gamer's utterance is not limited by time and may hence include over-polite expressions and even long monologues (Kramer, 2014: 270). By contrast, in the combat situation of a “shoot ‘em up game”, there is hardly any time for decision making or a lengthy group discussion of the situation: the gamer and the team must communicate and act as fast and, hence, as efficiently as possible (Herring et al., 2009). In a combat situation, even “on-mic” direct (less polite) utterances are acceptable for the sake of efficiency and so are over-polite expressions in a role game as long as they are appropriate for the character. The former, rapid game is typical of the online arena game in this study, too.

Another major claim by Ensslin is that underlying both polite and impolite utterances, there is rivalry, so that gamers infringe the rules of politeness to achieve a better position and more success in their groups (Ensslin, 2011: 103). This observation was also confirmed by the findings of Kramer (2014).

From her research of MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), Kramer (2010, 2014) concluded that the main motivation for politeness in online games is the mutual dependence of gamers as the completion of certain *quests* and *raids* strictly requires cooperation between multiple gamers. In order to achieve their goals and to develop their characters in the game, users form teams approaching each other as politely as possible. It is fair to say, along the lines of Watts (1992: 51), that gamers have an ego-centred motivation. The

1 This was one of our reasons for choosing the theory based on the flouting of Grice's and Leech's maxims together with Martinez and Yus's taxonomy, which are less applied to computer games, as a starting point for this paper.

feedback corpus showed that a polite request triggers a polite response and help, but any gamer who gives a rude answer or uses threatening language will be stigmatized within the group. These games are played on online servers, where gamers can be identified by their character names, so a gamer's bad reputation soon reaches a high number of people, preventing the excluded character from further development (Kramer, 2014: 268).

Kramer (2014) looked at online politeness using a questionnaire and found, among other things, that most gamers agree with the stereotype that in-game communication is less polite than offline dialogues. This, however, is in contrast with the self-report of the vast majority of respondents by which they always try to communicate with fellow gamers in a way that fits the situation and is the politest. This contradiction may be put down to several factors. Firstly, the respondents of the questionnaire do not, of course, cover the entire gamer community (and include some people who do not bother to use polite forms in-game). Secondly, negative experiences about game politeness presumably leave a deeper mark than positive impressions. Thirdly, the respondents may also have tried to put their best foot forward and show their positive face when filling in the questionnaire although it would not have had any consequences if their opinion had been contrary to the expected positive team player attitude (Kramer, 2014: 267).

Taunts

The term *taunt* occurs in games with two related meanings: 1. the ability of tanks, i.e. powerful characters that are resistant to attacks, to draw the enemy's attention to themselves in order to save their teammates; 2. a battle cry, sarcastic remark, gesture, or insult by which gamers deliberately demoralize or anger their opponents (primarily to make them act in a haste and hence cause them to make mistakes). A lot of times, taunting is part of or a byword for *trolling* (cf. Buckels et al., 2014; Hardaker, 2010, 2013; Shin, 2008; Veszelszki, 2017). This paper focuses on the second meaning. Taunts play a key role in games – so, if developers do not incorporate this option, gamers will find alternative insults to express their dominance.

LoL enables gamers to communicate with their fellows via inbuilt messages throughout the match, but in the game examined in this research one of the peak periods is idle time from 0:00 to 1:45 minutes, where the characters cannot perform any action other than buying initial items, taking up their positions, and interacting with each other. Taunts can be seen and heard by every gamer located in the affected point of the field.

Taunts occurring in the game and specifically addressed to the gamer may

1. be indirect or direct (in the latter case, the inbuilt options make explicitly

mocking remarks about the gamer); 2. appear as a monologue or dialogue, 3. exist as an extra feature or may be built on the game's dynamics (as in games that are basically meant to be mocking and impossible).

Both the manner and the function of taunting gestures are also different by game type. In fighting games, the opponent's taunting is typically linked to game mechanics (e.g. insulting another gamer may help to take up energy required for different wounding combinations). Online role games (MMORPG) also feature taunts as an ability and animation. In the latter case, they are only important for the communication between gamers without an actual role in game mechanics.

The gamer (speaker) can perform a face-threatening act through their selected character, which is made technically possible by the other gamer's character. As taunting typically occurs at the beginning of the game or because of uneven levels of power (one of the gamers is much more skilful than the other and even wants to emphasize this), gamers use the automatically generated messages to encourage both themselves and their teammates to play better, and they attempt to threaten their opponents in an implicit (and sometimes humorous) form.² Using taunts, then, is a kind of psychological warfare. Indeed, permanent and repeated taunting may even influence the end of the game (irritating the opponent and detracting their attention).

Taunts in *League of Legends* (LoL) as the Research Corpus

The present authors evaluated multiple criteria to choose a game for this research project. In her 2009 paper, Masso specifically mentions a frequent mistake in computer game research, by which scholars draw conclusions and propose models without ever having played the given game (Masso, 2009: 150). In addition, Masso suggests that an analysis of games should take into consideration whether the researcher prepares a log of a well-known video game or one played for the first time. We considered these criteria before our decision to analyse *League of Legends*: we knew how the game is played and were able to observe it, but our excessive game involvement did not affect the research. The game's designers clearly support team player gamers who communicate positively, emphasizing the attitude of paying attention to the team as a good example both in their communication with gamers (in social media, the game's official platforms, forums, and Reddit) and in their promotion materials.³

2 Game design often raises the question if the system should punish threats as verbal aggression (W8, W9).

3 In the *Summoner's Code* – a set of guidelines for the proposed in-game behaviours (W2).

As mentioned in the first part of the paper, LoL, the game chosen for the analysis, belongs to the type of online arena games (*Multiplayer Online Battle Arena*, MOBA). Gamers fight in two teams of five members, each in a closed area with the aim of destroying the opponent's most protected building. This is a third-person game where gamers have a bird's-eye view of their characters, the environment, and the animations. The research covered the game mode called *soloQ* (solo queue), where gamers find a team on their own and are put together with their teammates by the server based on previous performance. This team design method means that people playing together are nearly always strangers, so they cannot rely on any shared experiences but only on the communication channels offered by the game (written chat, visual signs on the map) and on their shared knowledge (about the objective of the game, the abilities of the different characters, and the roles assumed in the game) to coordinate team work, which is vital for victory. Tamás (2014: 17) proposes that while online strategic games "are mostly anonymous and virtual products, they are able to result in real human relationships and indeed affect the offline environment, too." This claim also applies to arena games. Continuous and intensive communication is vital for the efficiency of multi-character group games. LoL uses English as a common language.

Similarly, to several computer games, LoL has a narrative structure as its background story and the related events create something like a novel where each part is linked to the others by the characters. The characters also have their respective background stories underlying their forms of appearance and communication, including the Taunt command assigned to each. These utterances always reflect the character's perspective, so they are best interpreted together with the given background story. The game features male and female heroes with some characters whose gender is unknown and unidentifiable. As the gamers do not know each other, they often use the character's gender in reference to the controlling gamer,⁴ which also shows that the character and the addressed gamer may be different.

As opposed to role games, MOBA gamers do not create avatars with a permanent graphic design used for a long time but may choose a new character for the same account from game to game. Every new game starts by the user's choice of a character for the match. As a result, the gamer's and the character's personae and perspectives merge to a lesser degree than in a strategic or role game played with the same character for an extended time.⁵ This is confirmed by the game's framework as the gamer called *summoner* chooses a hero called *champion* for the battle.

4 For instance, with a personal pronoun matching the gender of the character, not the gamer: "she failed her ult, lol" (she failed her ultimate ability, laugh out loudly) or "her Q has big dmg" (her ability, which she uses by hitting the key Q, has big damage).

5 For the differences between the personae of the avatar and the gamer, see: Carter–Gibbs–Arnold, 2012.

The relative positions of the interacting participants can move along two scales according to the gamers and their characters. On the one hand, a distinction is made between good and bad gamers in terms of performance. Logically, a good gamer holds a higher position in the hierarchy. Wallace (2006: 133) coined the term *expert-ism* to designate the use of expertise or its lack by elitist in-groups on the Internet to define and distinguish themselves. The author points out that insiders love taunting newbies. Gamers engage in mocking by typing their messages that are hence unique. On the other hand, by the positions of the gamers' respective characters, there are allies/friends facing opponents/enemies. This distinction is revealed by the inbuilt messages. Thus, the dual perspective of gamer and character means that when two characters meet in the game, gamers either write messages from their own perspective and animate their characters or respond to certain situations according to the characters and the stories around them in a rapid game. The latter is served by the inbuilt options such as the taunts analysed here or the greetings that are automatically pronounced and/or appear when the characters meet.

The research corpus contains Taunt command sentences in the online arena game *League of Legends*.⁶ LoL features taunts both as an ability and as an inbuilt expression of emotion. This paper will look at the latter one.

Our taunt corpus forms a huge matrix with one axis featuring the speakers and the other featuring the characters potentially hearing the given taunt. This research covers texts by 127 heroes until 1 January 2016: the taunts related to heroes, which may be activated near any character (all taunts, 260 sentences, 10,671 characters) and the sentences uttered upon the meeting of only two characters (character taunt, 394 sentences, 18,154 characters). Thus, the corpus contains a total of 645 English-language taunts (654 sentences; 28,825 characters all told). On average, two taunt sentences per character are programmed as an inbuilt option.

Table 1 summarizes all preliminary information about the taunts in terms of addressee, form, and content. A taunt may address the gamer⁷ or the character controlled by the gamer.⁸ The form and wording of a taunt may be conventional, i.e. a statement prototypically used as an insult or mockery,⁹ but the diversity of the characters may introduce innovative forms, too.¹⁰ Ritual, formulaic insults may be regarded as conventional verbal weapons. By contrast, "personal,

6 Each taunt is interpreted using the game's wiki site (W1). The following examples will include (1) the taunt in English (in italics), (2) the character's name, and/or (3) the interpretation.

7 "You will lose, Malphite." In some way, this is a curse. A curse carries a bigger illocutionary force than an insult because cursing is usually related to the magical power of language and hence has an effect: that which is uttered will happen. A curse differs from an insult precisely by not involving any statement about the addressee (Jucker-Taavitsainen, 2000: 86).

8 "A legion couldn't stop me. What chance do you have?", Syndra.

9 "Foolish Sejuani", Ashe.

10 "Should I make your pulse rise? Or...STOP!", Ahri is an attractive eastern humanoid fox that can quickly and badly injure her opponents.

individualized statements work best as insults, but they also have the greatest potential to incite violence” (Arnovick, 1995: 604; cf. Jucker–Taavitsainen, 2000: 90). Given the play situation, a taunt may be in-game¹¹ or off-game,¹² one not necessarily closely associated with the game.

Table 1. *Data of taunts in the corpus (with numbers)*

		Character taunts	All taunts	Total
Number of sentences		394	260	654
Number of taunts		389	256	645
Addressee	Gamer	0	53	53
	Character	389	203	592
Form of taunt	Conventional	100	71	171
	New	289	185	474
Content of taunt	In-game	389	214	603
	Off-game	0	42	42

The three characteristics (1. taunt addressed to a gamer or a character; 2. conventional or innovative form; 3. content referring to in-game or off-game relationships) are closely associated with each other.¹³

Taunts that may only be activated between certain characters (called *character taunts* in Table 1) account for 60% of the corpus. Therefore, they respond to in-game contents and mostly take an innovative form (289 occurrences vs. 100 conventional items). A look at the addressees of taunts that may be used against any character/gamer (*all taunts*) also revealed a higher number of character-oriented interactions (203 occasions). Here, novel wording is also more frequent than conventional forms, and in-game content is also dominant (83%).

In order to analyse taunts and understand the essence of insults, it is (nearly) always necessary to present the story or personal features of the affected character(s); therefore, the analysis will touch upon this, but only as much as necessary. In addition, verbal information in the game may not be distinguished from visual and paralinguistic features (sound effects and stress patterns in the utterances), so we

11 E.g. a reference to the relationship between the characters: “Go where you want, Mundo – outside of Zaun.” Both characters come from the fictitious city of Zaun, but Ekko considers Mundo as a negative inhabitant. The sentence also echoes a line by Mundo uttered when moving: “Mundo will go where he pleases.”

12 E.g. “Would you prefer the good cop or the bad cop?”, Caitlyn.

13 Where we did not find a clear form of address or where the interaction did not specifically involve the characters, we relied on the content of the taunt to identify the addressee. Where a sentence only made sense in-game (e.g. a reference to an injury or death: “Fight as a hero or die as a coward”, Aatrox), we categorized it as one addressed to the character. Where we were able to attribute an off-game meaning to a message, we designated the gamer as the addressee (“I already calculated your odds. Sorry”, Ekko).

also regarded the character's looks, appearance, and intonation as key sources of information and hence incorporated them in the analysis as required by the topic.

LoL Taunts in Impoliteness Theories Based on the Flouting of Maxims

The insults in the taunt corpus will first be examined as the flouting of Grice's conversational maxims and Leech's politeness maxims. For ease of reading, all examples taken from the game will be given as footnotes.

Flouting of Conversational Maxims

We were able to categorize 572 corpus items as flouting of conversational maxims. Of these, 65 belong to the category of direct insults.¹⁴ In a game situation, a fast and accurate exchange of game-related information is a priority for gamers, but taunts usually aim to distract the opponent's attention, and this may involve the flouting of conversational maxims. The following sections will analyse the corpus instances relying on the flouting of maxims as an indirect politeness strategy (Brown–Levinson, 1978).

“Flout Quantity”

As a consequence of the game's competitive nature, the most common tactics to flout the maxim of quantity is overstatement (43 of the 70 taunts flouting quantity), but the corpus also includes examples of understatement (16) and tautology (11). Taunts reveal background information about the character or inter-character relationships in every case, but this does not affect the course of the game. *Overstatement* and *understatement* are key taunt strategies given the game's war situation as the characters extol their strength, qualities, and weapons as opposed to those of their enemies.¹⁵ Taunts using a *tautology* share information that is only associated with the course of the game indirectly.¹⁶

14 These include refusals (“Foolish spirit, be gone!”, Illaoi), threats (“If I want your opinion, I’ll beat it out of you”, Vi), and direct insults (“You remind me of Agatha. Best cow back home”, by Braum to Alistar, the hero appearing as a minotaur).

15 The main quality of Draven is vanity. This hero usually makes statements about himself: “Welcome to the League of Draven”. This refers to the name of the game (*League of Legends*) and introduces the character as the only one who is worthy of the game. The hero Syndra overstates her abilities with the already quoted taunt “A legion couldn’t stop me. What chance do you have?” This also refers to her opponent’s poorer qualities.

16 A typical example is the pun on Graves’s name with the punch line explained by Gangplank: “You will never have a grave, Graves... see, it’s ‘cause your name, it’s... your name is like a grave, it’s – I – never mind’.”

“Flout Quality”

In order to understand taunts that flout quality, the hearer must know the game’s world and characters (background, abilities) even more if they are to identify and decode any secondary meaning. Of all taunts in the corpus, 162 belong to this type: most of them hinge on irony (73), while rhetorical questions, contradictions, and metaphors have roughly the same share (31, 30, and 28 respectively). The direct offensive nature of these utterances may be partially reduced by *irony*, by which the characters – as was the case above – describe their own abilities and interpersonal relationships.¹⁷ Taunts based on *metaphor* rely on the characters’ appearance and background stories together.¹⁸ Given the game’s communicative setting, a *rhetorical question* is a special situation as there are no inbuilt answers to the questions that the designers programmed for the heroes. In spite of, or using, this, several characters engage in taunting in the form of questions, relying on off-game information.¹⁹ Gamer qualities always provide a solid ground for insults, and the intonation of the sentence even reinforces that no answer is expected. Irony and rhetorical question may go hand in hand.²⁰ In these cases, it is absolutely necessary to know the character’s abilities to activate the secondary meaning.

“Flout Relevance”

The maxim of relevance requires the utterance to match the situation, to avoid unnecessary digressions, and to keep to the point. In the games, relevance may be best flouted by taunts that are made at a time and in a situation where the information is irrelevant, involves unnecessary additions, or is unrelated to the situation (number of instances found: 216). In this research, taunts relying on *association* and partly on *presupposition* include memes about the gamer: the designers relied on shared knowledge when programming the sentences.²¹

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- 17 An utterance involving irony by Elise, a character who also appears as a spider, is “Come closer, I don’t BITE!” because *Bite* is the name given to one of her abilities. This utterance is ironic because the speaker (Elise) makes an obviously false claim which implies just the opposite idea.
- 18 “You are but a grain of sand, Xerath”, a metaphor used by the ruler Azir to his servant, is an allusion to the fight for power between the two characters and activates their environment in the desert as a connotation. “Ice Witch, prepare to be shattered!” is addressed to Lissandra in reference to the relationship, qualities, and looks of the characters as she looks like a female figure carved out of icy rocks, while the taunting Sejuani is a powerful warrior riding on a wild boar, whose utterances often relate to destruction. The threat is made obvious by the image of ice being shattered.
- 19 Jax’s taunt (“Who wants a piece of the champ?!”) refers to his story of origin according to which he used to be the most powerful hero in the game’s world that no one dared to challenge. The taunt “Why so serious?” by Shaco, the Demon Jester, is also an allusion to Joker’s character in the Batman films.
- 20 “You think you can outshoot me?” is asked by Tristana, a gunner able to attack from one of the greatest distances.
- 21 “Death at the door? Hmph, no. I am the one who knocks”, an insult by Lucian to everybody, is

“Flout Manner”

The maxim of manner requires clarity. This is flouted by obscurity of expression, ambiguity, prolix and disorderly utterances. Our corpus contains 59 instances of flouting manner by obscurity and ambiguity. In creating the characters’ personae, the designers would often assign not completely clear utterances to them (maybe as a way to introduce subsequent events and further characters). Indeed, the main attribute of certain heroes is the obscurity of their utterances. *Generalizing* utterances refer to in-game conditions.²² Their comprehension does not require familiarity with the character or the story, but, with such background knowledge, the sentences provide extra information about the characters, which is not really necessary during the game.²³ One type of obscure taunt that relies on *ambiguity* may also be considered as a flirt and the other as showing off of power based on in-game skills.²⁴ The interpretation of an *omission* or silence is typically assisted by intonation.²⁵

Flouting the Politeness Maxims

The following sections will look at taunts in the light of the politeness maxims. We had expected each item in the corpus to flout these principles, but it actually included some taunts that were utterly polite. This may be put down to the characters’ personae and the game developers’ already mentioned commitment to positive communication. The ways in which the taunts flout these maxims

an allusion to a famous monologue by the protagonist of the show *Breaking Bad* and aims to express that the character is a dangerous opponent. In order to decode Amumu’s taunt “Let me give you a hug”, one must know the background story that the character is a mummy looking for friends, and one of his abilities is like a hug by which he injures the victim and hence poses a risk. Likewise, the implicature of the next example can only be revealed by familiarity with the game. Tristana’s insult of Ziggs refers to his explosions: “Watch where you’re exploding, Ziggs!” All abilities of the character have to do with explosions. Another instance of in-game knowledge is the characters’ roles based on their abilities. Soraka is a healing character, so she is usually selected by gamers to play a support role. Her taunt “I will not save you” refers to her charms and support role.

- 22 Most of the time, they relate to groups (“Ninjas... I hate those guys”, Yashuo), qualities (“So young, so naïve”, Anivia), or to abilities and their development (“You wish to learn the hard way”, I see, Master Yi).
- 23 Yashuo was chased by ninjas. Anivia is an immortal ice bird, while Master Yi is a mentor.
- 24 Illaoi, the priestess of a sea god, uses a taunt of an ambiguous intonation to express her attraction to Braum, the northern warrior: “Northman. There are motions I would like to show you.” The double entendre gives rise to an insult in Quinn’s taunts. She is accompanied by an eagle and has a good relationship with the royal family: “I’d keep my head down if I were you; I’ve got friends in high places.”
- 25 For instance, Ekko taunts all heroes from the opponent city by saying “Great. Pilties” without finishing the utterance, but the paraverbal features make it clear that this is an insult.

cannot be strictly categorized. Instead, we are going to give the most typical examples of flouting in all seven politeness maxims.

Tact

One of the basic goals of taunts in the games is to anger the opponent, so it is just logical that most of them flout the tact maxim (“minimize cost to other, maximize benefit to other”). Yet, we only found few examples of tact.²⁶ In order to identify the flouting of this maxim, one needs to know the game’s story.²⁷ Most of the taunts emphasize and make abuse of the opponent’s weaknesses and defects. This may be based on differences in worldview²⁸ or the characters’ looks.²⁹

Generosity

Leech’s generosity maxim states: “Minimize the expression of beliefs that express or imply benefit to self; maximize the expression of beliefs that express or imply cost to self”. The basic situation of the game does not support the gamer’s/character’s generosity with the partner as the aim of the game is to defeat the opponent. However, the designers also programmed generosity as a quality of one character.³⁰ At the same time, generosity is reduced as these utterances also give hints about the assisted characters’ weaknesses.³¹ Non-verbal qualities play a key role as shown by the fact that sometimes not the verbal information but the intonation suggests that while the form of taunt expresses generosity, its actual aim is threat and intimidation.³² The corpus includes a relatively high number of examples of flouting the generosity maxim. The qualities of egoism and conceit are exhibited by several characters.³³

26 The utterances of Poppy, who admires two heroes, are tactful and this is also manifest in her utterly polite taunts (to Garen: “Oh, wow, Garen, do you think you could sign my shield?”; to the future ruler, Jarvan IV: “A pleasure to fight for you, your majesty”). Illaoi normally hurls strict and tough taunts, but the next one addressed to the Yordle (an in-game race of tiny creatures that are sociable and nice) is relatively low-profile and soft: “Little one, I don’t need empathy. Seek those who do.”

27 While Thresh’s offer may seem nice or tactful (“Ever seen your soul? Would you like to?”), this taunt is made seriously threatening as he usually captures and imprisons the souls of his opponents.

28 “Your twisted ways must be stopped!”, Ashe to Sejuani. They are rival leaders, Ashe being more peaceful and Sejuani more cruel.

29 “Quit monkeying around!”, Master Yi to his apelike disciple Wukong.

30 In some taunts to his allies, Tahm Kench offers to help them fulfil their wishes.

31 For instance, when they are fighting on the same side, he offers to return Gnar to his own time (“Time is just a river, boy, let me take you back where you belong.”).

32 In the taunt by Twitch the Plague Rat: “I’m dedicating this piece to you.”

33 The taunt of Zyra, a plant-turned-witch (“This land is mine.”), is about the expropriation of the area that she occupies. The insult of the materialistic Sivir refers to the looks of the anthropomorphic crocodile god Renekton and to his own money-grubbing attitude (“I could use

Approbation

Contrary to our previous expectations, the corpus included taunts flouting the approbation maxim (“Minimize the expression of beliefs which express dispraise of other; maximize the expression of beliefs which express approval of other.”) and utterances praising the opponent. Underlying this may be attraction,³⁴ respect,³⁵ and potentially similarity between the characters.³⁶ In these cases, the taunts play a key role in describing the character.

As opposed to the relatively low number of approbatory messages, our corpus contains a high number of critical remarks. Most of them refer to the combat and the abilities of the characters, their own invulnerability and dexterity but mostly to the opponent’s lack of skill.³⁷

Modesty

While the designers of LoL tried to achieve the greatest diversity in their characters, the taunts do not include any that relates to the modesty maxim. By contrast, there is quite a high number of utterances where the heroes praise themselves, their abilities and looks.³⁸

Agreement

The corpus only included one taunt expressing agreement with the partner (“Minimize the expression of disagreement between self and other; maximize the expression of agreement between self and other.”), and even this one seems ambiguous.³⁹ By contrast, the flouting of the agreement maxim, i.e. opposition and conflict, follows from the game’s mechanics. These utterances involve direct verbal aggression and, indeed, threats of “physical” aggression.⁴⁰

a pair of croc skin boots.”).

34 “Finally, a man who won’t break”, Illaoi to Braum.

35 “Garen, I think you might be the one!”, Poppy to Garen as an expression that she has been looking for him for years as the heir of a great warrior.

36 “Oohooohoo, Singed! You smell nice!”, Twitch to Singed as both characters relate to venoms and stench.

37 The taunt of Heimerdinger, a genius inventor, is an implicit self-praise and a disapproval of his opponent (“I prefer a battle of wits, but you’re unarmed!”).

38 One of the main attributes of Draven is conceit (“Who wants some Draven? Heheheh; Welcome to the League of Draven!”). Likewise, Zac praises his own abilities against the addressee (“It’s not how much you can lift. It’s how good you look!”).

39 The already mentioned Twitch the Plague Rat tells Singed, who keeps laying a poisonous trail: “I see why everyone chases you.” However, this is also ambiguous as it refers to a misleading tactic of Singed.

40 For instance, there are three characters fighting for control over the northern territories: Ashe, the archer queen, Lissandra, a highly powerful ice witch, and Sejuani, a barbarian warrior riding

Sympathy

The ultimate goal of taunts contradicts the sympathy maxim (“Minimize antipathy between self and other; maximize sympathy between the self and other.”) as the characters primarily express their antipathy to each other. The expression of antipathy may be offensive based on the gamer’s skills⁴¹ but may also target the character.⁴²

Phatic Maxim

The phatic function essentially aims to maintain contact between the interlocutors – specifically, “avoid silence, keep talking”. Given the unilateral nature of taunts, this function does not apply here. However, there are utterances that may prototypically be categorized within phatic communication, used to establish contact⁴³ or to close it.⁴⁴

A Typology of Insults by Aim/Function

The above findings show that not every item of the taunt corpus is an offensive utterance, but the vast majority do involve an insult. This makes them suitable for the insult typology developed by Martinez and Yus (2013) along the following four categories: 1. conventionality/innovativeness, 2. intention; 3. the right/wrong interpretation of the insult; 4. the addressee’s response or lack of response. Due to its manner of compilation, the corpus cannot contain any data of the ways in which the addressees respond to the taunts (perlocution), so two elements in the original taxonomy that refer to hearer response have been replaced with the addressee (gamer/character). Accordingly, we looked at mockeries within the 12 categories listed in *Table 2*. The results are presented in three groups by the intention of the taunt: aggressive mocks, praising utterances, and taunts meant to maintain a social relationship.

on a wild boar (to Sejuani: “Misguided warmonger!; Foolish Sejuani.; So, which one is the pig?”; to Lissandra: “To pierce your black heart!; Your twisted ways must be stopped!; “I will end your corruption!”).

41 “It’s just not possible to sink to the level of this competition”, Cassiopeia.

42 “Darius, you’re a butcher, not a general”, Garen to Darius. These characters are the warlords of the two biggest peoples fighting against each other.

43 “So, uh... how about that weather?”, Ekko to the wind magus Janna, whom he likes.

44 “You’re boring; Not interested”, Fizz.

Table 2. *A typology of insults*

Taunt intention	Taunt form	Taunt addressee	Number
aggression	conventional	gamer	18
aggression	conventional	character	144
aggression	innovative	gamer	16
aggression	innovative	character	317
praise	conventional	gamer	–
praise	conventional	character	1
praise	innovative	gamer	–
praise	innovative	character	43
social relationship	conventional	gamer	2
social relationship	conventional	character	6
social relationship	innovative	gamer	17
social relationship	innovative	character	81

Aggressive Taunts

As expected, the vast majority of the corpus items consist of taunts revealing an aggressive intention (493 items, 76%). This can be put down not only to the fundamentally aggressive nature of insults but also to the interpretation of the game situation as a fight.⁴⁵ The aggressive message mostly targets a character (461 vs. 34 gamer-oriented messages). This proportion is in harmony with the game designers' attempt to make the game fair and to have aggression aimed at characters and not fellow gamers. This may also explain why innovative character-oriented taunts have the highest number. The developers try to create a wide range of texts that match the characters, incorporating the aggressive and offensive function of taunts.

Praising Taunts

Praising taunts represent the smallest portion of the corpus (44 items found) and usually relate to the latest heroes. Praises always address characters (and never gamers themselves). The category of innovative positive messages addressed to a character includes utterances motivated by the following intentions: expression of sympathy,⁴⁶ recognition,⁴⁷ and acknowledgement.⁴⁸

45 "Fight as a hero, or die as a coward", Aatrox, the spirit of war in the game.

46 "You, I like", Illaoi.

47 "I see why everyone chases you", Twitch to Singed.

48 "It is you who have shown Gangplank his path. For that, I thank you", Illaoi to Miss Fortune.

Taunts Aimed to Maintain a Social Relationship

Leech (2014) also claims that banter should not only be interpreted in terms of politeness vs. impoliteness (“polite [or rather, ‘camaraderic’] interpretation”, Leech, 2014: 238) and points out that in the case of banter a particularly important aspect besides politeness is the expression and confirmation of the relationship between the interlocutors. Technau (2017: 99) proposes that banter involves an intention of entertainment in addition to a reference to social relationships. In summary, banter has the following interrelated and not necessarily mutually exclusive motivations: 1. dealing with conflicts, problem solving, expression of criticism; 2. joining in the power game, winning, demonstrating, increasing power; 3. relational work, marking of in-group membership, consolidating friendly relations; 4. humorous entertainment (Technau, 2017: 99–100). Taunting is similar to banter, typical of friendly conversations, but it also has different characteristics, primarily because of its medium and the game setting.

16.4% of the taunts in the corpus (108 identified) do not aim to offend, similarly to praising expressions, but to refer to and consolidate the social relationship between the characters. As with praising taunts, this type is common primarily among the latest heroes, but, contrary to praises, phatic markers may also address gamers (in 39 cases) and not only characters (67).⁴⁹

Conclusions and Further Implications

This paper presented the utterances activated by the Taunt command in the English version of the game *League of Legends* from the perspective of impoliteness strategies, specifically as the flouting of (conversational and especially politeness) maxims.

We looked at a communicative situation which is not an essential part of the game and where the aim of entertaining and the phatic function are just as important as the exchange of information and storytelling. A game can also be played “in silence”, without taunts, which is not a disadvantage for gamers in terms of the course of the game. The use of taunts is gamer dependent; so, there is a need for further research to find out why, in what situations, and how often gamers use taunts.

⁴⁹ A conventional taunt addressed to a gamer may also carry a negative message (“You’re boring”, Fizz). A conventional taunt addressed to a character may also refer to a friendship (“Are you having fun, my friend?”, Braum, an open-minded and friendly hero, taking a friendly approach even to the bloodthirsty Trynamere). The innovative taunts addressed to a gamer are often pop cultural allusions (“Why so serious?”, by Shaco, the jester, who looks like Joker’s character in the Batman films) and may also refer to the gamer’s success (“If at first you do not succeed, please, tell me what it is like”, Braum, a successful, friendly and optimistic character).

A look at taunts and conversational maxims shows that these text commands infringe the rules of linguistic politeness primarily by using in-game information. None of the utterances influences the course of the game directly (but, of course, they do so indirectly by perlocution, i.e. their effect on the gamer each time they anger the opponent so that he or she will make a mistake and hence help the taunting gamer's team). The utterances are primarily used to describe a character, by which the gamer is involved in the story even more and will hence be presumably more loyal to the game (and might even buy game-related products and services both in- and off-game). This function is confirmed by the fact that the game developers created a separate site to introduce the game's world and the characters. Such supplementary solutions may be necessary because MOBA gamers are offered little opportunity to establish a bond with the characters as they do not play with a permanent avatar but with a different hero in each match.

A look at the taunts from the gamer community's perspective has revealed that familiarity with the different insults (and other inbuilt texts), just like familiarity with gamer terminology, is a group feature that confirms community membership. Many of the taunts have become independent from the specific game and are now memes known not only to those playing the given game but also to the wider gamer community. Gamers often view inbuilt texts as challenges and try to find in them hidden allusions or signs that refer to the latest hero created in the continuously developed game, the field, or someone's in-game looks.

Our findings clearly suggest that a taunt (originally meaning insult) does not always refer to an obviously offending utterance but has more forms and roles than that. The reason is that, while taunts are elements that may not be left out of a competitive game (if they are not officially incorporated in the game, gamers develop their respective alternatives for this purpose), the designers want to present the social and cooperative game style as a norm for their gamers. In creating the heroes with a high number and wide range of qualities, the developers repeatedly built in the features of politeness among them. However, most corpus items, with only a few exceptions, may not be regarded as polite utterances. This is explained by the conflicts in the game's world and by the relationship between allies and opponents.

Our analysis of the politeness maxims has shown that the corpus items follow the basic scheme of insult, which the developers created to match each character. The ways in which the characters make utterances are greatly determined by their background stories and relationships with the other characters. Some of the examined taunts involve a conventional insult (i.e. one that reveals the intention to offend as an illocution even without knowing the game), but decoding requires familiarity with the game's world, the characters, and their stories in the vast majority of the cases. The same idea is emphasized by Technau (2017: 97) in his examination of oral in-group banter: "Understanding banter is not an easy task,

especially for analysts who do not belong to the in-group in which the object of their investigation occurs". The present authors managed to overcome this difficulty as one of them is a gamer and knows *League of Legends*. Also, we referred to the game's story description as necessary (W1).

The written nature of the corpus also meant that we focused on the illocutionary force of the insults. The texts do not make it clear if the addressee understands the insult and takes offence and, if so, how much and how they respond (cf. the third and fourth aspects by Yus and Martinez, 2013). Further research should find out the extent to which gamers feel hurt by the offensive messages that are sent to their respective characters and can take the insults to apply only to such characters. Another research question should be if there is a difference in response to an inbuilt insult created in advance by the system's text writers and to a unique message sent by a fellow gamer. Yet another task should be to see if there is any difference in response to insults by type of game (presumably, gamers using a permanent avatar identify considerably better with their characters than those choosing a new one for each game). The answers should be provided by a questionnaire of gamer attitudes.

Arnovick (1995: 611) points out that insult and banter are rooted in play and have a playful character by their very nature. Accordingly, it is fair to say that taunt is a play within a game.

Online Sources

W1 = *League of Legends Wiki*: http://leagueoflegends.wikia.com/wiki/League_of_Legends_Wiki.

W2 = *Summoners Code*: <http://gameinfo.eune.leagueoflegends.com/hu/gameinfo/get-started/summoners-code/>.

W3 = Reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/1d7ppg/loading_screen_tips/.

W4 = <http://www.riotgames.com/our-games>.

W5 = https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taunting#Video_games.

W6 = <http://boards.eune.leagueoflegends.com/en/c/player-behaviour-en/a8iu9i1l-taunt-can-get-report>.

W7 = <http://forums.na.leagueoflegends.com/board/showthread.php?t=3195698&page=1>.

W8 = www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/3sw1mj/please_make_the_champion_interactions_quotes/.

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