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Running head: attempted insults and responses on Twitter

‘I love James Blunt as much as I love herpes’ – ‘I love that you're not ashamed to admit you
have both’: attempted insults and responses on Twitter

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Vitae

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Abstract

To date, little research has examined participants' understandings of insults. We examine (potentially) derogatory talk and its consequences in interactions on Twitter, considering instances on the Twitter feed of one high-profile user. Discourse analysis identifies four forms of response to attempted insults: (1) ascribing category membership to first contributor, (2) taking up first contributor self-identification, (3) syntactic echoing, and (4) co-constructing criticism. These responses treat the original remark as literally accurate, and thereby 'breach' the usual expectations of talk. Thus, insulting is an outcome that must be accomplished in interaction. Otherwise, derogatory talk can become no more than failed insults.

Keywords: breaching experiment; conversation analysis; doing literal; insult talk; Twitter.

‘I love James Blunt as much as I love herpes’ – ‘I love that you're not ashamed to admit you have both’: attempted insults and responses on Twitter

1. Introduction

This study seeks to examine how individuals deal with potential insults directed at them by others. Over recent years various writers (e.g. Locher, 2012; Mills, 2011; van der Bom & Mills, 2015) have argued that politeness and impoliteness in talk should be studied using discursive methods. In contrast to theories that treat politeness and impoliteness as self-evident and universal elements of communication (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1978; Grice, 1989; Lakoff, 1973), discursive methods foreground examination of how and when individuals attend to politeness or impoliteness in the course of interactions. This approach involves the close study of talk-in-interaction in order to examine how people deploy and respond to talk that, potentially at least, might be considered derogatory or insulting. Yet, little (if any) of this discursive research has focused on potential insults in themselves or has sought to examine from a participants' perspective what for them counts as insulting and how they respond to such talk. It is that topic that we take up here.

1.1 Discursive approaches to insult talk

In considering insults, or politeness and impoliteness in talk more generally, discursive research to date has pursued three main lines of inquiry. Each of these has adopted not just a different focus but also a different way of approaching the study of insult talk.

A first line of inquiry has examined not insults themselves but rather how individuals report insults in pursuit of their immediate interactional goals. For example, Stokoe and Edwards (2007) have shown how in making calls to neighbourhood mediation centres and in participating in police interviews individuals often report the insulting speech of others. In these cases, the primary goal is one of establishing a complaint and reports of insults can serve to warrant the complaint being made. Thus, reports of insults are not themselves offered as the primary grounds for complaint but serve to add to the list of complainables that are being reported. On a similar note, Hutchby (2008) shows how speakers report insults made by others in the course of complaining to a co-interactant about the actions of a third-party. In that instance, the speaker can position herself as the injured party and elicit the support of the co-participant by formulating a complaint that reported the insulting behaviour of a third party. These two examples demonstrate how speakers can reformulate previous experiences and deploy reported speech in making prior insults or impolite talk relevant to current goals, whether complaining to institutional bodies in the former case or to conversational co-participants in the latter case. In these instances, however, speakers are reporting prior insults and not producing insults: the insults in question are not being directed at a co-participant in the ongoing interaction. Interest therefore is centred on how insult talk provides a ready discursive resource and not on what is actually to count as an insult.

The second approach, by contrast, has sought to consider the production of polite and impolite talk in local settings. Here, interest lies in examining how such talk serves to promote and sustain particular forms of social relations in specific contexts. As Locher (2012, p. 45), for example, argues (im)politeness should be studied through a focus on 'relational work': 'the wish to better understand how people create relational effects by means of language, comprehend how

this process is embedded in its cultural and situated context, and recognize how this is interrelated with social and cognitive processes'. Thus, in a study of the workplace, Holmes and Schnurr (2005) pointed to ways in which workers drew upon shared understandings of humour to demonstrate politeness to and affiliation with co-workers. The extent to which specific contexts require politeness or impoliteness will vary: in some contexts, impolite rather than polite communication might be an important part of the relational processes. It is argued that, in such instances, insult talk becomes a routine part of interaction, intended to maintain social relations rather than to cause personal offence. Numerous writers have cited the example of 'the dozens', a game originating among African-American males as first reported by Dollard (1939). As a game, 'the dozens' typically involves two participants sequentially engaged in insulting each other in front of an audience that encourages them to offer escalating levels of insult until one participant eventually withdraws. In this context, insults are produced as moves in the game and not as personally directed attacks. On a similar note, in a study of the workplace, Daly and colleagues (Daly, Holmes, Newton & Stubbe, 2004) showed that the use of impolite language in the form of expletives served to display solidarity among team members. And, it is suggested, 'banter', or impolite remarks that are intended to tease rather than offend, can serve to enhance solidarity among a group who use such language as part of their everyday workplace interactions (Decapua & Boxer, 1999).

Whereas in the first approach the emphasis is on how individuals report insults to accomplish other goals, in this second approach the focus is on the purposes behind particular uses of insults and the relational outcomes that result from such talk. In neither case, does attention focus on insult talk *as* talk and what people in their interactions with others actually treat as being insulting. In short, the focus on other aims, whether the production of a complaint

or of social relations, directs attention away from insult talk itself and how that talk functions. To understand how talk that is potentially offensive works in interaction, then, we turn to a third and very different approach: the study of how participants themselves treat and respond to potential insults.

This third approach to understanding insults stems from Sacks' lectures (Sacks, 1992) on how participants deal with insults in interactional sequences. As Sacks (1992, vol.1, Spring 1966, lecture 21) notes, insults are commonly found in interactions in which the participants seek to withdraw rather than to continue prolonged insult sequences. In discussing these cases, Sacks points to three common forms of possible response. The first is the use of misidentification, a response in which the recipient of the first insult responds in terms that refer to the other speaker in terms of kinship, when the other speaker is clearly not a ready member of a kinship group. Sacks offers an example from an exchange involving two participants, Roger and Ken, in which Roger's first turn refers to Ken as 'a poor little rich kid'. In response, Ken's turn of 'Yes, Mommy. Thank you.' proceeds on a misidentification of Roger: Roger cannot be a member of the kinship category that Ken has introduced. As Sacks notes, such responses are especially effective, in that they make the kinship status of the recipient contingent upon the status of the speaker delivering the insult through (mis)identification: the first speaker becomes the source of what is described as derogatory. In a second form of response, speakers might seek to stop the progression of insult sequences. This can be accomplished by accepting the insult in such a way that the acceptance is readily seen as untrue. Sacks notes the use of antinomies, which are statements that if true are false and if false, true. Here, he provides the example of a target who can cite his own cowardice in not offering a return insult, whereas the very ostensible acceptance of cowardice works to show that he is courageous. And, a third form of response comprises

ostensible gratitude displays, such as ‘thank you’ phrases, can be used to stop the insult sequence since these set up as response an acceptance: ‘you’re welcome’. Sacks argues that in insult sequences there is a premium on having ‘the last word’ and therefore that cutting off further exchanges can be useful.

All of these instances point to the interactional nature of insults, in that the second turn indicates that the recipient of the preceding talk is orienting to it as comprising an insult. Sacks’ interest, however, lay primarily in the study of the production of insults and retorts and in the sequential organization of the turns in which these were deployed. Although he draws attention to how insults should usefully be examined, Sacks was less concerned with the matter of what, for participants, is to constitute an insult. This consequently leaves unexamined the issue of participants’ understandings of such talk: what happens, for example, if they do not orient to (potentially) derogatory talk as being insulting to them, or if they respond in ways other than those outlined above? It is to these questions that we turn in this study.

1.2 Insults and Twitter

Much research in recent years has pointed to the incidence of insulting and abusive language found across all forms of online communication (e.g. Bishop, 2014; Coles & West, 2016), including social networking sites (Binns, 2012), online computer games (Fox & Tang, 2014; Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; Scharrer, 2005), online discussion boards (Iggulden, 2007), and readers’ responses to online journalists’ articles (Neurauter-Kessels, 2011; Santana, 2014; Upadhyay, 2010). The online site however that has perhaps attracted most criticism for incidence of offensive language is Twitter. Twitter is a social networking service that allows individuals, with a username of their own choosing, to post messages, to share information with those who

follow their posts, and to converse albeit in a form that differs from face-to-face interaction. It has become one of the most popular social media sites globally, attracting over three hundred and thirty million monthly active users who send more than five hundred million tweets each day (Smith, 2020). It is therefore especially popular with public figures, who use the site to interact with followers, promote their latest project and gain instant feedback on their activities (Bae & Lee, 2012; Cole, 2015).

This accessibility is however a double-edged sword in that any quality or activity of a user can form a target for insults (Bishop, 2013; Hopkinson, 2013) resulting in individual users potentially receiving considerable abuse (Bae & Lee, 2012; Cole, 2015; Jane, 2014; Lemonaki et al., 2015; Wallace, 2015). As such, Twitter activities are routinely marked by the practice of ‘trolling’, a term commonly used to refer to a range of online anti-social behaviours, such as starting arguments, being abusive or engaging others in pointless discussions (Bishop, 2014; Hardaker, 2013; cf. Dynel, 2016). Twitter has attracted considerable negative attention due to the behaviour of trolls and the site's failure to deal with them and indeed a leaked internal email describes how company employees ‘sucked’ at having to deal with trolls (Burrell, 2015).

Communications on Twitter, then, offer potentially fertile ground for examining insulting talk. At the same time, they pose a challenge for fine-grained analysis of interaction: interactions are often asynchronous, and the platform allows users to post messages (‘tweets’) of no more than 280 characters (140 characters prior to 7 November 2017). These posts do not incorporate elements, such as intonation, hesitations or speed of delivery, found in naturally-occurring talk. Users can of course insert such features to achieve particular interactional outcomes, but these are not naturally-occurring elements of online communication (McKinlay & McVittie, 2011). Nonetheless, numerous studies from the 1990s onwards (McKinlay, Procter, Masting, Woodburn

& Arnott, 1994) have shown that online talk is amenable to analysis that applies key elements of conversation analysis. Recently, Paulus and colleagues (Paulus, Warren & Lester, 2016) reported that conversation analysis has become an increasingly popular method of analyzing turn-design and sequence organization in online talk, allowing for detailed examination of how participants accomplish social actions in these contexts. Housley and colleagues (Housley et al., 2017a) similarly demonstrate that ethnomethodological approaches inclusive of conversation analytic or membership categorization analytic techniques can be used to examine social media interactions. In a subsequent study of the Tweets of a controversial celebrity Katie Hopkins (Housley et al., 2017b), the same authors show how the Tweets employed specific membership categories and devices in ways to develop antagonistic inferences, which could then invite responses. However, the authors did not examine if or how others responded to these tweets. In the present study we examine both the tweets posted and the responses made by the individual who is the recipient and/or target of the tweets in order to consider how the tweet and the response function together as an interactional sequence.

1.3 The present study

In order to examine how participants negotiate potential insults on Twitter, we consider the instance of one high profile Twitter user who is recognized as being the recipient of a considerable volume of trolling (cf. Housley et al 2017b), the British singer and former UK army captain James Blunt. Blunt's Twitter account attracts substantial public interest, with over 1.77 million followers, and he has received particular attention for his approach to dealing with those who troll him on Twitter. He is widely known both for the number of negative tweets that he receives, posted either to his account or elsewhere on Twitter, and for being a 'master' of

responses to these (Bridge, 2017), frequently responding to negative tweets by retweeting the original tweet along with a response to that user (Carter, 2013; Reilly, 2019). The tweets and Blunt's responses, then, offer useful opportunities for examining in detail how Blunt and those who tweet him negotiate potentially insulting talk in this context.

2. Method

2.1 Data

Data for the study were taken from James Blunt's account on Twitter. This account had been set up in October 2009 and by the close of data collection in December 2018 it comprised in excess of 1000 tweets. Blunt's tweets on this account covered a range of topics, including the promotion of his music (release of albums and tour details), general postings (for example, comments on other musicians, current television programmes or celebrities), as well as responses to tweets directed to him or targeted at him on other Twitter accounts. This third category included responses to tweets in which he had been directly referenced by means of the 'mention' (@) feature in Twitter, and tweets in which he had not been 'mentioned' but which included his name and some comment on him or his music and which he reposted or 'retweeted' in his response. In responding to these tweets, regardless of whether he was directly 'mentioned' or not, Blunt oriented to the originating tweet as being targeted at him. These exchanges were copied to a separate file as screen shots and thereafter copied into Word for close examination and coding. We then omitted exchanges from which the originating tweet had subsequently been deleted. From the remaining exchanges, we selected those in which the originating tweet commented in unfavourable terms on Blunt himself and/or his music, or on the user's reaction to these. We included in these exchanges any subsequent turns by the original poster or by Blunt.

Although many exchanges attracted comments from other users and led to discussions elsewhere on Twitter, subsequent comments on the tweet or on Blunt's response and all likes/dislikes on Twitter were omitted from consideration as these were not demonstrably relevant to the initial attempted insult/response sequence. This process yielded a data set of approximately 280 sequences, each comprising two or three turns (approximately 700 tweets in total), for further analysis.

The extracts included below exemplify the forms of attempted insult/response sequence recurring throughout the data set. Here, the data are provided in a format modified from that found on Twitter in order to assist readability for readers who are unfamiliar with the site. In the extracts provided here, the contributions to each exchange are presented in chronological order according to date of posting, and each contribution is presented as a numbered turn within the extract. We have however retained some features of Twitter: the @ mention symbol that precedes a username denotes a Twitter account, and the hashtag (#) symbol is a convention used to denote and emphasise user-defined topics (see Calvin et al., 2015), that can be used to shape the inferences available to readers from a tweet (Scott, 2014). It should be noted though that these features are built into the digital architecture of the platform; thus, the use of the 'reply' button will automatically insert the name of the originating user. In the extracts below, we have substituted pseudonyms for Twitter usernames to maintain anonymity.

2.2 Analysis

A range of forms of analysis are potentially available for analysing discourse such as that found in the present case (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). In the present study, interest focused on the fine-grained detail of the talk and the sequential organization of the turns in the exchanges.

Analysis therefore was conducted in line with micro approaches to discourse analysis, drawing on principles of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), membership categorization analysis (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007) and discursive psychology (Potter & Edwards, 2001). Initial analysis of the exchanges that were selected focused on identifying the lexical terms used and the turn construction of the originating tweet. We then examined if and how these elements were taken up in the turn construction of the response. Further analysis focused on the occurrence or lack of occurrence of further tweets (if any) in the exchange and whether these accepted, took up, or challenged the response to the initial post. This analysis thus focused on identifying both the form of response used and its effects for subsequent posts.

3. Results

Before we turn to the details of individual exchanges, it is worthwhile to note two general points that run through these data. First, in the entire data set there were no instances in which Blunt sought to refute directly the comments originally referring to him. And, second, it is interesting to note that throughout these sequences we see no reference to the three forms of response identified by Sacks, namely references to kinship, antinomies, and ostensible gratitude, which are commonly used to terminate insult sequences. Instead, we see four forms of response that take up and redeploy the form of the originating insult, namely ascribing category membership to first contributor; taking up first contributor self-identification; syntactic echoing, and co-constructing criticism of himself. We begin by examining instances of identification of the first contributor using a membership category.

3.1 Ascribing category membership to first contributor

As discussed above, Sacks (1992) noted that one form of retort found in insult sequences elsewhere proceeded with the insult recipient ascribing to the first contributor membership of a category to which the first speaker could not readily belong, for example the (mis)-ascription of the term ‘mommy’. In the present data set, there were numerous instances in which the recipient in the retort ascribed to the insult initiator membership of a particular category. In contrast to Sacks’ findings, however, these ascriptions relied not on the introduction of a new membership category but on the reworking of a membership category made available by the first turn (cf. McKinlay, McVittie, & Sambaraju, 2012). In the first set of extracts, each exchange begins with a tweet that makes such membership readily available.

Extract 1

- 1 Tweet @Aria24: @James Blunt is the rudest cunt on this earth, I fucking hate him.
- 2 Retweet and response James Blunt @JamesBlunt 17 Sep 2015 U’re just a jealous runner-up in the Rudest Cunt Competition.

The exchange in Extract 1 begins with a description of Blunt that he retweets in his response. This description depicts Blunt as being ‘the rudest cunt on this earth’ and is followed by a statement of Aria24’s personal feelings towards Blunt, that he/she ‘fucking hate(s) him’. This turn then is set out in terms that are potentially highly derogatory and insulting. Instead of seeking to challenge this description of him, however, Blunt responds by taking up the membership category introduced by Aria24, namely that of ‘rudest cunt’. His response does not orient to this description as offensive, but instead ascribes to Aria24 membership of the same

category. This opens up scope for Blunt to suggest that he is a more successful member of the category, by having won a ‘competition’ in which Aria24 was ‘runner-up’. Thus, he proposes that the feelings towards him as expressed are motivated by Aria24’s personal lack of success that have led to him/her being ‘jealous’: Aria24’s description of feelings towards Blunt is undermined on the grounds that he/she has an interest or ‘stake’ in making such a claim.

In the next two extracts, we see other ascriptions of category memberships to the individuals making the tweets.

Extract 2

- 1 Tweet @Drew37: @James blunt is one ugly mother fucker.
- 2 Retweet and James Blunt @JamesBlunt 22 Nov 2013
response And how's your modelling career going?

Extract 3

- 1 Tweet @Kelly41: Does @James Blunt only have that 1 song? Lol.
- 2 Retweet and James Blunt @JamesBlunt 12 Dec 2013
response Says the None-Hit Wonder.

The exchanges seen in Extracts 2 and 3 also begin in each case with a tweet (retweeted by Blunt) that describes Blunt in negative terms. In Extract 2 Blunt is described as ‘one ugly mother fucker’ while the initial tweet in Extract 3 describes him as having limited musical success in having only ‘that 1 song’. As with his response in Extract 1, Blunt does not treat either

description of him as being offensive but instead orients to the description in each case as making available a membership category that he can take up in responding. Thus, in Extract 2 he treats the description as indicating an attribute of ugliness / beauty that is bound to a category of 'model' while in Extract 3 he treats the description of 'song' and number as bound to a category of musicians. He thereby introduces again in each case the opportunity for comparison or competition between himself and the individual making the tweet. In Extract 2, his question as to how the individual's 'modelling career' is going is rhetorically designed to suggest a lack of success in any such direction and that Drew37 is unlikely to be sufficiently attractive to succeed in such an effort, while the description of Kelly41 in Extract 3 as a 'None-Hit Wonder' indicates a total absence of musical success. In each case, then, the ascription of category-membership based on the attribute introduced in the tweet allows for a comparison that reflects negatively on the individual making the tweet.

What the extracts above show, then, is that Blunt can in his retort take up membership categories made available in the first turn, either explicitly or by reference to category-bound attributes, to provide for a comparison that indicates that the individual is less successful than himself in relation to the relevant attribute. In other instances, however, the tweet does not rely upon the ascription to Blunt of a specific category membership or of category-bound attributes, as we see in the next two extracts.

Extract 4

- 1 Tweet @Ali53: @JamesBlunt gave me cancer with his shit music
- 2 Retweet and James Blunt @JamesBlunt 21 Mar 2016

response You should be a journalist for the Daily Mail.

Extract 5

- 1 Tweet @Chloe19: Why does James Blunt have a new album and why would people want that?.
- 2 Retweet and James Blunt @JamesBlunt 27 Oct 2013
response I'm guessing you're a philosopher.

In Extracts 4 and 5, the tweets (as retweeted) do not ascribe to Blunt membership of a negatively-assessed category or attributes bound up with such a category. It is, for example, difficult to envisage how a category based on music as the cause of serious illness might work. In these cases, then, Blunt's responses orient instead to the activities depicted by the tweets and to membership categories with which these activities might be bound up. Thus, Ali53's claim in Extract 4 that Blunt's music gave him/her cancer is treated as comprising an activity of making extreme and unwarranted claims. It thereby leads to a response, 'you should be a journalist for the Daily Mail', that treats it as an activity that is commonly regarded as bound up with a category of journalists who make dubious claims. In Extract 5, the repeated 'why' questions are treated as indicating that Chloe19 is engaged in a broad search for the meaning of aspects of life and that such an activity is related to the membership category 'philosopher'. In both instances, then, Blunt ascribes to the poster the category with which his/her talk might be associated.

3.2 Taking up first contributor self-identification

In the section above, we saw Blunt in his responses take up membership categories and category-bound activities made available in the first turns. In other exchanges, however, the first

turn did not make category membership potentially relevant but instead referred to personal attributes in the course of formulating criticisms of Blunt. These tweets made available other forms of response that oriented to the personal descriptions provided, as seen in the following extracts.

Extract 6

- 1 Tweet @Jessie78: I cannot put into words how much I hate James Blunt.
- 2 Retweet and response James Blunt @JamesBlunt 11 Nov 2013
Try singing it.

Extract 7

- 1 Tweet @Noah06: I try to hate James blunt but I can't.
- 2 Retweet and response James Blunt @JamesBlunt 20 Dec 2013
You obviously went to one of those schools where everyone got a prize.

As with all the exchanges considered here, the initial tweets are designed to comment negatively on Blunt and/or his music. The suggestion in Extract 6 that the individual is unable to express fully his/her dislike of Blunt or his 'new album' would often be taken to indicate that such dislike is so extreme that it cannot be expressed, that is that it would be a comment targeted against Blunt. Here, by contrast, Blunt in his response treats the description as relating to @Jessie 78 and not to himself. The lack of ability to express the feelings becomes a failing on the part of the individual tweeting the comment. Blunt thus responds by suggesting a way of

seeking to deal with this inability by ‘singing’ instead of using ‘words’. The initial turn in Extract 7 also suggests that the individual cannot feel towards Blunt as he/she would wish, in not being able to ‘hate’ him despite efforts to do so. Again, Blunt orients to this comment not as a suggestion that ‘hate’ should be taken as an appropriate feeling towards him but instead as a description of an inability on the part of the individual concerned. His response thus is framed in terms of previous acceptance of Noah06’s failings and lack of resulting disadvantage, in proposing that the individual involved attended a school where every pupil’s efforts were recognised regardless of individual success or failure: ‘everyone got a prize’.

The initial comments in such exchanges were not limited to descriptions of personal attributes of the individuals involved. Where the comments made available other possibilities for retort, these too could be taken up as seen in the next extract.

Extract 8

- 1 Tweet @Blair03: @James Blunt could give me a £1000 and I still wouldn't like him.
- 2 Retweet and James Blunt @JamesBlunt 7 April 2017
response OK I'll just take the £20 rubdown with happy ending then, please.

Whereas the exchanges in Extracts 6 and 7 began with turns that referred to the first contributor seeking to ‘hate James Blunt’ the first turn in Extract 8 refers to the contributor not being able to like him. This however is not simply a statement of personal disposition but instead is grounded in the possibility of financial payment of ‘£1000’. The possibility of such payment together with the claim that the contributor would ‘still’ not like him, is designed to demonstrate

the extent of Blair03's dislike of Blunt. In responding, Blunt takes up not the issue of like or dislike but the suggestion that Blair03 is someone who is prepared to act on the basis of receiving financial remuneration. Blunt's reference to a '£20 rubdown with happy ending' suggests that Blunt would be happy with the provision of services of a sexual nature, and through the use of the restrictive 'just' (Lee, 1987) is unconcerned with issues beyond that. Moreover, he treats Blair03, on the basis of his/her reference to financial reward, as someone who has self-identified as prepared to offer such services.

In most cases, the exchanges did not continue beyond Blunt's response to the initial comment and comprised only two turns. There were however some instances in which the first contributor did subsequently respond to Blunt's turn, as seen in the next two extracts.

Extract 9

- 1 Tweet @Aiden62: Don't know if I can imagine much worse than James Blunt's new album.
- 2 Retweet and James Blunt @JamesBlunt 5 Dec 2013
response Kids these days have no imagination.
- 3 Response to Aiden62 @Aiden62:
retweet @JamesBlunt it's just boring

Extract 10

- 1 Tweet @Ollie74: @JamesBlunt looks like my left testicle
- 2 Retweet and James Blunt @JamesBlunt 30 Apr 2014

response Then you need to see a doctor.

3 Response to Ollie74 @Ollie74 30 Apr 2014

retweet @JamesBlunt fucking legend I love your
 sassyness

The first turn in Extract 9 proposes a negative assessment of Blunt's music, specifically of his 'new album'. Similarly to the criticisms of Blunt seen in Extracts 6 and 7, this assessment is made out in terms of the inabilities of the individual, in particular that he/she cannot 'imagine much worse' than this music. And, as with the responses seen in those extracts, Blunt responds by taking up the inability as described in the initial comment. This response is not personalised to Aiden62 but is generalised to a membership category of which he/she is treated as being a member, namely 'kids'. It is thus framed in terms of a general failing on the part of members of the category, that they 'have no imagination'. Here the description 'kids these days' lends the response an idiomatic quality that suggests it is an exemplar of a form of criticism of this group that is commonly available. As Drew and Holt (1988) note, participants commonly draw upon idiomatic expressions in contexts of complaint, with the idiom serving to summarize the complaint being made, and to emphasize its legitimacy, thereby bringing the sequence to a close. In this exchange we see how this framing of Blunt's response works in such a way, in that what follows his response is a further turn from Aiden62 that provides a revised assessment of the negative quality of Blunt's album, stating 'it's just boring'. This marks something of a downgrade on the previous assessment, as seen in the shift from a highly negative formulation to one that is of a more limited extent, as signalled by the depreciatory 'just' (Lee, 1987). This reformulation thereby serves to concede the force of Blunt's response to the first assessment.

In Extract 10, the exchange begins with a negative assessment of Blunt that is made out

by way of a comparison. Here the assessment on offer relates to Blunt's appearance, and relies on a comparison between that of Blunt and that of a part of the body ('left testicle') that would not commonly be taken to be an attractive one. As with the response seen in Extract 8, Blunt's response takes the form of inverting the upshot of the comparison, taking the description to indicate a failing on the part of the individual rather than a criticism of himself. And given that the comparison relies upon the appearance of an anatomical part, this description offers a basis for Blunt to suggest that if it has the unusual appearance as described, then this should be treated as a concern that requires medical intervention, arguing that 'you need to see a doctor'. Whereas a response of this sort in Extract 8 resulted simply in the conclusion of the exchange, here we see a consequent further turn from Ollie74. Blunt's uptake provides the opportunity for Ollie74 to reformulate the exchange as one that was designed to produce such an outcome. He/she commends Blunt for his clever and witty response, stating 'I love your sassiness, and emphasises Blunt's reputation for producing responses of this sort, describing him as a 'fucking legend'. By responding in terms that are unlikely to meet with challenge, Ollie74 can have 'the last word' (Sacks, 1992) and draw to a close the potential insult sequence.

3.3 Syntactic echoing

Just as the tweets above lend themselves to responses that draw upon the membership categories made available or the self-identification of the first contributor, so other forms of tweets lend themselves to other forms of response. One such form relies on the echoing of the syntactical structure used in the tweet: where the poster deploys a particular structure in the tweet, Blunt can take up this structure in his response, as we see in the next set of Extracts.

Extract 11

- 1 Tweet @Emery93: That James Blunt song is utterly horrific, horrific.
- 2 Retweet and response James Blunt @JamesBlunt 7 Feb 2014
Yet so many people bought it, bought it.

Extract 12

- 1 Tweet @Rory62: @JamesBlunt can't stand your music but your comebacks are second to none
- 2 Retweet and response James Blunt @JamesBlunt 31 Jul 2015
Can't stand your face but thanks for the compliment.

Extract 13

- 1 Tweet @Jordan86: @JamesBlunt not a really big fan, but was listening to your new album, and boy! Wow! I really love the 'don't give me those eyes' song!.
- 2 Retweet and response James Blunt @JamesBlunt 25 October 2017
I don't really like you either, but I'm glad you like the song.

In these three extracts, we see the response echo features of the tweet. In Extract 11, the first turn relies on the repeated use of 'horrific' to emphasis its extremely negative assessment of

Blunt's 'song'. The placing of this description at the end of the tweet also works to highlight this assessment as an upshot of the turn. In his turn, Blunt does not comment on this assessment of his music but instead offers a different basis for evaluation of the song reflecting its popularity among a considerable number of people, stated to be 'so many', who purchased it. Here his use of repetition, namely 'bought it, bought it' emphasises an upshot that people's actions in purchasing the music provide a more appropriate basis for judging the quality of his music than Emery93's personal opinion.

In Extracts 12 and 13, the initial turns are framed in terms of a disjunctive structure: the syntactic form 'can't stand . . . but' in the former and 'not really . . . but' in the latter. In each case, these allow for the first contributor to express what he/she does not like and thereafter to express a favourable opinion of some aspects of Blunt's activities. Thus, in Extract 12 this structure combines a negative assessment of Blunt's music as something that the individual 'can't stand' and distinguishes this from an assessment of Blunt's twitter responses ('comebacks') which are described in extremely positive terms as 'second to none'. Blunt echoes this disjunctive structure in his response, describing the individual's 'face' in negative terms as something that he 'can't stand' and distinguishing this from the positive assessment of his twitter responses which he does evaluate positively as a 'compliment'. In Extract 13 we see a similar structure being deployed. Here the initial comment offers a mildly negative assessment of Blunt, stating that the individual is not disposed to liking Blunt's music but is willing to make an exception in respect of some recent musical work. This structure is echoed in Blunt's response, where he states that he is not disposed to like the individual but notwithstanding this generalization he is pleased with the view expressed towards his recent work.

Where the terms of the initial insult do not readily provide for direct echoing, the

response nonetheless can pick up on key elements as seen in the next extract.

Extract 14

- 1 Tweet @Dave43: James Blunt is a pathetic cunt
#obviousrhymes.
- 2 Retweet and James Blunt @JamesBlunt 12 Jun 2013
response Dave43 smells a little bit of wee
#notsoobviousrhyme

In Extract 14, the insult relies on an explicit rhyme between Blunt's surname and an extremely abusive description of him ('pathetic cunt'). In producing this description, Dave43 highlights the basis on which it is derived through the introduction of the relevant topic as one of #obviousrhymes as defined by the user-definition field (#). For a negative response, the username provided by the individual, namely Dave43, does not immediately offer the same possibilities as 'Blunt' for producing a rhyme. In his response, therefore, Blunt uses the user-defined topic field (#) to rework the relevant topic as #notsoobviousrhyme and the revised topic thereby offers more possibilities for responding through the use of rhyme. This allows Blunt to produce a negative assessment that rhymes with the individual's username, 'Dave43 smells a little bit of wee'. Although the assessment provided is less extreme than that in the initial tweet, this redefinition of the topic allows Blunt to produce a response that takes up the issue of 'rhyme' introduced by Dave43 and that in doing so echoes the structure seen in the preceding tweet.

In the extracts above Blunt, as well as echoing syntactical features of the initiating tweet

broadly also echoes the content. Thus, where the topic at hand is one of evaluating his music he responds by proposing a different approach to evaluation from that suggested (Extract 11), where what is liked is distinguished from what is disliked then he offers a similar distinction (Extracts 12 and 13), and where the issue is one of negative assessment and the use of rhyme then he pursues this in a similar manner (Extract 14). This of course is not necessarily the case: syntactical structure need not influence content. Thus, echoing of syntax is readily amenable to being combined with other forms of response as we see in the next extract.

Extract 15

- 1 Tweet @Lucas51: I love James Blunt as much as I love herpes.
- 2 Retweet and response James Blunt @JamesBlunt 20 Sep 2013 I love that you're not ashamed to admit you have both.

The initiating comment in Extract 15 is set out by way of a statement of the individual's emotional response to James Blunt, stating 'I love'. What follows is a comparison between Blunt and a painful and contagious disease ('herpes') in a tweet that claims that Lucas51 loves both equally. Given the unpleasant qualities usually associated with the disease, the claim is set out as an ironic one suggesting that the contributor regards Blunt similarly to that disease and that the assessment of him is extremely negative. In responding, Blunt begins by echoing the format of the initial comment in offering a statement prefaced by 'I love'. He does not, however, treat the comment as one that is offensive. Instead, he orients to it as describing a mental state of the

contributor, one that is based upon experience of both elements involved in the comparison. His response, 'I love that you're not ashamed to admit you have both', therefore treats the tweet as display of emotion that is based upon that experience. Again, the use of 'I love' frames the response in ironic terms, commending the individual on this display of the experience of Blunt and of the disease to which it refers.

3.4 Co-constructing criticism of himself

The responses seen in the exchanges considered this far have in various ways treated the first turn as providing resources that can be redeployed in a criticism or potential criticism of the first contributor. In this final section, we consider a rather different form of response, as seen in the extracts below.

Extract 16

- 1 Tweet @Morgan90: Why does James Blunt have a million followers? He stopped being relevant in 2009.
- 2 Retweet and response James Blunt @JamesBlunt 30 Jan 2015
2006, actually.

Extract 17

- 1 Tweet @Jane28: Bloody hell why is James Blunt still going
- 2 Retweet and James Blunt @JamesBlunt 12 Dec 2013

response Viagra and coffee mostly.

Extract 18

- 1 Tweet @Amelia17: Who the fuck is cheering for
 fucking James Blunt.
- 2 Retweet and James Blunt @JamesBlunt 11 Oct 2013
 response My mum's in the audience.

In these extracts, unlike the previous extracts (except for Extract 5), the first turn in each case takes the form of a question. The questions are set out in terms that are highly derogatory of Blunt, and in ways that suggest that the questioner is seeking to establish a claim rather than expecting an answer. Thus, the first turn questions in Extracts 16, 17, and 18 all are designed to suggest that Blunt and his music should not enjoy the level of popularity and following that they continue to have, whether through not ‘being relevant’ (Extract 16), Blunt ‘still going’ (Extract 17), or that people are acting inappropriately in ‘cheering for fucking James Blunt’ (Extract 18).

Blunt’s responses, in these exchanges, do not orient to the first turns as forms of negative assessment directed towards him (cf. Sambaraju & McVittie, 2020), but instead treat these as questions that are designed primarily to elicit information. Here, in responding to these questions he does so in ways that serve to upgrade the criticism that is being levelled against him and his music. Thus, Extract 16 begins with a question that is designed to cast doubt on Blunt’s musical popularity, combined with a claim that he has not been relevant for a considerable time (since ‘2009’). In his response, Blunt substitutes an earlier date on which he ceased to be relevant, thereby upgrading the argument being made against him and making the initial question even more puzzling. In Extracts 17 and 18, Blunt’s responses are framed in terms of offering

candidate answers to the questions asked. The answer in each case, however, is one that heightens the criticism of him that is being made. Treating the initial turn in Extract 17 as a bona fide query as to how he is ‘still going’, Blunt offers the response that refers to the use of stimulants (‘viagra and coffee’), an action that is in itself potentially criticisable. And, in Extract 18, Blunt’s reference to his ‘mum’ being ‘in the audience’ suggests that those who cheer for him do so on the basis that they are family members, who can be heard as having a vested interest in supporting him.

In these exchanges, then, Blunt is seen to treat the questions not as unwarranted insults but as requests for information. His responses upgrade the force of the first turns, and these exchanges can thereby be viewed as instances in which Blunt engages with the contributor in co-constructing criticism of himself. In some cases, however, this process of co-construction provides the opportunity for Blunt to make relevant matters that rebound on the initial contributor, as we see in the final two extracts.

Extract 19

- 1 Tweet @Riley85: Does anyone else HATE james blunt's voice? I can't stand it.
- 2 Retweet and response James Blunt @JamesBlunt 31 Oct 2013
I never liked the sound of my own voice. Till it made me rich.

Extract 20

- 1 Tweet @Mia32: James Blunt just has an annoying

face and a highly irritating voice.

- 2 Retweet and response James Blunt @JamesBlunt
And no mortgage.
- 3 Response to retweet Mia32 @Mia32 24 Dec 2013
rinsed by James Blunt.

In Extract 19 the question sets out Riley85's negative assessment of Blunt's voice and seeks to elicit support for that assessment. Here the capitalisation of 'HATE' emphasises the degree of emotion involved in this claim. Blunt responds to this criticism of his voice and the feelings that it evokes in others by stating that he 'never liked the sound of my own voice'. This heightens the negative assessment offered by Riley85 by arguing that if even Blunt, as someone with an obvious interest, does not defend the quality of his voice, then it does indeed fall to be assessed negatively. However, the statement that follows ('till it made me rich') works to undermine any such negative evaluation by invoking the financial success that Blunt has enjoyed, reflecting a wider popularity with his singing. Extract 20, similarly to many other exchanges, begins with a statement that comments unfavourably on two attributes of Blunt, namely his 'face' and his 'voice', which are described as 'annoying' and 'highly irritating' respectively. Blunt does not take up either description in his response but instead sets out a very different personal attribute in the form of 'and no mortgage'. As with his response seen in Extract 19, this makes relevant an alternative basis for evaluating Blunt and his musical abilities through its reference to financial benefits that have accrued from his music. Here, the response is given added rhetorical weight through being produced as the third element of a set of attributes, two provided in Mia32's first turn that allow a slot for completion of the three-part list (Jefferson, 1991) and Blunt's use of that conversational slot to co-construct the range of

attributes that he has. This response is moreover seen to be especially effective in this exchange, with Mia32 producing a further turn following Blunt's response. In stating that he/she has been 'rinsed by James Blunt' (totally defeated in the exchange between them), this turn presents Blunt's response as one that has undermined and dealt with the criticisms set out in the first turn.

4. Discussion

The findings above, then, show four discursive strategies that James Blunt uses in dealing with the tweets that he receives on Twitter and that involve negative comments about him and his music elsewhere on social media. His practice of retweeting or directing a response to the author of the originating negative remark functions to address directly the making of that remark. The responses themselves, by contrast, do not directly challenge the remark itself. Instead, Blunt is able to address the remark without direct challenge. And, all of these forms of response can be seen to be successful in different ways in bringing the exchange to a conclusion. The first three forms of response, ascribing category membership to the first contributor, taking up first contributor self-identification, and syntactic echoing, all draw upon features made available in the first turn that are open to being redeployed in a response. For a first contributor, then, to pursue a potential insult sequence following such a response would therefore necessitate not just addressing Blunt's response in itself but also reworking the grounds of the potential insult to overcome the possibility of further challenge in response. And, as we see in the extracts above, first contributors do not attempt to address such issues. Instead, in the majority of cases, they do not offer any subsequent turn. The instances in which they do so, comprise exchanges in which the subsequent turn offers only a substantially downgraded claim that acknowledges the force of Blunt's response (Extract 9), an explicit acceptance that the response has effectively dealt with

the claim (Extract 20), or indeed positive evaluation of how Blunt has responded to the first turn (Extract 10). Each form of response thus is seen to bring the exchange to a conclusion that is favourable to Blunt.

What is perhaps less immediately obvious is what Blunt gains through the use of responses that function to join in the criticisms levelled against him, as seen in the last set of extracts. In these exchanges, the deployment of such a response operates in effect as a discursive 'confession' of the criticism made: by conceding or not challenging the claim made against him, Blunt prevents the criticism made again of new. Although his responses in these cases do not perhaps carry the same force as seen in other responses, they too work to bring the exchanges to a conclusion. At the same time, however, they allow Blunt to introduce related matters, especially the financial success that he has enjoyed from his musical career. These responses also allow Blunt to do identity work as someone who is seen not to challenge every single comment made against him, who can be funny, and who does not take too seriously what others might say about him. Thus, these responses too can be seen to deflect the potential insults being made.

One feature of all the strategies deployed by Blunt seen here is they proceed on the basis of treating the original remark as one that is to be heard as literally accurate. It is a literal orientation to the terms of a remark such as 'Why does James Blunt have a new album and why would people want that?' (Extract 5) that makes available a response in the form of 'I'm guessing you're a philosopher'. The remark could equally be treated in other ways, such as comprising a criticism or complaint instead of being a reflection of lack of certainty on the part of the questioner. In this respect, Blunt's treatment of these remarks stands in marked contrast to how participants respond in everyday interaction. Edwards (2000) notes that in everyday conversation participants routinely treat others' descriptions as not to be taken as literally

accurate depictions of what is claimed: indeed, they recognise that other people's descriptions are constructed to be rhetorically persuasive or argumentative and therefore to include elements that are designed to attend to concerns other than accuracy. Thus, for example, extreme case formulations are not designed to be treated as literally correct but rather as indications of a commitment to an argument that is being advanced: it is for such reasons that speakers often provide extreme claims instead of attempting to soften them. In stating for example 'it was the worst thing that ever happened', a speaker does not seek to claim that an experience has been carefully weighed against other experiences in order to arrive at an appraisal of it, but rather to indicate his/her investment in the experience being evaluated negatively. On a similar note, writers such as Gavriely-Nuri (2008; 2010) have noted that speakers often rely on the use of metaphor rather than literal arguments to advance their claims. In the present data, we see numerous instances of extreme case formulations and metaphorical expressions that Blunt, in contrast to talk commonly found elsewhere, neither challenges on grounds of accuracy nor treats as non-literal. Instead, by 'doing literal', he orients to these as being literal statements or questions and responds accordingly.

The question here, then, is what does this orientation accomplish for him? The answer, we suggest, is one that has a history going back well before the advent of the internet and the invention of Twitter. Blunt's responses seen here resemble in many ways not so much parts of a specific (albeit new) form of everyday interaction as they do a form of breaching experiment devised for new media. Breaching experiments, as originally devised by Garfinkel (1967) frequently took the form of interactions in which one participant set out to disrupt the fluency and ordinary running of the social order with a view to observing what was disrupted, that is the sorts of expectations that routinely underpinned these interactions. In one such case, participants

could insist upon receiving clarification from their interlocutors of what was intended by particular utterances instead of drawing the inferences that the utterances made available.

Garfinkel's colleagues and students were thereby able to show more precisely what assumptions and inferences are present that usually allow interaction to proceed smoothly. In the present case, Blunt's responses proceed on a similar basis, for example by treating as literal comparisons that are designed to be emphatically offensive, by offering responses to criticisms that are presented in the form of questions, and so on. Responses that orient to these on literal basis serve to disrupt what elsewhere might function as offence and criticism in extreme forms.

That leaves the question of what the breaching of expectations in the present case can tell us about how we might usefully understand insults. Here, Blunt does not treat the comments directed at him as complainables, as might be the usual expectation. His non-adherence to this expectation, and the responses that he delivers in other forms, serve to deflect or avoid the attempted insult. This is evident in various forms as seen here, through conclusion of the exchanges without further turns, indication that the first speakers do not attempt to continue the interaction, or clear approval of the response. These findings thus to an extent resemble Garfinkel's finding that when the recipients of talk treat that talk as comprising 'strict rational discourse' (Garfinkel, 1967, p.41) and respond accordingly rather than treating it as having recognizable and understood features, then interlocutors will withdraw from the exchange. What all of this suggests is that apparently derogatory talk in itself does not necessarily constitute insults, for it to succeed as insulting it must be brought off as such within the interaction in which it is located. Insults are inevitably a participants' concern. And so, just as with any other social action outcome of an interaction, insulting must be accomplished in the talk as demonstrated by participants' orientation to the talk as offensive. Otherwise, as with any other

attempted action, instances of potentially derogatory talk on Twitter or elsewhere can become no more than failed attempts at insults.

On a final note, we turn to consider what the present findings tell us about the relationship between offensive behaviour and humour. For, by treating as literal descriptions that cannot be literally accurate, Blunt is able to inject humour into the exchanges seen here. And, his uses of humour at least in some instances are seen to meet with approval from the original contributor in the next turn in the sequence, as in Extracts 10 and 20. Humour thus works to negate the possibility of offence resulting from the initial posting. Previously, Billig (2001) noted the attempted deployment of humour in three Ku Klux Klan websites where those posting on the sites claimed that what otherwise would appear as expressions of extreme hatred were intended as ‘just a joke’ and not intended to be taken seriously. As Billig pointed out, notwithstanding such disclaimers (albeit ambiguous ones) that denied intentions to offend, the content of these sites did not fall to be treated in a humorous manner. While the contexts examined by Billig are very different from those considered in the present paper, his findings and those of the current study do shed some light both on the negotiation of possible offence and the use of humour in such instances. First, in each case it is the uptake of the initial remarks that demonstrates whether or not the talk is to count as being offensive. Intention, even where explicitly stated to be inoffensive does not determine the quality of the talk and its function. Second, humour can function to negate the possibility of offence in some instances but not all ones. As discussed earlier, online settings are rife with instances of insulting and abusive language (Sambaraju & McVittie, 2020). While the response strategies seen here might potentially be effective in some cases, their use in others could be challenging if not dangerous: it is, for example, potentially very unwise for the recipient of a message containing threats of physical violence to adopt a

literal and humorous approach to such threats. What the present findings do suggest however is that, as Billig argues, there appear to be links between the use of abusive and insulting language and the use of humour that could provide a useful direction for further research.

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