

Taking Offence

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Abstract—Between speakers and addressees, the perception of offensiveness in natural language may diverge distinctly to the potential for divergence of understanding of lexical content. Historically, the perception of offensiveness would be treated as a matter of pragmatics rather than semantics. Here, the semantic nature of offence, in particular, taking offence, even where none was intended, is addressed. A formal account is provided, with semantic composition rules corresponding to interpreter personality types.

I. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic politeness and impoliteness have been widely studied within linguistic pragmatics as something that one is able to “do with language” [1]–[12]. At the same time that researchers think of linguistic (im)politeness as highly situational, it is also recognized that linguistic formulae are frequently deployed [13]–[16], and this implicitly, if not explicitly, acknowledges that the choices made within language used are at least as important as the context in which the utterances are interpreted. Others have focused on a consequence of that implication, namely, that linguistic acts of (im)politeness have semantic content which encodes that fact, and therefore aspects of the theory of (im)politeness fall into the remit of semantic theory [16]–[19]. This is relevant because pragmatic theory is frequently taken as a theoretical dustbin into which to scrape the aspects of language interpretation that syntactic and semantic theory cannot explain.

Focus on the pragmatic qualities of (im)politeness, using the “discursive” analysis which takes into account communities of use and individual perceptions highlights the distinction between speaker meaning and hearer meaning: something that seems polite to a speaker may seem impolite to a hearer. While some argue that most uses of language in communication are such that speakers and hearers can never really be certain that they have understood each other [20]–[25], the chance for impoliteness to be perceived where none was intended is certainly a phenomenon for which those even most optimistic about basic uses of language involving unfettered sharing between speaker and hearer must agree is frequently instantiated. It could only be the most insensitive of humans who has never noticed some of their statements having been misunderstood as conveying impoliteness. Arguably, the language of politeness is as ornate as it is in order to overcome the possibility of being misunderstood as impolite [17], [19]. The fact that there is an inclination to distinguish linguistic (im)politeness as a species of (im)politeness is suggestive of the possibility that the wider category is an innovation, like language itself, that has been assimilated into the human cognitive architecture

as a functional module that has consequences in linguistic interaction and perhaps distinct consequences in non-linguistic dimensions of interaction [25]–[27].

The purpose of the present paper is to push further the discursive analysis of (im)politeness. The general tenor of this approach is that linguistic expressions do not possess inherent (im)politeness, but that this is something that emerges as a perception through discourse. I argue that, in fact, this presupposes a linguistic element and semantic compositionality: to take offence at something said requires a triggering expression (even if any expression will suffice), and different components of triggering expressions may serve to provide distinct content to any offence taken. Comprehensive treatments of what it is to be offended, informed by theoretical and empirical analysis are available [28]. The point of this paper is to analyze the semantic aspects of taking offence, while commenting on interfaces to pragmatic interpretation. Pragmatic dimensions of taking offence are most readily identified – one who takes offence at an utterance has defined a position of victim-hood, and it is more socially acceptable for a victim of offence to marshal the tools shared with aggression (e.g. raised voice, angry words, etc.) than for non-victim to embark on a dialogue move using the same tools. These dimensions have long been a topic of study, at least since Freud’s analysis of the notion of *narcissistic injury* [29]. Negative appraisals of taking offence remain readily available [30], [31]. Sometimes, those who take offence use offence taken in order to be offensive [32]. Taking the role of victim gives a social entitlement to being abrasive – an aggressor acting as a victim may claim their offensive acts are not aggression but defence. Taking offence can be a pragmatic move closely related to a bully, called out for the fact, claiming to be bullied. In any case, it is in the follow-on action, if any, pursued by someone who takes offence, including the action of expressing that offence has been taken that appear to be the root of negative evaluation of taking offence [31], [33]. What is less readily obvious in taking offence are the semantic dimensions of taking offence. Taking offence allows focus on the semantic role – the number of axes along which offence may be taken: a component of what was said, what was said vs. what was not said. Other steps in this direction have been taken, for example focus on lexical semantics associated with the experience of offence [34].

There is inherent philosophical and scientific interest in achieving an understanding of what it is to take offence. Moreover, there are potential applications and technological gains to be achieved by transferring any knowledge so acquired. Rude robots may have a useful role in training front-line medical and policing staff (among others) to deal with

problematic individuals more effectively than using role-play among colleagues or trainers. An advantage of using a robot in such a context is avoiding residual transference of associations from the role-play to interactions outside the role-play. Equally, one may imagine that public facing individuals could gain from being able to hone skills in producing diplomatic language by interacting with a robot designed to have the capacity to take offence in the many ways that people do.

This article proceeds as follows. Some basic facts about possibilities for taking offence are presented. The starting point of a semantic theory of (im)politeness is outlined. That framework is extended in order to address the linguistic data. The outcome is an improved framework in which compositionality in linguistic (im)politeness can be more transparently specified. Addressing the potential for humans to take offence yields an improved semantic theory of (im)politeness.

II. LINGUISTIC PHENOMENA IN TAKING OFFENCE

It is possible to take offence from both positive and negative facts, from positive acts and acts of omission, given possible acts of all sorts, linguistic and non-linguistic [28]. The focus here is on linguistic offence, that is to say, offence taken from linguistic expressions. Examples provided in an appendix ((21)-(27)) demonstrate a range of linguistic triggers: a sentence type (21), a pronoun (22), a noun (23), a numeric modifier (24), an adjective (25), a verb (26). Inspection reveals that the triggering expressions in these case do not involve taboo items, even in a bleached form [35], and thus it is demonstrable that offence taken does not need to be anchored in a lexicalization of inherent offensiveness [17].

Necessary conditions for feeling offended have been analyzed by past researchers [28, pp. 7-8] as involving preparatory conditions (1), essential conditions (2) and aggravating factors (3). These conditions involve an individual, A, being offended by a person, B, possibly in relation to a third party, C. Among the contributions of this work is the quantification of the level (with gender differences noted) to which A's self-esteem may impact, as an aggravating factor, on perception of offence.

- (1) Preparatory conditions
 - a. A has the goal of a positive image before B
 - b. A has the goal of a positive image before C
 - c. A has the goal of a positive self-image
 - d. A believes that property X is pertinent for his goal of image before B or before C
- (2) Essential conditions
 - a. B performs or omits to perform an action that affects A
 - b. A believes that this explicitly communicates or indirectly implies That B attributes a flaw X to A
 - c. X thwarts the image that A wants to project of himself to B
and/or to third parties, like C,
and/or to A, him/herself
 - d. A believes that X makes him/her inferior to B/C
 - e. Or to the category to which A wants others to believe he belongs to.
 - f. All of this causes A to feel a negative image emotion (sadness, displeasure, shame, humiliation)

- g. and/or a negative social emotion toward B (anger or rancor)
- h. a negative emotion of affiliation (inferiority, feeling of exclusion)
- i. a negative emotion of attachment toward B (disappointment about B)
- (3) Aggravating conditions
 - a. The negative emotion of A is as more dramatic as
 - b. The manifestation of A's flaw is public, i.e.,
 - c. A believes that third parties C will come to know about A's flaw or inferiority
 - d. A believes that B's attack to A's image is deliberate
 - e. A has a low self-esteem
 - f. A's self-image is strongly dependent on the image that others (B and/or C) have of A
 - g. For A the goal of having a positive social (possibly affective) relationship to B is important
 - h. A esteems B.

In this definition, the property X is relevant to the offended person, as in (1d). Seemingly, (2d) presupposes that A must believe that B's direct or indirect assertion about A's having the property X is true.¹ However, A may be offended by B having implied X of A, even if A does not think that X actually holds of A. To remove the presupposition of the truth of X being applicable to A, it suffices to modify the verb form of (2d):

(2d') A believes that X would make him/her inferior to B/C if X truthfully applied to A

Using the revised definition, whether or not A thinks it true that A has the property X, A may feel offended by B's assertion that A has the property X.

However, taking offence does not entail being offended. Although someone who takes offence may well be offended, some who do so many not be. To adapt the resulting revised conditions for feeling offence (2') to taking offence, it may be safe to change each instance of "believe", however inflected in the modified definition (2') to the corresponding inflection of "claim", and to delete mention of causation from (2f):

(2f'') A claims to feel a negative image emotion (sadness, displeasure, shame, humiliation)

Low self-esteem may well be an aggravating factor in the case of taken offence as well as experienced offence. Taking offence, when it is not experienced, appears to require action from A to ensure that at least someone has the impression that offence was taken. Whether action is part of taking offence is a point where others have differed [30], [31], the preceding observation requires that action be taken at least in the cases where taken offence is not experienced, else there would be no one who could identify that offence has been taken. For both feeling offence and taking offence, it remains to be examined how the property X arises compositionally, in the case of linguistic acts that elicit either.

¹The test for this being presupposition follows from entailment of the presupposition from the condition and the negation of the condition:

- (4) A believes that X makes him/her inferior to B/C ⊢
A believes X is true of A.
- (5) A does not believe that X makes him/her inferior to B/C ⊢
A believes X is true of A.

III. SEMANTICS OF (IN)OFFENSIVENESS

A semantic framework in which to develop such an account is presented below, with some modifications to earlier formulations [18], [19].² Within this framework denotations of linguistic expressions of politeness and impoliteness are understood as events constrained by predications of relative offence as experienced by the speaker of those expressions in relation to the participants in the triggering events.³ The framework requires modification to allow that the offence not actually be experienced, as described above. Example characterizations of sets of events corresponding to polite expressions and offensive expressions are provided in (10) and (11), however first it is necessary to present the terms used in those equations.

Relevant properties of event types are highlighted in (6); individual events are particulars that instantiate types.⁴ An event particular e of type \hat{e} ($e : \hat{e}$) has the properties specified. Properties of events include temporality: tense, aspect, and mode (*realis* or *irrealis*). The events of focus here are linguistic events; however, many of the distinctions made are general to non-linguistic events, as well. The mode of analysis is meant to be compatible with constraint based theories of grammar, like Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar [41], [42], or type theory with records [43]. Any event token e have definite values, rather than unresolved disjunctions (the symbol “ \vee ” encodes disjunction). Events have participants. The individuals who participate in (im)politeness events are designated in (6) using the labels from syntactic theory for *person*, to describe agreement relations between subject pronouns and inflected verb forms. For each participant, an event has *use* and *cost*. A three-valued polarity system may be deployed aggregating values of use and cost into a *net* attitude polarity value: 1 represents positive value, 0 represents neutral value, and -1 represents negative value. Table I illustrates one possibility for how values of *use* and *cost* combine to produce *net* attitude values.

TABLE I. A SPECIFICATION OF *net* ATTITUDE AS A FUNCTION OF *use* AND *cost*

	cost		
use	1	0	-1
1	1	1	0
0	1	0	-1
-1	0	-1	-1

In a particular event, relative offence (\hat{o}) that an agent, i , experiences involves a resolving of the disjunctions in (7). In the attitudes connected to an event, e , each participant may have a distinct grasp of to whom an event is directed. Presumably, the actual author of an event, s , has infallible knowledge about being that individual and which other individuals are involved as addressee or third party, if any exist. In contrast, the other participants in general have certainty only that they are not

²The modified form drops reliance on thematic proto-roles [36], provides explicit parameters for the participants, and generally tidies the original form.

³Analyzing denotations of expressions as sets of events is comparable to analyses modality that rely on understanding propositions as sets of possible worlds [37] and to analyses within situation theory which understand denotations as sets of supporting situations [38].

⁴Feature-value matrices such as used here visually organize bundles of predications of first-order logic. Details of feature logics and equations on paths through feature-value structures are available in the literature [39], [40].

the author of the event. These observations suggest that the constraints in (7) are more general than necessary in allowing each participant to have a distinct grasp of who authored the event, addressed to whom with what third parties. If there is no third party, for example, then the corresponding value is \emptyset .

$$(6) \hat{e} =_{event} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{temporality: } \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{tense} \\ \text{aspect} \\ \text{mode} \end{array} \right] \\ \text{participants: } \pi = \sigma \cup \alpha \cup \omega \\ \text{person: } \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{1st: } s | s \in \sigma \\ \text{2nd: } l | l \in \alpha \\ \text{3rd: } o | o \in \omega \end{array} \right] \\ \text{use} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{person: } \textit{polarity} \\ \text{1st: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \\ \text{2nd: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \\ \text{3rd: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \end{array} \right] \\ \text{cost} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{person: } \textit{polarity} \\ \text{1st: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \\ \text{2nd: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \\ \text{3rd: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \end{array} \right] \\ \text{attitudes: } \{\hat{o}(e, i) | i \in \pi, e : \hat{e}\} \end{array} \right]$$

$$(7) \hat{o}(e, i) =_{attitude} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{grasp: } \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{grasper: } i = j \vee i = k \vee i = l \\ \text{1st: } j | j \in \pi, j \neq k \\ \text{2nd: } k | k \in \pi, k \neq l \\ \text{3rd: } l | l \in \pi, j \neq l \end{array} \right] \\ \text{before-}e: \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{person: } \textit{polarity} \\ \text{1st: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \\ \text{2nd: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \\ \text{3rd: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \end{array} \right] \\ \text{during-}e: \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{person: } \textit{polarity} \\ \text{1st: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \\ \text{2nd: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \\ \text{3rd: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \end{array} \right] \\ \text{after-}e: \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{person: } \textit{polarity} \\ \text{1st: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \\ \text{2nd: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \\ \text{3rd: } 1 \vee 0 \vee -1 \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

The constraints of the model articulated in (7) provide for a sequence of attitudes towards an event as it unfolds from the time before the event, through the time during the event, to the time after the event. The values that resolve the disjunction are those that arise from the reconciling of the *use* and *cost* values, according to a function like the one presented in tabular form in Table I. Without prior context, it is assumed that individuals maintain a default evaluation of participants, such as in (8): there, the speaker has a positive self-evaluation and equal evaluation of the others.⁵ Reasonable alternative default specifications follow the relevant temperament of the individual – for example, in (9) the speaker has a positive self-evaluation and lesser evaluations of others, but none are considered negatively.

$$(8)_{attitude} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{person: } \textit{polarity} \\ \text{1st: } / \left[\begin{array}{c} 1 \\ x \end{array} \right] \\ \text{2nd: } / \left[\begin{array}{c} x \\ x \end{array} \right] \\ \text{3rd: } / \left[\begin{array}{c} x \\ x \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

⁵A formal framework for default feature structures is available [44]; the value to the right of the slash is defeasible. Co-indexing encodes value sharing.

$$(9) \text{ attitude } \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{person: } \textit{polarity} \\ \text{1st: } /1 \\ \text{2nd: } /0 \\ \text{3rd: } /0 \end{array} \right]$$

Notice the limits of expressivity in this model. In particular, recursive perspectives are not supported: given that grasper i is in either first, second or third person with respect to an utterance, $\hat{o}(e, i)$ may include, for example, the perspective that i is better than some other person, but not that some other person has the perspective that i has some perspective. Recursive embedding of perspectives could be useful, such as in analyzing taking offence by proxy, where one might say that the addressee has the perspective that the speaker has the perspective of being superior to a third party. However, below, this is analyzed without recourse to embedded perspectives.

Using this model, acts impoliteness may be understood as sets of events in which the speaker's ultimate self-estimation exceeds the speaker's estimation of others (10). In contrast, acts of politeness express sets of events constrained by the opposed relation (11).

$$(10) \lambda e. [\hat{o}(e, i):\text{after-}e:\text{person:1st:polarity} > \hat{o}(e, i):\text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity}]$$

$$(11) \lambda e. [\hat{o}(e, i):\text{after-}e:\text{person:1st:polarity} < \hat{o}(e, i):\text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity}]$$

Where the acts are linguistic acts, the corresponding lexical semantics of the expressions used contribute additional shades of meaning and associations. Without additional specification, using an epithet like “fool” to refer to someone supports exactly the same inferences as using the epithet, “spittle”: they both convey the same relative attitudes about the individuals involved.⁶ In addition to lexical content, one could derive meanings such as (10) and (11) from tone of delivery, for example, providing a semantics for acid delivery [45].

IV. SEMANTICS OF TAKING OFFENCE

The framework described in §III affords characterization of aspects of the meaning of offence, as described. It is also adequate for describing taking offence where none was intended. Some relevant conditions may be noted.

The set of events described in (12) are those in which the author of the event has a higher self-attitude than attitude about the addressee (as in (10)) – the details of this are articulated in (12.a) and are abbreviated in (12.b). Additionally (the symbol “ \wedge ” encodes conjunction), the addressee has a higher self-attitude before the event than after the event: such is the outcome of an effective giving of offence.

$$(12) \text{ a. } \lambda e. \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{grasp:1st:}i \\ \text{grasp:2nd:}j \\ \left[\begin{array}{l} \hat{o}(e, i):\text{after-}e:\text{person:1st:polarity} \\ > \\ \hat{o}(e, i):\text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity} \end{array} \right] \\ \wedge \\ \left[\begin{array}{l} \hat{o}(e, j):\text{before-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity} \\ > \\ \hat{o}(e, j):\text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

$$\text{b. } \lambda j \lambda i \lambda e (\textit{debased}(e, i, j))$$

c. The speaker feels better than the addressee and the addressee now feels worse than before.

A successful act of defamation typically consists of an author convincing an addressee to have a diminished attitude about a third party. The essence of this is that subsequent to the event, the address should have a lower attitude about the third party than self-attitude (13). Presumably, a goal of defamation is also to lead the addressee have a higher estimation of the author of the act than the third party, but this does not appear to be part of the essence of defamation.

$$(13) \text{ a. } \lambda e. \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{grasp:1st:}i \\ \text{grasp:2nd:}j \\ \text{grasp:3rd:}k \\ \left[\begin{array}{l} \hat{o}(e, i):\text{after-}e:\text{person:1st:polarity} \\ > \\ \hat{o}(e, i):\text{after-}e:\text{person:3rd:polarity} \end{array} \right] \\ \wedge \\ \left[\begin{array}{l} \hat{o}(e, j):\text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity} \\ > \\ \hat{o}(e, j):\text{after-}e:\text{person:3rd:polarity} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

$$\text{b. } \lambda k \lambda j \lambda i \lambda e (\textit{debased}(e, i, j, k))$$

c. The speaker feels better than a third party and the addressee feels better than the third party.

In episodes of offence taken where none was experienced, it is necessary to make reference to two sets of events: the events corresponding to the triggering act (14) and the events corresponding to the act of the “injured” party making known that offence was taken (a). As before, the independent label of the triggering act is not specified here, as that, as has been seen, can be anything; what is depicted is the content of offence taken. The constraints in (14) involve the party taking offence, j , having a greater estimation of the speaker than self-estimation (this encodes the low self-esteem condition), and attributing to a third party, k , estimations that rate j lower than k (this is the content of the offence, that someone else, perhaps unspecified, thinks less of the party taking offence). The notation in (14.a) is suggested by the abbreviation in (14.b); however, the abbreviation loses the potential to express that the debasement is from the perspective of the addressee rather than the speaker. Where the person who takes offence expresses this (15.a), that individual assumes the syntactic first-person perspective (j and i swap positions as the values of 1st and 2nd person), and is thus asserting that the original speaker, now the addressee, is lower in the estimation of the person taking offence than that person's self evaluation.

$$(14) \text{ a. } \lambda e. \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{grasp:1st:}i \\ \text{grasp:2nd:}j \\ \text{grasp:3rd:}k \\ \left[\begin{array}{l} \hat{o}(e, j):\text{after-}e:\text{person:1st:polarity} \\ > \\ \hat{o}(e, j):\text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity} \end{array} \right] \\ \wedge \\ \left[\begin{array}{l} \hat{o}(e, k):\text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity} \\ < \\ \hat{o}(e, k):\text{after-}e:\text{person:3rd:polarity} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

$$\text{b. } \lambda k \lambda j \lambda i \lambda e (\textit{debased}(e, i, j, k))$$

c. The addressee feels the speaker is better than the addressee and witnesses feel better than the addressee.

⁶A theory which supports infinite graduations of esteem or disgust is compatible with this approach.

$$(15) \text{ a. } \lambda e. \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{grasp:1st:}j \\ \text{grasp:2nd:}i \\ \text{grasp:3rd:}k \\ \left[\begin{array}{c} \hat{o}(e, j): \text{after-}e:\text{person:1st:polarity} \\ > \\ \hat{o}(e, j): \text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

b. The speaker feels better than the addressee.

Taking offence by proxy similarly involves two sets of events: the set corresponding to the triggering act (16) and the set corresponding to the act which makes known the offence taken (17). In contrast to offence taken directly, offence taken by proxy involves the addressee having a higher self-estimation than estimation of the speaker as well as a higher self-estimation than estimation of a third party (as evidenced by acting on the presumption that the third party could not express experienced offence directly). The expression of offence taken by proxy (17) is an assertion (again swapping individuals across person) that the proxy offended person, now the speaker, has a higher self-estimation than estimation of the original speaker (irrespective of actual evaluation of the third party for whom offence was taken).

$$(16) \text{ a. } \lambda e. \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{grasp:1st:}i \\ \text{grasp:2nd:}j \\ \text{grasp:3rd:}k \\ \left[\begin{array}{c} \hat{o}(e, j): \text{after-}e:\text{person:1st:polarity} \\ < \\ \hat{o}(e, j): \text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity} \end{array} \right] \\ \wedge \\ \left[\begin{array}{c} \hat{o}(e, j): \text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity} \\ > \\ \hat{o}(e, j): \text{after-}e:\text{person:3rd:polarity} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

b. The addressee feels the speaker is worse than the addressee and the addressee feels the addressee is better than a third party.

$$(17) \lambda e. \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{grasp:1st:}j \\ \text{grasp:2nd:}i \\ \text{grasp:3rd:}k \\ \left[\begin{array}{c} \hat{o}(e, j): \text{after-}e:\text{person:1st:polarity} \\ > \\ \hat{o}(e, j): \text{after-}e:\text{person:2nd:polarity} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

V. SEMANTIC COMPOSITION

Thinking about the meaning of offence intended and taken makes clear that these elements require a differentiation between speaker meaning and hearer meaning. Further, noting that the distinctions discussed in the last section did not address lexical semantics directly, it may be concluded that this is because lexical semantic content provides a dimension that is, in general, distinct to that supplied by offensiveness. Exceptions are for those items whose semantic content is precisely in the domain of offensiveness, such as expressions of politeness and impoliteness, like epithets, politeness particles and formulaic expressions.

$$(18) \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{utterance-event: } e \\ \text{speaker-meaning: } \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{lexical content: } . \\ \text{attitude: } . \end{array} \right] \\ \text{hearer-meaning: } \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{lexical content: } . \\ \text{attitude: } . \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$$

Within the meaning dimension associated with attitude, where offence is a possible attitude, discussion of the relevant

data indicates that offensiveness may project from a single word to a perception of a composite utterance. This suggests a form of meaning composition that is relatively flat, such as provided by the framework of minimal recursion semantics (MRS) [46]. In this framework, one thinks of “handles”, as arguments (typically, referential), to which one may attach a bag of elementary predications. One may think of the utterance of any word within a larger expression presenting an event, the event of its utterance, which serves as a handle, in the sense of MRS, in which the appropriate predication of offense taken, as discussed in the last section, may be attached as a predicate. The handle for the utterance as a whole may be understood in terms of offence taken if in its attached bag of elementary predications is one of the forms described.

One may characterize two extremes of attitude composition, given an utterance event e , speaker i , addressee j and third party k and a bag Π of elementary predications of attitude associated with e . The condition in (19) corresponds to the generous interpretation in which if offensiveness is not perceived for any sub-expression then the whole expression is perceived without offence; one may think of an addressee whose behaviour is consistent with this constraint as “laid back”. The condition in (20) is one for which offensiveness is associated with the whole expression follows from offensiveness being experienced for any of its sub-expressions; one may think of this as the “thin-skinned” condition.

- (19) If $e' \in e$ is such that
 $\text{debased}(e', i, j, k) \notin \Pi$
then $\neg \text{debased}(e, i, j, k)$
- (20) If $e' \in e$ is such that
 $\text{debased}(e', i, j, k) \in \Pi$
then
 $\text{debased}(e, i, j, k)$

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A difference in emphasis is evident between the analysis provided in §II and §IV. Both make reference to three salient parties: speakers, addressees and third parties. Within §II, specific reference is made to the offensive content, the category X presumed to apply. Within §IV emphasis is given to the relational consequences of assertions. The former suggests conditions like A having “a negative emotion of inferiority” while the latter suggests conditions like “B expresses an attitude about A that rates A inferior to C”. Thus, these distinctions of emphasis, I think, are fully reconcilable. Both frameworks express conditions that are essential to offensiveness. What the present work adds, through the distinctions articulated, is the capacity to describe offence taken where none was expressed. The general framework for formal semantic analysis of the pragmatic qualities of offence interpretation has been sketched.

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APPENDIX

(21) A hypothetical dialogue segment.⁷

- a. What do you say to Americans who are scared, though? Nearly 200 dead. 14,000 who are sick. Millions, as you witness, who are scared right now. What do you say to Americans who are watching you right now who are scared?
- b. I say that you're a terrible reporter. That's what I say. I think it's a very nasty question and I think it's a very bad signal that you're putting out to the American people. The American people are looking for answers and they're looking for hope, and you're doing sensationalism. The same with NBC and Comcast. I don't call it Comcast, I called Concast, for who you work.

(22) A hypothetical dialogue segment.⁸

- a. A: You have instances where in cities, they are running out but the state still has a stockpile. And the notion of the federal stockpile is it is supposed to be our stockpile. It is not supposed to be the state stockpile that they then use.
- b. B: Thank you. Yesterday Jared Kushner said the notion of the federal stockpile was, it's supposed to be our stockpile. It's not supposed to be state stockpiles that they then use. What did he mean by our?
- c. C: What are you asking?
- d. B: Even the fact that taxpayers from every state pays for it.
- e. C: What's that? A got you? I got you. You used the word our.
- f. B: No, it's not a got you.
- g. C: Our, you know what our means? United States of America. That's what it means.
- h. B: What about the states?
- i. C: Our. Our. It means the United States of America. Then we take that our, and we distribute it to the states. Not that we have to-
- j. B: So why did you say it's not supposed to be state stockpiles that they then use?
- k. C: Because we need it for the government, and we need it for the federal government. But when the states are in-
- l. B: To give to the states.
- m. C: No to also keep-
- n. B: Then who are you giving it to if it's not to the states?
- o. C: To keep for our country because the federal government needs it too, not just the states. But out of that, we oftentimes choose. As an example, we have almost 10,000 ventilators, and we are ready to rock with those ventilators. We're going to bring them to various areas of the country that need them. But when he says our, he's talking about our country. He's talking-
- p. B: He makes a distinction, and sir-
- q. C: Excuse me. He's talking about the federal government. I mean, it's such a basic, simple question, and

you try and make it sound so bad.

- r. B: It's not bad. I'm just trying to understand.
- s. C: You ought to be ashamed of yourself.
- t. B: No, by the way, Secretary Azar-
- u. C: You know what? You ought to be ashamed. It's such a simple question. He said our, and our means for the country and our means [...] for the states because the states are part of the country. Don't make it sound bad. Don't make it sound bad. Go ahead, Steve. Go ahead. Back here.

(23) A hypothetical dialogue segment.⁹

- a. Hon ADELE FARINA: I do not know what rock Hon Robyn McSweeney has been sleeping under, but it must have been a very comfortable one because I have been having this argument very publicly for at least the last 12 months.
- b. Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Excuse me, Mr Deputy President. I find that very offensive. I know what hides under rocks, and it is certainly not me. I would like the member to withdraw her comment that I hide under rocks. I am very open and accountable, and I am certainly not a snake, a spider or a rock spider, in fact, so I want it withdrawn.
- c. The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Simon O'Brien): Order! I am ruling on a point of order. I will not rule that the words used were unparliamentary because I do not believe that they fitted under that —
- d. Hon Robyn McSweeney: — rock that she was talking about.
- e. The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order! I do not believe that they fulfil the requirements of unparliamentary language. Nonetheless, I note that the member has objected to words and I defer to Hon Adele Farina to take the appropriate action.
- f. Hon ADELE FARINA: Thank you, Mr Deputy President. I am more than happy to withdraw the words that offended Hon Robyn McSweeney. I make my point, though, that if Hon Robyn McSweeney chooses to have a scroll through the local papers from the last 12 months, she will see numerous stories in the local papers in which I take issue with various decisions and various processes, or lack of processes, at the City of Bunbury. I think my record and my view pre and post the last local government election are very clear. I do not have anything to be concerned about from that point of view, but if Hon Robyn McSweeney took offence at the word "rock", I am more than happy to apologise to the honourable member for that. That is not a problem

(24) A hypothetical dialogue segment.¹⁰

- a. She says she's lived here her entire life, almost eighty years, been through just about everything.
- b. I ain't no eighty years old.
- c. Well, just about. I'm sorry Ms. Constance. Seventy-six to be exact.
- d. No, seventy-five.

⁷See <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-coronavirus-task-force-march-20-press-conference-transcript-trump-spars-with-reporters-in-fiery-briefing> – last verified April 2020.

⁸See <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-coronavirus-briefing-transcript-april-3-new-cdc-face-mask-recommendations> – last verified April 2020.

⁹See [https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Hansard/hansard.nsf/0/c39f8f7551040a2e48257c8d00296757/\\$FILE/C39%20S1%2020140226%20p628e-654a.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Hansard/hansard.nsf/0/c39f8f7551040a2e48257c8d00296757/$FILE/C39%20S1%2020140226%20p628e-654a.pdf) – last verified April 2020.

¹⁰See <https://1051theriver.heart.com/featured/ju/content/2017-02-10-older-woman-takes-offense-to-a-reporters-question/> – last verified April 2020.

(25) A hypothetical dialogue segment.¹¹

a. Steve mentioned before, he said we needed to get hungry and desperate before it was too late. From your point of view, from the players' point of view, I suppose, did the team turn up with the right attitude tonight?

....

b. I think it's quite a disrespectful question to suggest that the All Blacks turned up not hungry.
They're desperate to win the game - just because I've asked them at halftime to get hungrier doesn't mean they didn't turn up to be hungry.
There's a big difference and if you want to spend some time outside, I'll give you a rugby education on that one.

(26) A hypothetical dialogue segment.¹²

a. Do you hate the president, Madam Speaker?
b. I don't hate anybody. I was raised in a Catholic house. We don't hate anybody, not anybody in the world. Don't accuse me of hate [...]
This is about the constitution of the United States and the facts that lead to the president's violation of the oath of office. And as a Catholic I resent your using the word hate in a sentence that addresses me.
So don't mess with me when it comes to words like that

(27) A hypothetical dialogue segment.¹³

a. Reporter: "Tonight you were playing very short many times. I don't know why, because you're not used to that. I'd like to know, for many people to get married is a very important, distracting thing before the marriage, during the marriage, after the marriage. I'd like to know if somehow your concentration on tennis life has been a bit different even if you were going out with the same girl for many, many years?"
b. Nadal: "Honestly, are you asking me this? Is a serious question or is a joke? Is it serious?"
c. Reporter: "It's serious. Is not something that ..."
d. Nadal: "OK. I am surprised. Is a big surprise for me you ask me this after I have been with the same girl for 15 years and having a very stable and normal life. Doesn't matter if you put a ring on your finger or not. In my personal way, I am a very normal guy. Maybe for you was ... how many years have you been with your..."
e. Reporter: "Wife, 30 years this year."
f. Nadal: "And before? Ah, maybe before you were not so sure. That's why. OK. We move to Spanish, because that's bulls***. Thank you very much."

¹¹See <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/sport/rugby/rugby-news/blacks-coach-steve-hansen-snaps-17151824> – last verified April 2020.

¹²See <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/dec/05/dont-mess-with-me-nancy-pelosi-rejects-question-hates-trump> – last verified April 2020.

¹³See <https://m.news-mail.com.au/news/rafa-slams-journos-bulls-question/3876548/> – last verified April 2020.