

Chapter one: Introduction

“[...] Son las malas palabras, único lenguaje vivo
en un mundo de vocablos anémicos.
¡La poesía al alcance de todos...!
Octavio Paz (del Río, 2001)

1.1 Introduction and contextual background

Lang (1990) mentions that social, political, economic, and cultural changes motivate lexical and grammatical innovation, as do scientific and technological changes. When speaking specifically of political issues, Moreno (1986) further indicates that the consolidation of democracy has been an important trigger of linguistic changes. In this context, Descartes thought of humans as linguistic animals, whereas Aristotle defined them (us) as political¹ animals. Either way, politics cannot be carried out without language (Chilton and Schäffner, 1997).

Since politics and language go hand-in-hand, it is necessary to define democracy, as it has been identified by Moreno (1986) as an important cause of changes in a language. Thus, democracy, as defined by Robledo (2011), refers to society's active participation by way of getting involved in decision making processes and being motivated to defend their rights. Currently, democracies around the globe are undergoing critical moments because the majority of the voting population, especially the youth, refuses to get fully involved in political processes mainly because they distrust the government, politicians, and political institutions (Enríquez, 2011; Lozano, 2010; Rodríguez Manzanares, 1994; Leighninger, 2011). Consequently, there is an urgent need of developing or updating the legal framework that ensures citizen involvement in political activities (Leighninger, 2011).

¹ Anything that has to do with power and/or resistance (Chilton and Schäffner, 1997). This is where pragmatics comes in.

The internet, and especially online social networking sites (SNS), is already a place where to share political ideas (Garret and Danziger, 2011), which makes it both a source of political information and a medium for political and electoral expression and persuasion (Garret and Danziger, 2011; Contreras, 2012b; Leighninger, 2011). Online social networking sites (SNS), also called friend networking sites (Bonds-Raacke and Raacke, 2010) or simply social networks are virtual communities where people with similar interests gather to communicate, share, and discuss ideas, thoughts, feelings, and activities by posting messages, pictures and hyperlinks (Raacke and Bonds.Raacke, 2008; Bonds-Raacke and Raacke, 2010; Young, 2011). Facebook, created in 2004 (Kujath, 2011), is the most popular SNS around the globe, to the extent that if it were a country it would be the third most populated after China and India (Young, 2011).

During Barak Obama's 2008 political campaign, online social networks were given a positive and admirable role (Aguilar, 2011; Ramírez, 2012) as they were used by the presidential candidate not only to promote his proposals, but also to include, mobilize, and organize the voting population (Aguilar, 2011; Islas, 2012). In the 2012 electoral process, Mexican politicians tried to mimic Barak Obama's campaign ("Las redes le ponen picante", 2012; Islas, 2012). However, Mexican practices were quite deceiving not only because they took place in a top-down fashion and only when votes were needed (Islas, 2011), but also because they were unethical as fake accounts were created and trolls, i.e. people who insult and discredit candidates and their followers, were widely used (Islas, 2012; Pérez, 2012; "Redes sociales, el otro escenario", 2012) which lead to disinformation, paranoia, distrust, and deception ("Redes sociales, el otro escenario", 2012).

In order to contextualize, it must be mentioned that in Mexico, elections have been going on since 1920 (Navarrete, 2011). Since then, however, and until the year 1994, the political regime existing in the country was an authoritarian presidential model. The president, in this case, held all the power and among his duties he basically had to assure

that the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (the PRI, see section 2.3.1.1.1.1) remained in the presidential seat. In order to achieve this, the president could manipulate the electoral processes and arbitrarily choose his successor, i.e. *dedazo*. The Mexican electoral process, therefore, has always been full of irregularities (Ackerman, 2011). In addition, since the late 1970s, when political parties in Mexico were allowed access to the media to promote their proposals and political campaigns (Paoli, 2011), the messages transmitted have never encouraged public debate or political culture² (Luna, 2011; Orozco, 2011), instead, they are used to discredit and insult adversaries and their followers (Orozco, 2011).

Insulting is an intrinsically dysphemistic and tabooed speech act as it involves using words or actions to offend, wound, provoke, denigrate, or reject someone (Allan and Burrige, 2006). Dysphemisms are defined by Allan and Burrige (2006) as: “[words or phrases] with connotations that are offensive about the denotatum and/or people addressed or overhearing the utterance” (p.31). Accordingly, dysphemistic language, also referred to as strong language, is used to express fear, frustration, distaste, hatred, and disapproval, also to humiliate or degrade. Cursing and name-calling, as well as other linguistic expressions used to insult or wound, in other words, to show authentic impoliteness, are dysphemistic expressions³. Consequently, insults are a face threatening speech act that reflect the attitudes, beliefs, and qualities that are appreciated and rejected in a given society. Accordingly, when analyzing insults, one gets an insight to a culture’s social values and expectations from an individual (Martínez Lara, 2009). By the same token, in political discourse, wordings and phrasings carry meanings that, either directly or indirectly, reflect a person’s background knowledge, values, and political stand (Chilton and Schäffner, 1997).

² Political culture can be understood as the information available regarding political matters, and the set of values and attitudes that a person holds towards such matters (Lujambio, 1994).

³ Both of these terms, authentic impoliteness and dysphemistic expressions will be further explained in chapter two.

When saying discourse, one refers to language beyond the sentence level, and which appears in a specific context in order to communicate something by following culturally appropriate constraints (Sunderland and Litosseliti, 2002; Paltridge, 2006). Considering the latter, discourse analysis describes and analyses both written and spoken interactions in order to study the relationship that may exist between language and the contexts in which it is used (Johnstone, 2002; Paltridge, 2006; Sunderland and Litosseliti, 2002). Although discourse analysis is interested in language beyond the lexical level, it looks at semantics, syntactic, and morphological patterns which are in most cases used to reflect social and cultural conventions (Paltridge, 2006).

Political discourse analysis (PDA), more specifically, attempts at investigating the political functioning of pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic choices in relation to four types and/or levels of discourse organization, rather called strategic functions. These latter are: coercion; resistance, opposition, and protest; dissimulation; and legitimization and delegitimization. Each strategic function is characterized by specific speech acts (Chilton and Schäffner, 1997). Similarly, pragmatics sees language as a dynamic process with a meaningful functioning in the sense that all linguistic resources, namely phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntax serve speakers' intentions to influence others through verbal messages (Huang, 2007; Verschueren, 1999). Thus, pragmatics examines, describes, and attempts to understand linguistic phenomena, especially *meaning*, in relation to the social, situational, textual, and background knowledge contexts in which a person speaks or writes (Huang, 2007; Paltridge, 2006; and Verschueren, 1999). Hence, pragmatics is especially interested in the relationship that exists between a linguistic form and the communicative function it serves, basically, "what people mean by what they say" (Paltridge, 2006:3).

When compared to other branches of linguistics, pragmatics studies the relationship between signs and their utterers and interpreters, while syntax analyzes the

relation of signs to other signs, and semantics examines the relations of signs to the objects they refer to (Verschueren, 1999). In morphology, word formation aims at “analyzing and understanding the processes through which the lexis is created or renewed” (Lang, 1990:3). Purists and lexicographers, however, might criticize and even condemn the creation of new terms, which they might consider irrelevant and unnecessary. Nonetheless, speakers and writers, support lexical innovation and creativity either proposed by themselves or by mass media because it allows them to be more expressive when speaking and writing (Lang, 1990).

In this context, as Octavio Paz mentions in the above cited quote, swear words can be given a variety of uses such as: to alleviate a strong emotion, to strengthen an argument, to insult the interlocutor (Raisin and van der Heijden, 2005), and, in some cases, to show solidarity (Martínez Lara, 2009; Stapleton, 2007). Despite the fact that swear words are socially and institutionally censored, they are widely used by all speakers. Even people who have a reputation of not using bad language are aware of the ways and settings where it may be used, in other words, they know how to swear (Allan & Burridge, 2006). The reason is that curse words are loaded with emotional content and they are helpful to express what other non-swear words fail to communicate (Spinney, 2007). Early in life, children learn about the emotional content of swear words and insults, and in fact they learn how to curse by actively participating in such cultural practices. Furthermore, due to their caregivers' reactions children learn what words are socially unacceptable and become aware of the emotional meaning that taboo words have. In this sense, “taboo language has strong cultural, religious, political, and psychological significance” (Jay, King, and Duncan, 2006: 130).

As it was already mentioned, the use of bad language, i.e. cursing, insults, swear words, is a face threatening speech act that reflects the attitudes, beliefs, and qualities that are appreciated and rejected in a given society (Martínez Lara, 2009). Politeness and

impoliteness are essential to face, identity, and relation negotiation in any given interaction. Face is never individual or static (Goffman, 1967 as cited in Bernal, 2008) as it is constructed based on who we are and who we are interacting with (transportable identity), depending on the communicative situation (situational identity), and it changes throughout an interaction (discourse identity).

As it is widely known, face can be positive or negative (Brown and Levinson, 1987 as cited in Bernal, 2008). The former refers to an individual's refusal to be imposed upon, whereas the latter is an individual's wish to be accepted by others. In a similar way, as proposed by Bravo (2004 as cited in Bernal, 2008) autonomous face refers to a person's wishes to be seen (by herself and by others in the group) as original, with self-esteem, and assertive. Affiliative face, on the other hand, is how a person wishes to show features that identify her with the group, e.g. consideration, affection, trust. When a person's face is saved or threatened, then the utterance or action is considered polite or impolite respectively (Bernal, 2008).

Politeness is the set of rules that prevent aggressiveness, and therefore keep social order. It is also a set of conversational strategies intended to keep and maintain interactions going in a harmonious way so that communicative objectives are achieved. Impoliteness, on the other hand, is understood as a communicative action whose objective is to damage the other person's face. Although little attention has been paid to impoliteness strategies (Culpeper, 2005, as cited in Bernal, 2008), two types can be identified: authentic and unauthentic, which occur depending on the degree of cooperativeness between participants. The former, authentic impoliteness –also known as communicative rudeness or on-record impoliteness-- (Culpeper, 2005 and Kienpointer, 1997 as cited in Bernal, 2008) has a negative interpersonal effect as there is conscious verbal or physical aggression intended to damage. This type of impoliteness is more frequent in intimate relationships.

However, the degree of offensiveness of an utterance is only determined by the hearer, whose perception and interpretation are influenced by the sociocultural context (Bravo, 2003, as cited in Bernal, 2008), which refers to the knowledge a person has about the way interpersonal interactions and relations should take place. Such knowledge creates expectations and helps interlocutors determine if a given behavior is polite or impolite depending on the context, which is defined by what the participants are doing during the interaction. Accordingly, speakers should know the rules that govern each situation (sociocultural knowledge) so that a given expression or utterance can be identified as polite or impolite. Insulting would generally be considered a form of authentic impoliteness. Yet, the addressee is the one who will determine if a given speech act was polite or not, depending on its adherence to the conventions agreed upon by the members of a community of practice or even of society as a whole in respect to the current context of interaction (Mills, 2002).

Due to the increasing popularity of SNS in Mexico, since the year 2010 they were expected to be positively used by the 2012 presidential candidates and their campaign crew during that year's electoral process (Mejía, 2012). At first, Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN) appeared to be the most popular candidate in online social networking sites (Pérez, 2012). In Twitter alone, he had 870, 000 followers by July the 1st (Ordoqui, 2012), and 3 million followers on Facebook (Pérez, 2012; Seco, 2012). In contrast, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), once again candidate of the PRD, had 782, 000 followers on Twitter (Ordoqui, 2012) and 450,000 on Facebook (Seco, 2012). Nonetheless, the PAN was the party with the highest number of online followers (Herrera, 2012).

Despite of this apparent online popularity, the literature reports that politicians instead of using online social networks in positive and productive ways, e.g. to make proposals and communicate more openly with the voters, they applied old practices like the use of bots and trolls, as well as the creation of fake accounts to appear more popular

than they really were (Mejía, 2012; “Las redes sociales le ponen picante”, 2012; Seco, 2012; “Redes sociales: el otro escenario”, 2012; Islas, 2012). In addition, since the amendment mentioned earlier made not prohibition to civilians in terms of insulting during the electoral process (Orozco, 2011), and **considering** that online networking sites are by no means included in Mexican law, i.e. the IFE has no right over them, because in most cases the servers of such sites are foreign, the dirty war took place on the internet, and thus slander, taunt, defamation, direct confrontations and accusations, and insults widely done by candidates and online social networking site users alike before, during, and after the 2012 Election Day (“Se avecina la Guerra electoral”, 2012; “El IFE sin facultades”, 2012; “Las redes sociales le ponen picante”, 2012; Pérez, 2012; Ramírez, 2012).

1.2 Overall description of the study

Considering that online social networks are fairly recent and have become widely popular, the present is a synchronic study that focuses on the description of some of the linguistic phenomena, i.e. insults, which took place on the internet, specifically on four Facebook pages, during the 2012 presidential elections in Mexico. In this respect, Moreno (1986) highlights that a synchronic study is more objective and useful than a diachronic one because the latter focuses mainly on the historical development of words, while the former highlights the importance of the context in which words appear.

In this context, the present study aimed at 1) identifying which were the most common politically-related insults used on Facebook before, during, and after the 2012 Mexican presidential election day, 2) resolving the morphological processes by which such insults came about, and 3) determining the meaning and the pragmatic implications of such insults. The latter was done by means of two corpora created with the comments made by Facebook users on pictures posted on four Facebook pages that were openly against two of the most controversial candidates of the 2012 Mexican presidential elections: Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). The

pictures were collected by accessing each of the four Facebook pages on every Saturday for almost a year. Each picture was labeled and saved depending on the candidate that each Facebook page was intended to attack or criticize. It must be kept in mind that the pictures were merely gathered to have access to the comments that were made to each of them. In other words, the pictures and what was depicted in them were not the actual objects under study.

Once the pictures were gathered and labeled, a set of fifty random numbers was generated in order to select the pictures whose comments would be used to create the corpora. The comments made to each picture were copied and pasted into a word document so that they could be entered into the Text Stat program for the creation of the actual corpora. The word document was given the same label as the picture from which the comments were taken. The quantitative and qualitative analyses were then carried out by determining the frequency of the insults and the linguistic context in which they appeared as well as the morphological processes that gave way to them in order to determine their meaning and the pragmatic implications behind their morphological structure. A total of 620 pictures were collected, however, only 36 were actually used because that was the numbers of coincidences with the random numbers generated with the Stattrek online random number generator. Further and more in depth explanations of the methodological steps taken are provided in chapter four.

1.3 Research questions

1. What are the most common politically-related insults used on Facebook during the 2012 Mexican presidential electoral process?
2. Which are the morphological processes that gave way to such insults?
3. What are the pragmatic implications of such insults?

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The present chapter offered an overview of the main issues to be discussed throughout this thesis. Chapter two provides more detailed information on the major topics, some of which have already been addressed in the present chapter: morphology, pragmatics, politeness, insults, face, and Facebook in that order, as well as an in depth description of the political process and situation in Mexico in the year 2012. The following chapter (chapter three) describes the steps followed and materials used in order to gather and analyze the data that served the purposes of this study. Finally, chapter four presents the results obtained, and chapter five offers a discussion and conclusions mainly driven from the qualitative analysis of the data presented in chapter four, together with the limitations of the study and considerations for further research. Extracts of the corpora, as well as some of the images collected are included in the appendix section to better illustrate the results and conclusions that were arrived at from the data analysis.