

ANALYTICAL ESSAY

“Filthy Lapdogs,” “Jerks,” and “Hitler”: Making Sense of Insults in International Relations

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This paper offers an original theoretical framework for the study of insults in international relations (IR). Bringing into IR the two main theoretical approaches to aggravating language, slurs and dysphemisms, we conceptualize insults’ disruptive impact on international interactions in a way that explains their logic, consequences, and risks. Specifically, we argue that insults constitute both at once tactical tools used by international actors to achieve their interests by disrupting an interaction and modifying the payoffs associated with it and linguistic artifacts constructing and sharpening self- and other identities. The components of our theoretical framework are illustrated with a wide range of empirical cases of international insults.

“You’re a donkey, Mr Danger!” (Hugo Chavez, to George W. Bush)

“WORST INSULT TO THE UNITED STATES IN ITS HISTORY” titled the *New York Journal* on February 9, 1898, when it disclosed a letter from the Spanish ambassador De Lomé describing President McKinley as “weak and a bidder for the admiration of the crowd.” Only one week later, after the explosion of the US battleship Maine, American public opinion was ready to support the war against Spain (O’Neill 1999). Twenty-eight years earlier, on the European continent, Bismarck had carefully edited the Ems telegram to make it look like the French ambassador and the King of Prussia had insulted each other during a meeting, in view of giving Paris a reason to launch a war (Hall 2017). These two examples show that insults have often been considered an escalatory step toward interstate wars. On the one hand, insults could participate in the framing of another state as an “enemy” to be blamed for an untoward event, making the prospect of war desirable for a population, as with the Spanish–American War. On the other hand, insults also constituted legitimate *casus belli*, as with the Ems telegram.

Yet insults do not always lead to war. In recent history, international insults have been frequent but have not triggered armed conflict.¹ For example, members of the Trump administration have been particularly productive in their use of invectives toward other states (Lee and Quealy 2019),² while former Venezuelan President Chavez is known for having called other leaders by many insulting nicknames, such as “the puppy dog of the empire” for his Mexican counterpart Fox (Wittmeyer 2013). Former UK Prime Minister Cameron named French President Sarkozy “a hidden dwarf” (Brady 2010), and former President of the European Commission Juncker greeted the Hungarian Prime Minister Orban with the word “dictator” at a European Union (EU) summit (Walker 2015). Why these cases did not lead to war while the Ems telegram and the De Lomé letter did is an important puzzle for international relations (IR) theory, which has been largely left aside so far.

Indeed, while dynamics related to, or involved in, insults have recently been investigated in IR—such as disrespect (Wolf 2011), blasphemy (Hassner 2011), Schadenfreude (Levy 2019), anger displays and provocation (Hall 2017; Wong 2019), or stigma (Adler-Nissen 2014b)—the study of international insults per se is still at its infancy (Korostelina 2014; Faizullaev 2018). The same holds for the field of diplomatic studies, whose scholars have tended to sideline insults as occasional “breaches of diplomatic norms about civility” (Sharp 2009, 206), even though the importance of related issues, such as (dis)honor, has been highlighted (Neumann and Pouliot 2011; Tsygankov 2012). Recently, however, Faizullaev (2018) opened up research space by providing a first direct study of “diplomatic symbolic insults,” understood as concealed nonverbal or verbal actions aimed at insulting a foreign diplomat. A study of non-concealed public insults in international affairs, together with a discussion of the dynamics of cooperation and conflict that they engender, remains to be done.

The aim of the present paper is to provide that contribution, in other words, to offer a first theoretical framework for the study of non-ambiguous international verbal insults. We focus on what linguists call *dysphemistic expressions* (“words or phrases with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance”; Allan and Burridge 2006, 31), and in extreme cases *slurs* (terms “considered among the most taboo and offensive of all linguistic expressions [...] used to derogate certain group members”; Croom 2013). We favor such a narrow, and hence analytically specific, understanding of international insults as dysphemistic expressions and slurs for two interrelated reasons. First, unlike other words, images, gestures, or symbols whose meaning may vary according to the context,³ we want to focus on those insulting words that precisely do not leave space for various interpretations. Dysphemistic expressions and slurs are blatant forms of disrespect, with no ambiguity surrounding their interpretation. Second, and relatedly, we suggest that if the meaning of dysphemistic expressions and slurs is straightforward for the broad audience, so is it for the utterer: the intent is clearly to insult the target.⁴ Accordingly, international dysphemistic expressions and slurs—that we label “international insults” in our development—are probably the types of insults with the biggest potential for conflict. This is precisely

¹ Insults are also a recurrent—and some say growing (Sobieraj and Berry 2011)—feature of domestic politics: Chavez was known for calling his political opponents “squealing pigs” or “vampires,” and the use of insults is a regular feature of contemporary British politics (see, for instance, Carroll 2016).

² On the politics of Trump’s insults, see Winberg (2017).

³ The ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of nonverbal, visual, or symbolic insults has been noted in IR (e.g., Hansen 2011; Adler-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen 2020), and the importance of the context in the interpretation of non-dysphemistic insults has been examined by many anthropologists and linguists (e.g., Lachenicht 1980; Irvine 1992, 612–13).

⁴ On intention in international relations, see Fierke (2014). Unintentional insults may occur in world politics. George H. Bush’s 1992 trip to Australia is a case among many. He committed a faux pas when he made a V sign with his fingers, palm inward: thinking he was doing the “peace sign,” this gesture was actually the local equivalent of “giving the finger” (Bingham 2012). This type of faux pas could also occur in interlingual relations where meaning gets lost in translation. This “semantic transaction cost” (Wigen 2015) can lead to unintentional insult in some cases.

because their underlying intentionality is obvious and their understanding suffers no ambiguity, even across cultures.⁵ Knowing that provocations increase support for retributive and military actions (Hall 2017, 6) and that “disrespectful behaviour [. . .] tends to intensify conflict” (Wolf 2011, 126), the question becomes why do international political actors resort to dysphemisms and slurs that will immediately be interpreted as straightforward insults, and what this language does.

Our theoretical framework, which addresses this question, brings into IR two major existing approaches to aggravating language—the linguistic–pragmatic one and the social identity one—in order to show, on the one hand, how insults can come to define international political actors’ instrumental considerations and, on the other hand, how they contribute to the construction of their identities. Our central contention is indeed that international insults constitute both at once tactical tools used to achieve interests by disrupting an interaction and modifying the payoffs associated with it *and* linguistic artifacts constructing and sharpening self- and other identities.

To allow the reader to appreciate the full scope and diversity of international intentional verbal insults, we illustrate this argument with many examples, ranging from Khrushchev’s vilification of Philippine’s UN representative as a “jerk” in front of the General Assembly to the so-called Islamic State (IS)’s repeated invectives castigating the “sodomite” United States and its “filthy lapdogs.”⁶ Our contribution is primarily theoretical, and ventilating these examples throughout the argument allows us to zoom in and more fully develop the nuances of our conceptual contribution. To be sure, the range of international insults is so vast, their working dynamics so varied, and their potential implications so numerous that we abstain from claiming to offer a definitive and comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. More modestly, we provide what we believe is the first systematic presentation of the major lines constituting such a picture, opening up research space in IR with a coherent conceptual framework. Similarly, our aim here is not to isolate a few processes potentially involved in international insults and to offer a systematic empirical test of their relative causal importance. Our task comes before—and paves the way for—such endeavors, mapping and unpacking a broad range of processes involved in international insults, from a multidisciplinary perspective.

We proceed in two main parts, which correspond to the two major approaches to aggravated language in the literature and allow us to expose the dual logic of international insults. The first section specifies how insults, understood as *performative linguistic acts* unsettling social interactions, alter international actors’ perceptions of payoffs and hence destabilize cooperation. The second section explains how insults, once understood as *group labels*, contribute to constructing group identities. Although we make this distinction for analytical purposes, we maintain that these two logics are interlocking. Organizing our paper in this way stresses that both the very *act* and the specific *content* of the international insult matter. A conclusion summarizes our argument and takes stock of its blind spots to propose a research agenda.

International Insults as Performatives: Disrupting Interactions

An Instrumental Reading of Insults as Attacking Face

A first way to approach international insults is to conceptualize them as *acts*, in line with an important literature in linguistics and pragmatics (the “pragmatic literature”). This approach suggests that insults occupy a particular role in everyday language, inasmuch as they allow the utterer to openly disrupt the otherwise

⁵ See Yus and Martinez (2013) for a cross-cultural taxonomy of insults.

⁶ The scope of our inquiry therefore goes beyond the realm of interstate relations, to include insults voiced and received by representatives of major insurgent and terrorist groups, globally active nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and other transnational actors.

regular conduct of communication with its target (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1978; Lachenicht 1980; Culpeper 1996; Bousfield 2008). What matters here is the very act of insulting, over the actual content or meaning of the insult. Insults, in this view, are “symbolic linguistic means for conveying impoliteness” (Culpeper 2010) that are used to achieve particular ends. In most cases, a broader audience is necessary to perform this act successfully, as disrespect or aggressiveness is acknowledged publicly.

In the pragmatic literature, insults are considered “successful” when they destabilize the target and, in so doing, create a new social situation. Therefore, insults are understood in opposition to the intuitive idea that they tend to be irrational outbursts of aggressiveness. On the contrary, they are conceptualized as potentially advantageous linguistic devices that can be used tactically by individuals conducting their social interactions with broader strategic goals in mind. This instrumental conception of insults permeates the vocabulary employed by linguists working in this tradition. Chilton (1990), for example, talks about “strategies of politeness,” while Lachenicht explicitly presents insulting “as a rational activity” (1980, 615) whereby insults are selected “with an eye upon their maximum effectiveness” (1980, 620). Culpeper (2010) refers to the “pragmatic strategies” of impoliteness implemented through insults, and Tracy and Tracy (1998, 227) conceptualize rude language as “communicative acts” that are “purposefully offensive.” This instrumental conceptualization of insults results from an original—and somewhat surprising for IR scholars—encounter, in the pragmatic literature, between ordinary language philosophy on the one hand (Austin 1962; Searle 1976) and symbolic interactionism on the other hand, chiefly Goffman’s work on “interaction rituals” (1967).

As for the former influence, insults are seen as “performative” utterances, meaning that they should not be understood as mere descriptions of a reality—“truth claims”—but rather as shaping this reality.⁷ To paraphrase Austin, they are one particular type of the “many utterances which look like statements [yet] are either not intended at all, or only intended in part, to record or impart straightforward information about the facts” (Austin 1962, 1–2). It is worth noting that, in this context, insults have been said not to belong to the narrower realm of “speech acts” (e.g., Green 2014). After all, in contrast to a priest declaring “you are married” and *by saying so makes* two individuals married, someone declaring “you are a filthy pig” does not make the target of the insult a filthy pig.⁸ As usual when it comes to performative language, the context of insults is crucial: slurs might not be insulting within specific circumstances or among particular groups of individuals (Lachenicht 1980, 612–13; see also Croom 2013).

As for the latter influence, Goffmanian symbolic interactionism—which is not usually associated with instrumental considerations in IR⁹—provides the answer as to what exactly is being “done” through insult. The key Goffmanian concept mobilized in the pragmatic literature is that of “face.” For Goffman, everyday linguistic (and nonlinguistic) interactions are largely ritualized proceedings whose main purpose is to preserve individuals’ “faces,” understood as the “positive social value a person effectively claims for itself,” the “image of self defined in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman 1967, 5). People usually tend to “conduct [themselves] during an encounter so as to maintain both [their] own faces and the face of the other participant,” thereby constituting the “basic structural feature of

⁷ We understand here the concept of “performative” in the early, broadest sense given by Austin’s (1962) seminal William James lectures, and not in the narrower meaning given in further explorations of “speech acts” (as summarized up, for example, in Green 2014). For Austin, “the term ‘performative’ [is] used in a variety of cognate ways and constructions, [...] derived, of course, from ‘perform,’ the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (Austin 1962, 6).

⁸ In the next section, we show how taking the truth claims of insults seriously could actually lead us to understand them as being, for a sympathetic audience and at a symbolic level, genuine speech acts.

⁹ Jervis’s (1970) *Logic of Images in International Relations* is a prominent exception.

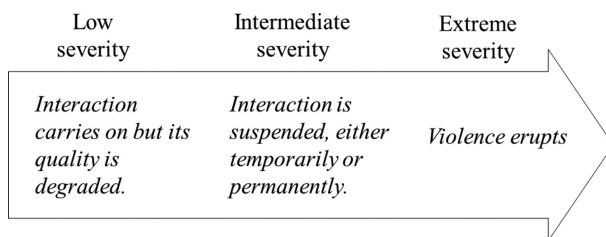


Figure 1. Levels of interaction disruption by insult.

interaction,” which is “a state where everyone temporarily accepts everyone else’s line” (Goffman 1967, 11). Insults have thus quite naturally been conceptualized by pragmatists as “incidents”¹⁰ that voluntarily disrupt and aggravate otherwise polite social interactions (Lachenicht 1980, 615)¹¹ by “attacking face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony” (Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichman 2003, 1546).

Given their performative nature, insults are thus not to be judged for their meaning (in terms of a truth claim) but rather against the backdrop of their effects and consequences. Therefore, the key question becomes to know what the implications of “successful” insults are (Lachenicht 1980, 625). The overall objective of attacking face and unsettling social interactions subsumes many variations in the intended severity of the disruption. This continuum can be cut artificially into three levels, as represented by figure 1.

At the *lowest level of severity*, insults can be used to provoke an emotional reaction from the target, temporarily hampering his/her capacity to pursue the interaction in a normal way. At the *intermediate level*, the objective can be to make the interaction temporarily or permanently impossible, disturbing the ritualistic polite interaction described by Goffman up to the point where constructive discussion is no more an option (see Kienpointner 1997, 259).¹² At the *extreme level of severity*, insults can seek to tactically provoke a violent behavior from the target, who might not only feel that social interactions can no more be conducted but might conclude moreover that conflict is necessary to suppress the source of nuisance or restore face (and dissuade further insults) in a punitive way.¹³ Because a violent reaction is always a possible horizon, and because the forms and consequences of violence are hard to predict, insults entail serious risks that are to be factored in the utterer’s calculations of the consequences of his/her insulting action.

A first, *direct risk* of disruption is that the target fails to react as predicted by the utterer. The severity of the reaction, and the related disruption of the interaction, may indeed vary unpredictably according to the three levels mentioned previously. A second, *indirect risk* involves the audience, who might get the impression that the insulting person is weak, helpless, over-reactive, or unnecessarily aggressive, and may consequently react with contempt. The audience (or the insulted party) might pressurize a third actor to intervene to punish the utterer or, conversely, join in the insulting spree. These risks can be mitigated through apologies, although there is no guarantee of success, and apologies themselves incur costs to face.

Insults can also be launched in the absence of the target, privately, between the utterer and his/her audience. In this case, the performative dimension of the insult has to be evaluated against its effects on the audience and not on the target. The

¹⁰ On this concept, read Goffman (1967, 12).

¹¹ On everyday politeness, see Brown and Levinson (1978).

¹² This helps understand the claim “democracies need politeness,” repeated many times in the context of Trump’s election (e.g., Bullock 2017).

¹³ This possibility is rarely acknowledged in the pragmatic literature yet is nonetheless quite common in everyday life, not least in sports where athletes sometimes verbally abuse their adversaries to trigger forbidden aggressive behavior. A famous example is the Materazzi–Zidane clash during the 2006 soccer World Cup Final.

utterer might wish to win the support of a potentially sympathetic audience by mocking an absent rival, or might even seek to be perceived as an insulting person. A particular risk of backlash is inherently linked to this tactic: not only may the utterer become the target of criticisms, he/she may also lose the support of the audience.¹⁴

International Insults: Determining Payoffs, Disrupting Interactions

This type of instrumental considerations directly enter the range of concerns taken into account by international political actors when calculating their interests and taking decisions. As advanced by proponents of the “neo-neo synthesis” (Baldwin 1993) and rational choice approaches more largely, international political actors seek to secure or maximize their gains, often by eliciting other actors’ reactions. International interactions are therefore often modeled as iterated rounds of games (prisoners’ dilemmas, stag hunts, chicken games, or else) wherein individual actors rationally and interactively calculate the payoffs of each potential course of action given the other’s past and foreseen reactions, and they subsequently opt for the best option in terms of these payoffs. In this context, international actors use language—and therefore insults—to influence others’ decision-making. As a general principle, international insults can thus be said to potentially distort and change the parameters of the rational calculation of payoffs and interests in international interactions. They may be mobilized tactically to direct rivals into suboptimal decisions, working alongside other types of interventions already explored in classic studies of international negotiations (e.g., “threats” or “warnings” in Schelling 1981). From this perspective, the content of the insult only matters secondarily to the intention and its perception (O’Neill 1999, 146).

More specifically, insults have the potential to enter both “power strategies,” or attempts to establish the initial setting of payoffs associated with the various options characterizing a given situation, and “influence strategies,” or attempts to shape others’ evolving perceptions of the payoff situation, in international interactions.¹⁵ Attuning to these two dimensions allows us to expose the conditions under which insults are (un)likely to unsettle international interactions, in line with our continuum from “low” to “high” severity and our presentation of “direct” and “indirect” risks spelled out above.

In terms of *power strategies*, insults can set the stage for international interactions by building a state’s reputation. As Jervis (1970, xvi) noted, the “ability to affect others’ images of the state and therefore their beliefs about how it will behave” is one of the most “important instrument of statecraft.” In such context, international insults can serve two main objectives. First, the utterer can tarnish the target’s image, either to be seen favorably by states already opposing the target or to undermine the target’s efforts to enter cooperation with other states. In the first case, what is sought by the utterer is to enhance its levels of cooperation with other states. This will backfire if these other states’ aggressiveness against the target is not already high, as these states might resist any worsening of their relationship with the target. In the second case, insults are used to tarnish the target’s image in order to outcast it as an uncooperative state, and to raise the public costs of dealing with such a state.

Second, insults can be used to strengthen the utterer’s own image of toughness. It is well known that states’ credibility when issuing threats or promising paybacks is a crucial part of their success in deterring uncooperative actions from other states (Danilovic 2001). In this context, international insults can be used in addition to other signals of “toughness” to build an external image of “resolve” that would

¹⁴These considerations are further explored in the second section of the paper, as they tend to involve identity dynamics.

¹⁵On this typology, see Bell (1988, 239).

influence any calculation of payoffs. Relatedly, insults can be used to build an even more deterring image, that of the irrational state that is prone to sanguine and uncontrollable outburst. Nixon's "madman theory" constitutes a prime example of an instrumental use of anger displays and insults designed to create a reputation for disproportionate responses, a reputation that would supposedly advantage the utterer (Matusow 1999; McDermott, Lopez, and Hatemi 2017). Khrushchev's regular emotional outbursts, inflammatory language, and insults, such as the rant and shoe-banging incident at the 1960 UN General Assembly, can be understood in the same way. Trump's heavy and seemingly incoherent use of insults—called "random insult diplomacy" by the *New York Times* (2017)—could perhaps be interpreted as following this not-so-random logic, or to accidentally produce this effect.

Yet while slurs and dysphemistic expressions have the potential to reinforce a projected "madman" image, they may also constitute the extra, counterproductive step that could undermine the insulting actor's effort to project resolve or toughness. First, if insults become extremely frequent or overtly offensive, the wider audience might get the impression that the insulting state is weak or struggling with problems of legitimacy, or that the leader is indeed "mad" and not just "tough." In the former case, both target and audience will tend to react with contempt. For instance, most Western leaders ignored, or even mocked, Hugo Chavez's rants on the United States. In the latter case, target and audience are likely to decrease their cooperation with the insulting state or wait until the insulting leader steps down. Second, and in line with Wong's (2019) work on anger projection in diplomacy, if insults are staged by a leader regularly performing theatrical outbursts of anger and offensive language, they would more likely be ignored or mocked than if they were launched in a seemingly authentic way by an otherwise "stoic" leader. As Wong (2019) shows, Khrushchev's regular anger displays and use of insulting spree quickly led Nixon not to take him seriously. This perspective allows us to understand better why most countries insulted by Trump did not break diplomatic ties with the United States, while in the meantime they slightly altered their behavior toward the United States. To some extent, most foreign leaders are now accustomed to Trump's extensive use of aggravating language and thus react less strongly than if the insult were uttered by a leader known for his/her reserve and politeness, for example, the German chancellor Angela Merkel or the Emperor of Japan. In the wake of the Paris and Nice terrorist attacks, Trump used insults to claim that France and Belgium's border policies were to blame for the infiltration of terrorists (e.g., "Brussels is a hellhole"; see Wishart 2016). Even if French and Belgian officials were offended by these insulting words and reminded the American President of what should be the nature of their relations,¹⁶ they acknowledged the incident but showed their will to continue the relationship with the United States regardless.

In terms of *influence strategies*, insulting one or several state or non-state actor(s) can alter the target(s)' perception of the perspectives associated with more or less cooperative options as a given interaction unfolds. First, at an intermediate level of severity, insults may be used to decrease the target's perception that appeasement and cooperation are possible. This tactic could be useful if the utterer seeks to raise the stakes of provoking a deadlock or a crisis. As Chilton (1990, 212) observes, "refusal to address positive face can be a cause of breakdown in co-operation, and can certainly exacerbate the breakdown if the initial cause is elsewhere." Zimbabwe and other Southern African states have repeatedly made such a use of insults at the meetings of the Kimberley Process,¹⁷ in a deliberate attempt to derail it. For example, Western officials have been called "neo-colonialists" and NGO experts

¹⁶ François Hollande, for example, reminded that "it is never good to show the smallest defiance toward an allied country." See Cook and Visser (2017).

¹⁷ The Kimberley Process is an international forum regulating the trade of rough diamonds in order to avoid the diffusion of "conflict diamonds" in the global market.

“discredited individuals who failed their careers” during official meetings, fueling Western diplomats’ and NGOs’ perceptions that further proceedings were simply impossible (Rousseau 2017).

Second, at a higher level of severity, insults can constitute a prominent component of what Hall (2011) calls a “diplomacy of anger,” that is, “vehement and overt state-level display of anger” that states perform to “project an image” to others of a “particular issue as sensitive and volatile, and thus possibly outside the realm of standard cost-benefit calculations” (Hall 2011, 522). For Hall, a diplomacy of anger includes “rhetorical assaults” (541) and “gestures meant to convey displeasure—ranging from facial expressions and tone of voice to symbolic gestures such as walking out of a meeting, terminating communication, or engaging in petty harassment” (534). Insults arguably constitute the extreme end of such expression, pushing the diplomacy of anger to its limit.

Third, in even more severe cases, insults can be voiced to trigger violent responses from the target, as a type of “outrage discourse” (Sobieraj and Berry 2011; see also Hassner 2011) that provokes strong negative emotions, a desire for revenge, and a willingness to restore honor. This effect is more likely to occur when serious attack to the target’s face has been committed. A brief detour to the recent IR literature on status, humiliation, and revenge is here necessary to expose the exact conditions under which insults are likely to trigger conflict. This literature emphasizes that states continuously engage in status comparisons and enter conflictual dynamics to restore a perceived lack of respect (Wolf 2011) or relative loss in status (Renshon 2016). As Wolf (2011, 106) summarizes, disrespect “challenges an actor’s self-respect or self-esteem by denying her the degree of esteem or attention she feels entitled to. [...] As such, disrespect tends to arouse anger and a self-protective urge to re-establish one’s ‘rightful position’”. This pressure to restore perceived status and retaliate is especially strong when disrespect comes from states of comparable power (in other words when status hierarchy is ambiguous; Wohlforth 2009), when the target feels that a serious moral outrage has been committed against them (Löwenheim and Heimann 2008), and when disrespect and humiliation has been public (Fattah and Fierke 2009, 72). From this perspective, insults enhance the probability that a more or less even-matched target will retaliate to restore status and maintain self-esteem and public image, especially if honor norms are prominent among the target population.¹⁸ Because by “initiating an open act of disrespect a transgressor signals that he considers its victim as the kind of actor ‘that can be dealt with in this way’” (Wolf 2011, 128) and encourages others to lack respect (see Saurette 2006), voicing insults on top of other marks of disrespect further aggravates the target’s dilemma: either it fails to respond, which “actually confirms the transgressor’s judgment that the victim really is the kind of actor that can be dealt with in this way” (Wolf 2011, 128), or it falls in the insulting actor’s trap by retaliating. As O’Neill (1999) explains, resisting an insult comes with costs, but in many cases political actors will do so “for fear of the precedent.” As obvious markers of disrespect and outrage, public insults can thus be tactically used to drag the opposing state into a conflict the insulting actor believes it will win. Hall’s study of the 1870–1871 Franco-Prussian war is a case in point. Arguing that provocations “alter preferences, change attitudes towards risk, and increase impatience and urgency” (2017, 5), produce strong “pressures for rapid, retaliatory satisfaction” (2017, 1), and increase support for retributive and military actions (2017, 6), he claimed that the Prussians deliberately engaged in such tactics to bring France to war. Furthermore, insults against the insulting party can be voiced by the insulted one, in a bid to heat up public opinion and prepare it for conflict, as the US press did after the De Lomé letter discussed in the opening lines of this paper.

¹⁸ Experimental evidence shows that people with stronger adherence to honor norms react more angrily and frontally to insults (Ijzerman, van Dijk, and Galucci 2007).

Be it as part of influence and/or power strategies, insults entail potentially severe long-term risks. First, in line with the classic IR literature that shows that it “pays to be nice” when interactions are repeated (Axelrod 1984), as well as more recent interventions that have demonstrated that threats and “aggressive negotiating stances” have long-lasting negative consequences for the threatening actor (Trager 2012; see also Wolf 2011, 120), the impact of insults is likely to be felt in the long run as dynamics of resentment build up. Insults will be remembered, or even actively recalled, by political leaders who may wish to revive ancient grievances in their population. Second, the audience or the insulted state may also act upon the insult to pressurize third actors to intervene and punish the insulter. For instance, the insulted state might rally third parties against the insulting state to hamper its prospects in ongoing or future interactions, or to reinforce cooperation among them. As Wolf noted, there are indeed advantages “in acting *upon* disrespect” (2011, 119, *our emphasis*). For example, Trump’s “insult diplomacy” contributed to creating a united front of states opposing the United States at the 2017 G20 meeting in Hamburg, which demonstrates that insults can provoke damage in terms of cooperation gains/losses to the insulting actor, even if it is the most powerful state in the system.

While apologies have been shown to have potential for international reconciliation and could potentially de-escalate unexpectedly severe situations, they can also potentially backlash domestically or not be accepted—and in the worst cases, be seen as insulting—by the insulted (e.g., Giner-Sorolla et al. 2008; Lind 2009; Kampf and Löwenheim 2012). In fact, two major features of international affairs magnify the risks of international insults. On the one hand, the anarchical character of the international system means that no actors above the state can be expected to punish the insulter (like courts at the domestic level), which leaves the insulted state alone to react or to hope that another state will, and which brings power relations between the insulter and insulted to the forefront. On the other hand, and as noted above, politeness is considered a key norm of contemporary diplomacy: even if this norm could be understood as “organized hypocrisy” (Krasner 1999), it is against its backdrop that insults occur and are thus immediately outstanding.

International Insults: Destabilizing Practices, Undermining Cooperation

When it comes to disrupting interactions, we further suggest that the impact of international insults may reach much deeper than what a traditional conceptualization of interests and payoff perceptions would suggest. Not only do international insults steer the power or influence strategies entailed by international interactions, resulting in various levels of disruption and risks, they also have the potential to destabilize the very foundations upon which these interactions rest. In other words, insults not only undermine the particular interaction during which they are voiced, but may additionally damage the larger set of practices within which this interaction takes place.¹⁹

To better understand this argument, we need to briefly attune to “international practices” (Pouliot 2008), understood here as “socially meaningful patterns of action” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 4–5). In many cases, international political actors’ perceptions of payoffs and calculations of interests are embedded in their participation to a range of routine performances, ranging from the almost ritualistic performance of G8/G20 summits to the many bureaucratic rules shaping who can do what and how in national or international organizations.²⁰ We adopt Adler and Pouliot’s approach to the study of practices, as it expands particularly well the pragmatic approach to international insults described previously. They contend that

¹⁹ While we insist on the fact that insults cause disruption, we acknowledge that international insults can also conversely be the manifestation or the effect of a disruption.

²⁰ For a review of this “practice turn” in IR, see Cornut (2017).

strategic interactions are “affected, indeed constituted, not only by the cost-benefit analyses leaders make, the ideas and knowledge people carry in their heads, and the discourse they use to communicate. Rather, what states do vs. other states, the moves they make, the signals they give, and the language they speak are constituted by the practices they share” (2011, 20). In other words, practices constrain the range of options available to international political actors. While recent interventions acknowledge the role of practices in change (Hopf 2018), the prevalent view is that they tend to produce stability and favor the dominant international hierarchy.²¹ This is, first, because practices “embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 4); second, because they rest on habits that “imply actions by giving us ready-made responses to the world that we execute without thinking” (Hopf 2010, 541); and third, because they sustain dominant perceptions of relational, dyadic identities (Hopf 2010; more on dyadic role identities in the second section).

Beyond disrupting the interaction at stake, international insults may fundamentally disrupt the background knowledge upon which calculations of interests and cooperation are grounded. They interrupt and unsettle the habitual conduct of international affairs writ large. This is particularly true when insults are voiced in the context of highly institutionalized or ritualistic environments such as WTO rounds, EU Councils, or G8/20 meetings. Strikingly, recent reviews of the “practice turn” (e.g., Cornut 2017) are largely silent on the processes that potentially disrupt and short-circuit practices,²² reflecting the state of the field and echoing the above-mentioned absence of insults in the literature on diplomacy.

We argue that international insults are devices that—potentially deliberately—disrupt the “straightforward habitual routines” that stabilize international affairs (Hopf 2010, 540). In other words, insults destabilize the status quo sustained by the dominant practices of the international system. Therefore, their consequences ought to be assessed in terms of the impact they potentially have on the normal conduct of international affairs *as such*. Specifically, international insults prevent the competent performance of practices, leading to their disruption, and possible collapse. A powerful insult launched at a highly ritualized moment—say during the G7 dinner or photography—will undoubtedly create malaise among participants, perhaps pushing some to leave. The practice would be suspended. The insult would not only have disrupted that specific instantiation of the practice, but also have *desacralized* the practice altogether, exposing the artificial nature of the performance to a wider audience. The Trump administration’s offensive comments vis-à-vis Canada following the 2018 G7 Summit are a clear example.

If the insult is strong enough, the practice might be abandoned altogether, and this situation might provoke a chain reaction whereby other international actors join in contesting the practice. Excluded nations may openly contest the performance (e.g., criticizing and describing the G7 as being a forum for oppressive economies), while participating nations may quit it. The usual conduct of international affairs would have been shaken, creating opportunities to rethink and reshape the hierarchy that underpinned that and other practice(s). As Hopf (2010, 543) argues, “it is instrumentally rational to break habits if the costs of following them becomes (*sic*) too high and are recognized as such.” International insults provide a powerful way to do so. Khrushchev’s outburst at the UN in October 1960 can thus also be read as one of the many attempts from the Soviet Union to disrupt and desacralize the practices of the UN, along with its periodic “empty chair” policy.

²¹ For a discussion on practices as vectors of stability/change, see Cornut (2017).

²² The panel “Confounding Conventions; Disrupting Practices” at the 2018 ISA Convention (Cornelia Navari and Vincent Pouliot chairs) identified disruption as the likely new central topic in international practices research.

Seen from the perspective of practices, international insults have more diffuse risks than the direct and indirect ones evoked above. When they bring well-established political performances to a stop, international insults may trigger unease and anxiety among the public, for whom ritualized practices are reassuring signs that world politics are stable behind chaotic appearances.²³ Openly disrupting a ritualized practice through insulting brings unpredictability into the whole system, a phenomenon that could feed impressions that international politics are in a state of flux and therefore prone to erupt in violence. For instance, when Australia former Prime Minister Tony Abbott promised to “shirtfront” Putin during the 2014 G20 meeting in Brisbane (Massola and Cox 2014), the sole announcement that the practices traditionally associated with the G20 could be altered provoked fear that the system would be destabilized and conflict would erupt.

Another risk relates to political/security communities and alliances. Practices mainly embody cooperation: G8, G20, European Councils, bilateral diplomatic meetings, and WTO rounds are characterized with ritualized practices, and are all instances of cooperation. More than that, they sustain common political identities by creating political communities (e.g., the EU) or security communities (e.g., NATO), and by reinforcing ongoing perceptions of who is a friend, a rival, or an enemy (Hopf 2010). When disrupting practices, international insults destabilize the common identity and relationships that presuppose them, a problem explored more fully in the next section.

Yet before turning to identity considerations, it is worth raising the possibility that insults come to play a part in the performance of particular practices. The pragmatic literature occasionally describes instances of a quasi-ritualized use of insults, whereby individuals voice or receive specific insults to greet or to display their adherence to a group (“ritualized banter”; Culpeper 1996). On this account, while both the emitter and the receiver know that the words used in the message are insults, they also know that the intent is not to harm. In politics, original insults are, for example, “expected” in the Prime Minister Questions in the UK Parliament (Harris 2001). While rare, such “practice of insults” does exist in IR. Hugo Chavez’s regular insulting rants against the United States and George W. Bush (named, among others, “donkey,” “Mr Danger,” “alcoholic,” or “the Devil himself”), carefully staged at his television show *Aló Presidente* and reiterated at the UN General Assembly, are one clear example of a practice being enacted, not disrupted through insults. As with most rituals, the function of such “insulting practice” is to reinforce bonds within the group, which leads us to the second section of the paper.

International Insults as Truth Claims: Sharpening and Breaking Identities through Categorization

A Social Identity Reading of Insults as Truth Claims

Appraising international insults in an instrumental way and attuning to their impact on international interactions and practices delivers important insights, and yet misses an important point: the meaning of insults *does* matter, and sometimes this meaning has dire material or symbolic consequences.²⁴ To use Austin’s terminology again, insults *do* make “truth claims.” The content of an insult indeed typically matters as much as its existence: to be called “swine” is different than to be called “bitch” not only because one might provoke more/less outrage or disrespect than the other in a particular context, but also because it makes a different claim about the identity

²³ On the anxiety-relieving function of social rituals, see Gordon (1956).

²⁴ Some in the pragmatic literature have acknowledged that the “offensive information being expressed” by the insult counts (Culpeper 2005, 37). A few have even offered typologies of the rich landscape of different insults (e.g., Lachenicht 1980), yet always in order to highlight how each type *does* something different, with the very fact that insults only “do” something *because they make a truth claim* remaining underappreciated.

of the target. In other words, insults trigger social dynamics that cannot be appreciated when solely attuning to instrumental considerations, all the more so when the target is not simply an individual or a conglomerate of individuals, as mostly envisioned by the pragmatic literature, but instead a social group or its representative.

A second way to approach international insults is therefore to conceptualize them as *categories*. This is in line with works in psychology (mostly social identity theory) and constructivist sociology, which see insults as devices that sharply and “arbitrarily divide reality and impose on it the categories of human thought” (Huston 2002, 89, our translation). As pointed by Korostelina (2014, 1), an insult can be understood as “a social act constructed mutually by social groups on the boundary between them” (Korostelina 2014, 1).²⁵ Insults operationalize the difference between groups by characterizing and homogenizing the outgroup with negative attributes.²⁶ Yet while Korostelina considers insults as “*interruptions* in the mutual process of the production of meaning of social identity and power” (2014, 2, our emphases), we instead propose that dysphemistic expressions *formalize* the social construction of identity and power, elaborating it at the most explicit level possible.

Very few social identity theorists take insults per se as an exclusive object of inquiry.²⁷ This is surprising considering that, we suggest, the use of insults sharpens the logic they describe. As Croom (2013, 190) contends, “slurs both at once derogate the outgroup and strengthen ingroup solidarity.” Insults tend indeed to accentuate and solidify people’s tendency to exaggerate and rationalize both the homogeneity of their “ingroup” and “outgroups,” and the difference between their ingroup and the outgroup (on these tendencies, see Tajfel and Turner 1979). Dysphemistic expressions and slurs should be understood as a very specific linguistic “technique of reification” (Reicher and Hopkins 2001) that makes social groups—from football fan clubs to ethnicities—appear very real, and therefore real in their consequences (e.g., Thomas and Thomas 1928; Tajfel 1982; Maass et al. 1989, 572). In other words, insults reinforce what is known in social cognition as the “metacontrast” tendency, that is, people’s propensity to “maximize the ratio of perceived intergroup differences to intragroup differences” (Hogg et al. 2004, 253). Through the categorization of the outgroup as negative other, insults simultaneously produce a positive ingroup identity.²⁸ As such, the most important audience of the insult is not the insulted outgroup (who might even be unaware of the insult) but the members of the insulting ingroup. Even though insults seemingly address the “other,” they have an effect on the social construction of the “self.”

Although their theories are distinct in some respects (see Neumann 1996; Dunn 1997), poststructuralist scholars in the line of Derrida (1992) have similarly considered that language functions by means of inclusionary and exclusionary processes. This literature contends that meaning is not established by the essence of things but is constituted through difference. The positive self always needs a negative other to construct its identity: the other has “the status of an epistemological as well as an ontological necessity, without which there can be no thinking self” (Neumann 1996, 148). The “othering” process crystallizes these inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics and can give rise, in extreme cases, to an extensive use of insults. It constitutes “a range of differences as intrinsically evil, irrational, abnormal, mad, sick,

²⁵ Korostelina distinguishes between six types of political insults, yet all are essentially group identity enhancing, representing subtleties in the ways through which insults sharpen group identity perceptions: “identity insults,” “projection insults,” “divergence insults,” “relative insults,” “power insults,” and “legitimacy insults.”

²⁶ Not coincidentally, the first major experiment aiming at artificially triggering group-based conflict had as a major observation the extended use of insults by both groups created by the experimental design (Sherif et al. 1954).

²⁷ Recent exceptions are Leung and Cohen (2011) and Maitner et al. (2017).

²⁸ Levy (2019) has argued that a similar positive feeling could emerge when the self or ingroup experiences Schadenfreude, that is, the emotion one feels when s/he takes pleasure in seeing the sufferings of others. According to him, Schadenfreude is a purifying and cleansing emotion that is empowering in the sense that it allows the self to justify its decisions and ways of being.

primitive, monstrous, dangerous—other” (Connolly 1991, 65). From this perspective, because language is unstable, the meaning associated with particular insults is always contingent. This is why poststructuralist discourse analysts do not favor the study of isolated terms and always link insults with other signs, which may give invectives a different interpretation depending on the context (see Hansen 2006, 43).

Most social identity theorists, as well as poststructuralist thinkers studying these dynamics, have been criticized for leaving power games and domination considerations out of their investigations (e.g., Bourdieu 1991; Jenkins 1994; Sajed 2012). According to these critics, the specificity of the other and the effects of the reification process on the other are not acknowledged: the other is “frozen into a portrait of difference” (Sajed 2012, 157), it is only but the “object” against which the definition of the self is constructed. We suggest that focusing on insults helps understanding this critique, as insults not only have an effect on the self-definition process, but may also impact the life and identity construction of the other. As Huston observes, “the power of insult comes from the fact that it claims to account for the specificity of the other [. . .] the mechanism that operates here is the one that combines classification and condemnation” (2002, 109, our translation). Jenkins concurs that insults “are concerned with the beating of ethnic boundaries through the enforcement of definitions of what the ethnic ‘Other’ *is* or must *do*. Power is at the heart of the matter” (Jenkins 2008, 67, his emphasis). Building on his work, we argue that in addition to being part of self-definition, the categorization process at the heart of insulting may lead one set of actors to impose upon another “a putative name and characterization which affects in significant ways the social experience(s) of the categorized” (Jenkins 1994, 199).

This perspective rests on the general idea, put forward in sociology, that insulting is a particular subclass of *naming*, that is, the attribution of a name to someone or to a group, its assimilation to a certain category. As Bourdieu (1991, 105) himself wrote, insults are “daily and petty manifestations of the solemn act of naming.” Importantly, names perform an identity function; they categorize and hence “construct boundaries of belonging, [. . .] demarcate who is an insider and who is an outsider” (Madziva 2018, 941). Specifically, insults dispossess the insulted actor of its name and replace it with something else. They are “acts of institution *and* destitution through which an individual, acting in his own name or in the name of a group [. . .], indicates to someone that he possesses such and such property” (Bourdieu 1991, 105–6).

As a subclass of naming, insults may become a powerful vector of stigma. According to Goffman, categorization is a necessary step in any stigmatization process. When members of a group meet a stranger, he explains when defining stigma, “evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind” (Goffman 1963, 2). When this occurs, the whole, complex identity of the bearer is reduced to his/her attribute categorized as abnormal: s/he “is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 1963, 3). Building on Link and Phelan’s (2001) account according to which stigma occurs when four components converge, we argue that the power of insults is at its heights when they result in the stigmatization of the other. Insults have, we noted, an oversimplifying effect on the perception of the other, which contributes to reify it, most likely by labeling the perceived difference between the groups (component 1). Variability within the outgroup is denied, its members being reduced to what distinguishes them from the reference group. With insults, this difference is *by definition* associated with negative stereotypes (component 2). In addition, we suggest that the power of insults becomes extremely dangerous when this negative labeling gives rise to the belief that the negatively labeled persons are intrinsically different (component 3). In extreme cases, “all manner of horrific treatment of ‘them’ becomes possible” (Link and Phelan 2001, 370). When insults give indeed

rise to status loss and discrimination (component 4), their stigmatizing potential is at its apex. However, “it takes power to stigmatize” add Link and Phelan (2001, 375), and so stigmatization through insult truly occurs when the insulting group or individual exercises social, economic, and political power over the insulted.

We suggest that a higher frequency and multiplication of insults, named “conglomeration of insult” by Korostelina (2014, 9), aggravates this risk. For instance, not only did the categorizing power of insults paved the way for Nazi ideology and reinforced it (Klemperer 1947; Bein 1964), but the repetition of such insults was key for shaping the perception that the outgroup had to be eradicated. From this viewpoint, it becomes evident that, in particular instances, insults can become speech acts in their own right, contrarily to the above-mentioned claim made in the pragmatic literature. While a priest marrying people is certainly not akin to an individual shouting “parasites,” the latter does *in fact* contribute to making the outgroup parasites in the eyes of a sympathetic audience, albeit solely at the level of symbolism and perceptions—which can have no less dire consequences.

A stigmatization process is considered “successful” when the stigmatized has adopted, and internalized, the categories of the stigmatizer. As noted by Elias and Scotson (1994, xvi), in such occurrences, “the ‘superior’ people may make the less powerful people themselves feel that they lack virtue—that they are inferior in human terms.” When this occurs, feelings of humiliation and isolation are usually experienced by the stigmatized actor²⁹: racial slurs, for instance, “may cause long-term emotional pain because they draw upon and intensify the effects of the stigmatization, labeling, and disrespectful treatment that the victim has previously undergone” (Delgado 1982, 144). However, those labeled “deviants” may also embrace the label, implementing “ingroup alignment” or “reappropriation” strategies whereby the categories externally imposed on them by the insulting party are turned into an emblem of pride (Becker 1963; Goffman 1963; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003). Some insulted groups go as far as openly endorsing the insulting name “defiantly, reclaiming for oneself the power of naming and appraisal” (Valentine 1998; see also Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003). The insulted group “may go on the offensive, turning the tables” and name the other group “as other, alien and inferior” (Valentine 1998), “spiraling into belligerent sequences of insulting social acts and resulting in aggressive actions, social movements, and mass violence” (Korostelina 2014, 1).

By reinforcing the positive identity of the self through an implicit mirror effect and potentially damaging the identity and the social experiences of the other, insults *reshape the relationship between the two*. In other words, their impact is felt separately not only within one or both groups through metacontrast or stigmatization, but also at the level of the interaction between them, whereby alleged identity differences made salient through insults enhance the possibility of confrontation. Insults not only trigger emotion, send a signal, or set audience-costs dynamics to motion, to cite a few processes considered in the previous section, but also potentially sharpen or attack group identities so much that violence becomes a preferred solution for both the insulting and the insulted groups.

International Insults: Homogenizing Identities, Sharpening Differences

Building on the social identity reading of insults as categories, we conceptualize an international insult as a particular form of language that constructs both identities and power relations between international political actors. In line with our previous paragraphs, we argue that international insulting is the imposition of a *name* upon the other, an action defining the alleged differences between the utterer and the insulted group, homogenizing the former as a positive entity and

²⁹ On these group-based emotional dynamics, read Baele, Sterck, and Meur (2016).

the latter as a negative one. Furthermore, when this categorization process leads to stigmatization, international insults potentially affect dramatically the other's social experiences. Such an understanding of naming does not square perfectly with the way the concept has been used so far in IR, where naming has mostly been approached together with "shaming" and has thus been linked to considerations of norm diffusion and appropriateness.³⁰ By referring to a state by its own, internally defined name, naming and shaming actors in fact *includes*, paradoxically by partially excluding, the norm-violating state in the moral community, whose rules it is then supposed to abide. By contrast, when insults are used to name a particular state, the state is no longer included within the community, it is always already an outsider. Our endeavor here is to take differences between internal and external names seriously, and to consider international insults as the sharpest possible way to operate such discrepancy.

To examine the impact of insults on the construction of identity, we use the two conceptualizations of the relationship between language and identity identified by Fearon and Laitin (2000). On the one hand, if language is understood as an indissoluble assemblage whereby language and identity are mutually constituted (i.e., discourse, à la Hansen 2006), we argue that international insults crystallize the background discursive formation underpinning positive ingroup and negative outgroup identities, and thus further reinforce it. For example, Boris Johnson's characterization of George W. Bush as a "cross-eyed Texan warmonger, unelected, inarticulate, who epitomizes the arrogance of American foreign policy" (quoted in both Graham 2016 and Peterson 2017), directly strengthened stereotypes about Americans. Conversely, the insult produced a mirror image of British leaders—including himself—as peacebuilders, elected, articulate, and without arrogance. Donald Trump's naming of Haiti and African states as "shithole countries" (Watkins and Phillip 2018) similarly contributes to establishing a metacontrast between supposedly underdeveloped countries assimilated to "shit" and a supposedly advanced United States implicitly assumed to be neat and well functioning. This utterance reinforces more classic forms of discourses constituting the postcolonial condition (Said 1978). Venezuelan Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez's depiction of Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski as a "poor thing, [. . .] an elderly man, a good dog who wags its tail at the empire" (Aponte and Cespedes 2017) similarly operationalizes a metacontrast between a weak, US-following Peru and its alleged antithesis, a strong, independent Venezuela. These identity-producing linguistic moves locate international insults in the wake of more routine linguistic "othering" performances in IR (Neumann 1996), such as those depicted by Campbell (1998) in his analysis of US foreign policy speeches. Indeed, American leaders continuously referred to the Soviet Union as "sick," "irrational," or "depraved" to construct a negative Communist identity and simultaneously reasserted the positive American one. These examples demonstrate that, in contrast to what is mostly assumed when endorsing an instrumental approach, the target of the insult matters sometimes less than the intended audience, which is usually the members of the insulting group.³¹

³⁰ Typical analyses of naming/shaming in IR focus on campaigns launched by transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998) against violators of liberal norms like human rights, or "blacklisting" practices implemented by international organizations (e.g., Nance 2015).

³¹ This perspective also allows us to make better sense of political leaders who characterize a behavior or saying made by a member of another group as an insult to their group's values. When Kissinger named IS an "insult to our values and to our society," he established an us/them dichotomy supporting his claim that "there can't be any debate any more about fighting them." When Nancy Pelosi characterized Netanyahu's visit to the US Congress in March 2015 as "an insult to US intelligence," the implied identity of Netanyahu and his followers leaves little doubt. When EU Commissioner on Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris Avramopoulos called the situation in refugee camps "an insult to our values and civilization," he appealed to European citizens' moral values and self-image toward more support for the Commission-brokered plan to allocate Syrian and Iraqi refugees across European states, implying that member states were behaving in an uncivilized way.

On the other hand, if language is understood as a causal chain whereby the use of a particular language shapes identity in order to prompt action (i.e., rhetoric, à la Collier and Hoeffler 2004), then international insults can be used instrumentally to influence the construction of identity. Consider the case of IS's propaganda and its consequences. IS's videos, magazines, and other outlets are full of insults toward groups presented as IS's enemies (Shi'a Muslims, the United States, the "West," moderate Islamic clerics, etc.), and these insults are carefully chosen to reinforce, redefine, and exaggerate, among potentially sympathetic audiences, existing stereotypical identities of both these groups and IS itself. They directly strengthen the values and social hierarchies that structure IS's identity. Shi'a Muslims and Alawites are, for example, consistently named "filthy" or "impure" "swine,"³² which deliberately uses the negative status pigs have in the Muslim tradition to stress the supposed difference between their faith and the "pure," "clean" one practiced by IS militants. Non-IS aligned Muslims—groups and governments—are recurrently named "lapdogs," "puppets," or "minions," to emphasize their subordination to non-Muslim groups, chiefly their "Western" or American "masters." This implicitly presents IS affiliates as independent, non-corrupt supporters of the Muslim cause. IS's naming of moderate Islamic clerics as "effeminate" not only participates in their negative portrayal of moderate Islam under Western influence, but also echoes and strengthens their "hypermasculine" culture (Ahram 2015).³³ These conglomerations of insults are strategically chosen by IS propagandists to sharply mark the boundaries between IS and the other international actors it interacts with, constructing and reifying each other's identities to elicit violent actions among sympathizers. Similarly, international insults may be used to alter the identity of the self *from within*. International insults are one way through which the substate politics of identity contestation can be implemented, whereby identity entrepreneurs attempt to steer the state identity toward a specific interpretation when they hope to shift the state's international conduct (e.g., Zehfuss 2001). The insults voiced in the build-up to the Brexit vote can be understood in this way, whereby many UK politicians portrayed the EU or its leaders in a derogatory way to polarize and fragment their own society and obtain a majority of "leave" voters. These examples show that it is difficult to distinguish between the two conceptualizations of how language and identity are related, as well as the necessity to connect the pragmatic and identity approaches to insults. IS's propaganda is without doubt an instrumental attempt to use insulting language to shape identities and prompt action; yet, to a large extent, IS's use of insults only crystallizes much broader discourses that predate and far exceed IS. The international insults used to qualify the EU in the wake of the Brexit vote were also used instrumentally in a bid to shift UK national identity, and yet they tabled on much broader background discursive formations that preceded the vote.

However, the impact of international insults is not limited to sharpening the difference between the ingroup and the outgroup, thereby contributing to the construction of a positive self, and the perception of a negative other. As a subclass of naming, insults may impact the life of the insulted in potentially dramatic ways. A concrete example of the effects of international insults on another state is the alteration or fragmentation of its identity. Insults can be tailored to encourage minority groups within the outgroup to distance themselves from the majority that is negatively depicted. Playing on individuals' desire to be part of a positively valued group, an insult can lead individuals to defect from the insulted group

³² This is sometimes backed by images; unfortunately, and as explained in the introduction, we cannot dedicate space here for a discussion on the visual expression of international insults [for foundational elements, see Hansen's (2011) analysis of the "Muhammad cartoons"].

³³ Insults, as this example incidentally shows, are not to be neglected by scholars seeking to examine how "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 1987) and gender identities are constituted at the international level (e.g., Tickner 1992; Zalewski and Parpart 1998).

and ideally join the insulting one. IS's continuous insults of the "West" in its Westerner-facing propaganda tactically seeks to make disenfranchised individuals within the "West" question their identity, and potentially join the "Caliphate" or attack their now former ingroup. Assigning negative traits to an outgroup through international insults can also amplify dynamics of stigmatization recently theorized in the literature (Zarakol 2014; Adler-Nissen 2014b; Towns and Rumelili 2017; Rousseau 2018). Adler-Nissen (2014a), for instance, described how British and Danish officials have been relegated to the margins of European financial and economic negotiations because of their opt-outs from the European Monetary Union, and labeled "free riders" or "outsiders." These labels did not merely assert their otherness, but had consequences on the status and image of the two states. The use of international insults makes explicit this otherwise subtle stigmatization process: "through pejorative comments and teasing remarks from other member states, British and Danish diplomats are often reduced to being primitive defenders of national interests—one of the worst epithets that you can get in the EU" (Adler-Nissen 2014a, 149). At the extreme level, insults and stigmatization of an outgroup can lead to perceptions of its members that are so radical and dehumanizing that they supposedly necessitate a violent solution. The repeated characterization of Tutsis as "cockroaches" or "snakes" by Hutu génocidaires throughout the early 1990s did certainly facilitate the perception that the outgroup had to be eradicated (e.g., Rwigamba, Nkusi, and Ruzindana 1998).

As the literature in sociology made clear, however, insults can be re-appropriated by the insulted group, which can act upon them to reinforce its positive identity. For instance, a series of European leaders capitalized on the insults aired to them by Trump, but also by Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, and used sarcasm or ridicule to reinforce their unity and positive sense of self as they faced important negotiations (NATO or TAFTA on the one hand and "Brexit" on the other hand). The strategy labeled "counter-stigmatization" by Adler-Nissen (2014b, 153) precisely envisions this type of scenario "where representatives accept the stigma but turn it into an emblem of pride, identifying with the group of stigmatized." She mentions the example of Cuba, consistently associated with a "communist tyranny" in the United States and stigmatized through sanctions, which actually managed to build its own "separate system of honour" in which it became regarded with admiration by other states (Adler-Nissen 2014b, 168). International insults were used to define the United States in the process, contributing thereby in making stigma interactive.

Relatedly, and as argued above, the relational nature of identities means that insults dynamically transform relations binding the groups and the international system more broadly. International insults can go as far as reconfiguring, to use Wendt's (1999, 258) language, dyadic, intersubjective "role identities," understood as the "distinct posture or orientation of the Self toward the Other with respect to the use of violence." In other words, international insults make transparent relations of enmity and, in this, potentially transform relations of friendship or rivalry into ones of enmity. Being the most explicit type of identity-producing language, insults indeed allow political leaders "not only to be heard but also to be seen as adversaries" (Harris 2001, 467). They thus operate shifts in international relationships by reconstituting dyadic role identities and reconfiguring friendship (Berenskoetter 2007), more specifically by altering what Berenskoetter and van Hoef (2017), paraphrasing Wendt, call the "role structure of friendship."

There are two possibilities in this respect. On the one hand, a state already perceived as an enemy might see this role identity reinforced through the act of insulting. This was perhaps the other logic behind Khrushchev's famous shoe-stomping episode—that it is less well known—accompanied direct insults to the head of the Philippine delegation Lorenzo Sumulong (and thereby to the entire

Philippine state and community), who was called “a jerk, a stooge and a lackey of imperialism” before the shoe banged the desk (*Moscow Times* 2000).

On the other hand, a state previously seen as a friend or a rival might see its relationship with the insulting state change toward an enemy role identity (or, if the state is inclined toward forgiveness, toward a rival role). In other words, international insults not only lay bare which “culture of anarchy” (Wendt 1999) prevails in the interaction, but also powerfully contribute to constructing it by constituting each other’s understanding of the kind of relationship uniting them. As Berenskoetter and van Hoef (2017) argued, the “discursive performance” of “friendship language” plays a key role “in forming and maintaining a friendship bond and the collective identity anchored in it [. . .], not simply a generic diplomatic trope but is both an indicator for, and a practical expression of, friendship.” Being the contrary of such “friendship language,” insults constitute one of the sharpest dynamics—said by Berenskoetter and van Hoef to be insufficiently unpacked—that degrade friendship into estrangement. The Trump administration’s insulting spree toward Trudeau and Canada following the 2018 G7 is an example of a weakening of a friendship relationship through international insult.

In both cases, insults construct dyadic identities in ways that meet Gries’s (2005) conditions for a higher probability of conflict: not only are insults direct hits at the target group’s positive sense of self, they fuel dynamics of intergroup comparison and competition. The insulted actor is pushed to engage in competitive actions that reinstate its positive identity (Löwenheim and Heimann 2008, 695; Larson and Shevchenko 2010).

Once the intersubjective nature of identities is taken into account, it becomes clear that international insults have potentially serious consequences in terms of cooperation even when their prime audience is the ingroup. As famously identified by Wendt, a fundamental constraint in the evolution of cooperation is that it “presupposes that actors do not identify negatively with one another” (1992, 418). Put simply, dyadic role identities of enmity hamper cooperation and peace, whereas rivalry and ultimately friendship identities make peace more probable and lasting (Wendt 1999). From this standpoint, international insults push away the possibility of cooperation and pull more closely the prospect of conflict. This allows us to appreciate the impact of Trump’s insults as linguistic acts that shatter the culture of cooperation that prevailed in—and defined—the “West,” replacing it by a culture of rivalry. When coining the concept of “random insult diplomacy,” the *New York Times*’ editorial board did not miss the detrimental effects of this behavior on international cooperation: “Mr. Trump has rattled the world by needlessly insulting allies [. . .] if this bellicose approach becomes the norm, alliances and key relationships will quickly fray [. . .] when the time comes, as it assuredly will, for Mr. Trump to pick up the phone to make tough requests of traditional allies in moments of crisis, he shouldn’t be surprised if it is the person at the other end of the line who ends the call abruptly” (*New York Times* 2017).

Again, the content of the insult determines sometimes more than the insulting act itself the chances of shifting the dyadic identity, because some insults resonate more strongly than others against the insulted state’s history, and predominant socio-historic myths and narratives.³⁴ When Turkish president Erdogan named German leaders and population “Nazis” (Calamur 2017), he could not possibly hurt more, given how Germany’s modern identity—and foreign policy—has been constructed in opposition to its past and the Holocaust (e.g., Maier 1998; Zehfuss 2001). Similarly, when he claimed that Israeli leaders were “surpassing Hitler” (Calamur 2017), he directly hit the very foundational component of Israel’s national identity and interpretation of its security environment and preferred foreign policy options

³⁴ This is especially true when this state is insecure about its identity (e.g., as it undergoes important social change or following a pivotal moment in its history, such as a defeat or a radical shift in domestic politics).

(e.g., Barnett 1999; Klar, Schori-Eyal, and Klar 2013). In both cases, the negative impact on subsequent cooperation with Germany and Israel, respectively, was greater than if more “neutral” insults had been aired. The logics of identity and consequences once again intertwine: Erdogan instrumentally postulated that the highest the outrage within these states, the higher the chances of positive outcomes in terms of domestic politics and of rapprochement with other states.

Conclusions

The present paper sought to offer a first theoretical framework for the study of international insults, taking the form of dysphemistic expressions and slurs, thereby setting the groundwork for further research by detailing the two main ways through which they influence international affairs. Conceptualizing international insults simultaneously as *disruptive actions* whose impact is felt at the level of interest calculations and even practices, and as sharp *identity-producing devices*, we have laid bare their working dynamics, shown their importance in world politics, and underlined their potential consequences in a way that enhances the IR analytical toolbox across the “-isms.” By doing so, our endeavor contributes to fine-tune IR theory to comparable practices like disrespect, blasphemy, outrage, provocation, Schadenfreude, or stigma.

Overall, our analysis made clear that international insults are inherently political. In an international environment where actors seek to preserve face and material interests alike, insults are a potentially powerful linguistic instrument to gain advantages, to destabilize a rival and force him/her into a reaction, to disrupt cooperation or secure connivance, or even to alter the structure of the system. As international actors intentionally or involuntarily engage in identity construction, insults orient processes of group association and dissociation, contributing to the production of the friend/enemy dichotomy seen as foundational of politics by Schmitt (2007 [1932]).

To be sure, our effort did not pay justice to all the ways through which international insults shape world politics. Our paper aimed to explore as widely as possible the working dynamics of international insults to provide the basis for further studies. Work is now needed to unpack and evaluate further the phenomenon, as well as to refine the claims made here. Nonverbal insults, such as insulting behaviors or visual images, are first in line: to what extent and how are they different from slurs and dysphemistic expressions? What is the actual impact of international insults? Our framework uses a range of theories to hypothesize their variable effects and provides anecdotal evidence, yet a more systematic testing of our framework needs to be done. While our effort focused on what international insults do, we did not aim to provide a way to determine the intention behind every case: the exact extent to which an international insult is the result of a strategic calculation, or seeks to manipulate identities, is very hard to pin down and likely to be different for every single instance. Again, in-depth studies should explore the level of intention and the consequences of this on the dynamics triggered by the insult. Similar research questions abound, proving that international insults, while so very common and important, were too long ignored.

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