

Is a loser always a loser? How the interpretations of apparent insults vary in different syntactic environments and emotionally-loaded contexts

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Loser, *clown* and *jerk* are words that, besides being nouns, share another interesting property. They can be either used neutrally as a description of a boxer who lost a fight, a person that works in a circus or the movement a car makes when it is starting slowly or these words can be used as insults to other persons. Similar to Stollznow (2003), we want to analyse and define the insulting meaning of these words, applying the concept of “semantic primitives” developed in Wierzbicka (1992). This will ensure a clear distinction between different semantic uses of these words and enable us to analyse them transparently. Additionally, due to the uses of these words being separable into the categories “insulting” and “non-insulting”, we aimed at investigating whether any regularities can possibly predict the specific use of these items. That is why we examined the emotional loading of the contexts in which these words occur, using Plutchik’s (2001) emotion model, and furthermore analysed their syntactic environments. Our hypothesis is the assumption that there are certain syntactic markers that hint towards an insulting use of the word. However, those cannot be entirely relied on, due to the emotional loading of the context. For our examinations, we used and collected data from <https://www.english-corpora.org/iweb/>.

In total, we looked at 100 uses of each word. Out of 100 uses, *loser* was used as an insult in 51% of its occurrences, *clown* was used as an insult in 55% of its occurrences and *jerk* was used as an insult in 62% of its occurrences. Moreover, our results show that a close proximity of personal pronouns hints towards an insulting use. *Loser* was coreferent with a personal pronoun 26 times, out of which 23 uses were insulting. *Clown* was referred to by a personal pronoun 9 times, out of which 8 uses were insulting. *Jerk* was related to a personal pronoun 29 times, 25 out of these 29 uses were insulting. Interestingly, the use of the article was also indicative of the meaning of our three words. When co-occurring with an indefinite article, *loser* was an insult in 75% of these cases, *clown* in 73% and *jerk* in 76% of these combinations. Furthermore, we found that the occurrences of modifiers can predict the use of the word. Even though there are non-insulting as well as insulting uses of our words in combination with modifiers, the semantics of the modifiers differ clearly. When used as an insult, *loser*, *clown* and *jerk* appear with further insulting adjectives, whereas the modifiers are non-insulting when the term itself is not used as an insult, too. Examples (1a-c), taken from <https://www.english-corpora.org/iweb/>, show sentences where *loser*, *clown* and *jerk* are used in combination with an insulting modifier:

- (1) a. It's the ugly, obnoxious, toothless loser who got drunk and wouldn't leave you alone all night.
- b. You have to find the good patterns so you don't look like an irritating clown.
- c. Just because you're a greedy, self-righteous jerk doesn't mean you're also a sadist!

Generally, negative emotional contexts are very commonly linked to insults, nonetheless, there are exceptions, too. On the one hand, the emotional contexts present in some of the randomly chosen sentences were very clear, on the other hand, some examples could only reveal their true intention after analyzing them from a metalinguistic perspective.

To conclude, our hypotheses that specific syntactic patterns as well as negatively loaded emotional contexts predict the occurrence of our words as insults can be (partly) upheld. Nevertheless, there are exceptions as one cannot always tell if a particular use of our three words is meant to be an insult or not. The boundaries may blur due to different interpretations of the degree of insulting use.

References: • Plutchik, Robert. 2001. The nature of emotions: Human emotions have deep evolutionary roots, a fact that may explain their complexity and provide tools for clinical practice. *American Scientist* 89(4). 344-350. • Stollznow, Karen. 2003. Whinger! Wowser! Wanker! Aussie English: Deprecatory language and the Australian ethos. In Moskovsky, Christo (ed.), *Proceedings of the 2003 Conference of the Australian Linguistic Society*. www.als.asn.au/proceedings/als2003/stollznow.pdf. (1 February, 2021.) • Wierzbicka, Anna. 1992. Defining emotion concepts. *Cognitive Science* 16 (4). 539-581.