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Expressive meanings and expressive commitments – a case of meaning as use

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Abstract

Expressives, i.e. words such as *damn* or *bastard*, seem to convey a specific kind of content, different from, or on top of, “regular” descriptive meaning. Following the seminal work of Chris Potts (2005) the meaning of expressives is often conceptualized in a two-dimensional semantic framework, in which descriptive and expressive contents are separated as a result of special rules of semantic composition (cf. Gutzmann 2015). This approach is successful in accounting for some interesting semantic properties of expressives, e.g. their projective behavior, and has also been extended to other classes of expressions, such as racial slurs or honorifics. However, it does not offer any actual insight into the nature of expressive meaning (the two-dimensional formalism operates on dummy values, independently of what they may stand in for).

The present paper offers an alternative, pragmatic, account of expressives, based on the observations that expressive meanings seem to directly involve the speaker (her states, emotions or attitudes) rather than just abstract (e.g. truth-conditional) contents, and that the utterer of an expressive is responsible for the choice of loaded, often taboo vocabulary. The account is developed in a commitment-based scorekeeping model of discourse (inspired by Lewis 1979 and Brandom 1994), in which hearers interpret speakers’ utterances by attributing commitments to them. Besides assertoric commitments (and potentially other kinds), expressive commitments can be distinguished. These are commitments to the appropriateness or applicability of a given expression, which also can be attributed to speakers based on their utterances (separately from assertoric commitments).

What characterizes expressives as a lexical class is that they always raise the issue of speaker’s expressive commitment. In short, expressive meanings are commitments to the appropriateness of strongly charged (often vulgar or taboo) vocabulary – which, in turn, can signal a speaker’s heightened emotional state, negative attitude etc.

Keywords: expressives, meaning as use, multidimensional semantics, commitment, expressive commitments, scorekeeping

Introduction

The topic of my paper is the nature of *expressive meaning*, which I will construe narrowly as the meaning of *expressives* (although, as will be suggested later, the category of expressive meanings may be fruitfully extended to other linguistic items).¹ Expressives are strongly charged, emotional, often taboo (or highly colloquial) words such as *fuck*, *shit*, *damn*, *bastard*. As these few examples already show, expressives can belong to any grammatical category – they can serve as nouns, adjectives, verbs, interjections etc. Their main function seems to be to manifest a negative (less often positive) attitude towards a situation or a heightened emotional state. They typically do not have any descriptive content, or if they do (e.g. *fuck* used as a verb to refer to sex), it is easily detachable from an expressive component (*fuck*, when used to refer to sexual activity, can be replaced with *have sex* with arguably no change to truth conditions).²

I will begin with a brief discussion of the main properties of expressives in section 1. In section 2, I will discuss an influential account of expressive meanings within the framework of multi-dimensional semantics, as developed by Chris Potts. While formally cogent and offering interesting extensions to other classes of expressions, the semantic approach is severely limited – mostly importantly, it offers no insight into what expressive meanings as such are, representing them only with dummy values. In the brief section 3, I will present some intuitive support for a different, more pragmatically oriented approach. It focuses on the speaker’s choice to use a marked, “risky” expression and the resulting responsibility. In section 4, I will show how this notion can be modelled within a commitment attribution framework based on Lewisian conversational scorekeeping. In section 5, I briefly conclude.

The semantic approach to expressive meanings is inspired partly by an idea of David Kaplan, who envisaged extending formal semantic methods to capture a notion of *meaning as use* (which, in more or less vague forms, has been a fixture of 20th century philosophy of language). In proposing an alternative account of expressive meanings, I will also suggest another way of thinking about meaning as use – in some sense a more direct and strict application of this idea.

1 Properties of expressive meanings

¹ The research for this paper is supported by the EU under FP7, ERC Starting Grant 338421-PERSPECTIVE (Principal Investigator: Corien Bary).

² The boundaries of the category of expressives are fuzzy. The characterization presented so far does not clearly determine whether *idiotic*, *awesome*, or *totally* are expressives. My strategy here is not to engage such problems, but focus on the unambiguous core examples. Non-prototypical instances may share relevant properties to some extent, and my arguments may apply to them partially.

Christopher Potts (2007) names the following properties of expressives:³

- Independence
- Nondisplaceability
- Perspective dependence
- Immediacy
- Descriptive ineffability
- Repeatability

Of these, the first three are most important for my present purposes. “Independence” describes the fact that expressives contribute a dimension of meaning which is independent of the main content of the utterance in which they appear. They serve only as a kind of comment on or supplement to the main – *at-issue*, in semanticist jargon – content and can be removed (or replaced with neutral, unmarked counterparts) without any change to truth conditions.⁴

“Nondisplaceability” means that expressives always predicate something of the context of the actual utterance – therefore, their content cannot be displaced even in contexts such as speech and attitude reports, modal or conditionalized statements, reports of past events etc.

“Perspective dependence” describes the fact that expressive content is always evaluated from a concrete perspective. In general, the perspective is the speaker’s, but under some conditions it can be someone else’s.

The other properties listed by Potts are less important, and in fact less tangible. The precise content of expressives is difficult to articulate (“descriptive ineffability”); it is non-negotiable and in a way directly imposed on the speech situation (“immediacy”); expressives can be repeated to strengthen their effect (“repeatability”). I will not discuss them in any way.

The following two examples illustrate Independence and Nondisplaceability.

- (1) We bought a new electric clothes dryer [...] Nowhere did it say that the **damn** thing didn’t come with an electric plug!
- (2) If that **bastard** Kaplan got promoted, then the Regents acted foolishly.

(Potts 2005)

In both cases the content of the expressive makes no contribution to the *at-issue* content of the sentence. What is conveyed is clearly a negative attitude or emotional state of the speaker, but this is only a comment, in a way, on what the main content of the utterance is. On the other hand, embedding of the expressive in a report and under negation in (1) or in an antecedent of

³ My focus is on expressive meanings, which include the meanings of expressives, but may be a broader category (honorifics, slurs, formal pronouns etc. may convey expressive meanings, but they are not expressives).

⁴ It is worth noting that being not-at-issue and having non-truth-conditional content are two distinct properties, even if this distinction is obscured in Potts’ original treatment of expressives. Gutzmann (2015) offers a refinement of Potts’ theory in which the two are disentangled. However, the distinction will not be relevant to any aspect of my discussion here and I will treat the two notions as equivalent.

a conditional in (2) makes no difference to what it communicates. Expressive content is not conditionalized, negated or evaluated with respect to the context of an original speech act, but should be interpreted with respect to the actual speech situation.

In (1) and (2) the negative attitudes expressed by “damn” and “bastard” are clearly those of the speaker her- or himself. This is a typical situation – there is a (very strong) default interpretation of expressives as conveying the speaker’s perspective. However, as mentioned before, occasionally the perspective may be someone else’s⁵. Consider (3):

(3) My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that **bastard** Webster.

(Amaral et al., 2007)

The most plausible interpretation of (3) is clearly that it is not the speaker’s negative attitude toward Webster that is expressed (as he or she apparently intends to marry Webster), but the speaker’s father’s. The expressive is embedded under a speech report, but we already saw in (1) that this is not enough by itself to evoke a non-speaker-oriented reading of an expressive. Higher-level pragmatic factors are clearly at play here.

I assume that the three basic properties of Independence, Nondisplaceability and Perspective dependence are the minimal explananda for a successful account of expressive meanings.

2 Two-dimensional semantics for expressives

2.1. Potts’ Logic of Conventional Implicature

In an unpublished, but highly influential lecture, David Kaplan⁶ proposed to extend the methods of formal semantics to linguistic categories that had so far been largely ignored by semanticists – including expressives.⁷ The way to do that was by attending to the rules of use of the relevant expressions (“the right *sort* of rules of use”, Kaplan insisted). Stating the rules of use in a formal setting, rather than providing a translation or a denotation, could constitute

⁵ It is very difficult to define precisely what are the conditions under which non-speaker-oriented readings of expressives are possible. They do not seem to have anything to do with syntactic or semantic embedding (cf. “nondisplaceability” above). See Potts (2007), Harris and Potts (2009) and Hess (forthcoming) for a discussion. I will briefly return to this point in section 2.2.

⁶ Kaplan 1999; the lecture is known under the title *The Meaning of Ouch and Oops: Explorations in the Theory of Meaning as Use*. I quote from a transcript prepared by Elizabeth Coppock and available online: <http://eecoppock.info/PragmaticsSoSe2012/kaplan.pdf> (accessed on October 10th, 2017).

⁷ Kaplan also mentioned interjections such as *ouch* or *oops*, diminutives, nicknames, greetings, ethnic slurs etc. The common denominator is that the meanings of these words does not seem to be of the same descriptive type as *fortnight* or *feral*. Whether or not they can all be identified with expressive meanings, in the sense I am discussing in this paper, is an open question.

an account of their meaning, because for the relevant kinds of expression “meaning *is* use”. The inspiration for that project was, of course, Kaplan’s own theory of indexicals:

Take for example the first person pronoun *I*: It seems fruitless to ask what the first person pronoun means; as Frege said, it seems to mean different things on different occasions of use. But the question, “What are the conditions under which the first person pronoun would be correctly used?” quickly yields a good answer, namely: to refer to the person who uses it.

For words such as *damn* or *bastard* it could be said, analogously, that they are correctly used to express the speaker’s negative attitude. And just like with indexicals, Kaplan argued, such rules could be integrated into an account of truth and validity, so that the two kinds of meaning present in a sentence like *That bastard Kaplan got promoted* could be unified in a single semantic theory.

Kaplan himself stopped short of developing these suggestions into an actual formal theory, but this was done by Christopher Potts. Potts (2005) elaborates on Kaplan’s core idea of meaning-as-use in a formal semantic setting and connects it with the concept of *conventional implicature*. The latter comes from Grice (1975) – a conventional implicature (CI) is a part of the meaning of a linguistic expression that does not contribute to the truth conditions of a sentence (does not belong to *what is said*), but it is conveyed as a matter of convention (and is not calculated in context like a conversational implicature). Grice’s original examples of CI-triggers were words like *but* or *therefore*. For instance, in (4), what is said (at-issue content) is that Donovan is poor and that he is a happy, while the conventional implicature is something like “there is a contrast between being poor and being happy”.

(4) Donovan is poor but happy.

According to Grice, *but* has the same truth-conditional import as *and*, but in addition triggers the implicature of contrast. Bach (1999) criticized this approach, arguing that the supposed implicatures of words like *but* or *therefore* can be displaced, e.g., in speech reports. Potts in turn does not defend the Gricean candidates for CI-triggers, but offers new ones: appositives and expressives. Consider example (5).

(5) Lance Armstrong, **a cyclist**, survived cancer.

Here, the at-issue/truth-conditional content is that Lance Armstrong survived cancer. The appositive (in boldface) conveys a CI that Lance Armstrong is a cyclist. The CI is by default speaker-oriented (it is not displaced, e.g., in speech or attitude reports), which makes it possible for sentences such as (6) to be felicitous.

(6) Jack thinks that Lance Armstrong, a cyclist, is a Formula 1 driver.

The stipulation that appositives trigger conventional implicatures is therefore immune to Bach’s criticism. The same goes for expressives, the non-displaceability of which was already mentioned. (I will not discuss appositives any further.)

Example (7) presents the basic schema of Potts’ CI theory of expressives. (BAD is a dummy predicate that stands in for a representation of the speaker’s negative attitude which is

conveyed – through being conventionally implicated – by the expressive “bastard”. I will come back to this point shortly.)

(7) That bastard Kaplan got promoted.

At-issue: Kaplan got promoted.

CI: BAD(Kaplan)

According to Potts, the two levels of content – at issue and CI – are independent and undergo transformations separately. Accordingly, any displacement or embedding can only target the at-issue part of the content. Thus in (8) the conventional implicature remains unaffected (BAD still represents the speaker’s attitude, not Jack’s):

(8) Jack said that that bastard Kaplan got promoted.

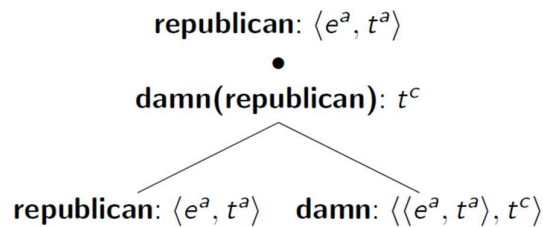
At-issue: Jack said that Kaplan got promoted.

CI: BAD(Kaplan)

(Potts initially ignored examples of perspective shifts such as (3).)

This analysis is developed formally in a two-dimensional semantics, in which at-issue/descriptive and CI/expressive contents⁸ are processed separately at every level of the theory: there are separate at-issue and expressive types, CI-functional application rules and special interpretation rules for objects that are combinations of descriptive and expressive contents. I will not describe Pott’s formalisms in any detail, as nothing in my discussion hinges on it. Just as an illustration, to give the reader some sense of what it looks like, here is a toy example. It shows a fragment of a *semantic parsetree*, which is a structure resulting from type-driven translation of a natural language sentence (where combinatoric semantic rules can be treated as tree-admissibility conditions) and which can be model-theoretically interpreted.⁹

(9) The damn Republicans are aggressively cutting taxes.



(Potts 2005)

The diagram presents a part of the semantic parsetree for (9) (a local tree) corresponding to the composition and translation of “damn Republicans”. The a-subscripted and c-subscripted

⁸ As I will not be interested in appositives or any other potential examples of conventional implicature, I will identify CI contents with expressive contents for now.

⁹ Semantic parsetrees, therefore, belong to a semantic translation language, which turns out to be indispensable in Potts’ theory, contrary to the belief of many semanticists that direct interpretation is to be preferred.

types are separate types (at-issue and CI/expressive, respectively). The expressive “damn” here has a type which takes as input a (descriptive) predicate and returns an expressive t-type object. However, the special rule for functional application where CIs are involved is not resource-sensitive, so “damn” returns its argument as well. Thus, the meaning of “damn” passes both its argument and a resulting CI proposition up to its mother node. The bullet (●) represents the separation of the at-issue and CI contents, which from then on are processed independently (the CI proposition is in fact passed unchanged to the top of the parsetree and interpreted together with the at-issue proposition).

How is the part of the tree below the bullet (●) interpreted, or in other words, what is the CI proposition? As suggested already by Kaplan the semantics for *damn* simply states that it expresses a speaker’s negative attitude. The meaning of the CI proposition in (9) is therefore that the speaker holds a negative attitude towards Republicans. Such meanings can be incorporated in the formal theory by providing lexical entries for expressives like the following:

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \textit{damn} \\ \textit{bloody} \\ \vdots \\ \textit{fucking} \end{array} \right\} \rightsquigarrow \lambda X. \mathbf{bad}(\cap X) : \langle \langle \tau^a, t^a \rangle, t^c \rangle$$

The function **bad** is the function that says that the speaker has a negative attitude towards X.¹⁰ (The \cap symbol is a nominalizing type shifter.) When this meaning for “damn” is applied to the meaning of “Republicans” we get the desired proposition, one that holds (is expressively correct) if and only if the speaker has a negative attitude towards Republicans.

Potts’ Logic of Conventional Implicature, as he called the system, is a powerful formal tool which makes it possible to carry out Kaplan’s postulate of extending semantic methods to new kinds of content. The treatment of expressives within LCI straightforwardly accounts for two of their most salient properties: Independence and Nondisplaceability (I will discuss Perspective dependence later), because the CI propositions resulting from the admission of expressive meanings in a semantic parsetree are always interpreted at the top node (thus projecting from all embeddings) and separately from the at-issue content.

Slightly modified versions of Potts’ LCI have been applied to other linguistic categories that share some properties with expressives of the *damn* and *bastard* sort. For example, one plausible theory of *slurs* (i.e. racial, ethnic or sexual pejoratives) treats them as *mixed expressives* – words that carry both a descriptive and an expressive meaning. They would thus contribute to both dimension of meaning in the Pottsonian system. The lexical entry in (10) is a toy analysis of a (somewhat archaic) slur for Germans, as suggested by Eric McCready (2010). The bullet (●) separates two kinds of content, as usual. The \times symbol

¹⁰ Considering that expressives can be used not only to convey negative attitudes and emotions, but also positive ones, or simply a state of agitation or excitement, Potts suggests an even more general translation: “the speaker is in a heightened emotional state about X”.

indicates that the type of the expression is compound: it has the (at-issue) predicate type and also the expressive proposition type (here indicated by s-subscript).

$$(10) [[Kraut]] = \lambda x. \text{German}(x) \bullet \text{bad}({}^\cap \text{German}) : \langle e, t \rangle^a \times t^s$$

(McCready 2010)

This meaning for *Kraut* indicates that when a speaker uses this slur, she is referring to a German individual (as if she just said “German”) and at the same time expressing a negative attitude towards all Germans as such.

McCready offers a similar treatment for Japanese *honorifics*: expressions (especially verbs) that combine descriptive content with a meaning that conveys the speaker’s reverent attitude towards the verb’s subject or another agent. An example of his analysis can be seen in (11) and (12).

$$(11) [[irassharu]] = \lambda x. \text{come}(x) \bullet \text{honor}(x) : \langle e, t \rangle^a \times \langle e, t \rangle^s$$

$$(12) \text{Yamada-sensei-ga irasshaimasi-ta}$$

Y-teacher.NOM came.HON.PST

‘Teacher Yamada came. (And I honor him.)’

(McCready 2010)

Other linguistic categories that have some aspect of expressive meaning could be treated similarly. Potts (2007) proposes an expressive-meaning account of formal and familiar pronouns (e.g. the French *vous* and *tu*). Daniel Gutzmann (2015) develops an extended version of the LCI system that covers also categories that are not superficially similar to expressives, like sentence mood. He also refines the treatment of expressives proper by distinguishing several types based on the relation between the descriptive and the expressive meaning dimension.¹¹

The Kaplan-Potts line of thinking about expressives is clearly quite successful in answering some important questions and can be productively applied to other areas. However, it also has many limitations, which I discuss in the next section. In the end, I argue, even if formally sound, it is not philosophically satisfactory as a theory of expressive meaning.

2.2. Limits of the semantic theory

One problem with Potts’ two-dimensional semantic theory of expressive meanings – which I do not consider very serious, but it is worth bringing up – is that it is not strictly speaking compositional. For one, the CI functional application rule is not resource sensitive (the

¹¹ Mixed expressives such as slurs and honorifics are of a different kind than ones that only contribute to one dimension, while leaving the descriptive content in place; it is also possible for an expressive meaning to “shift” a whole descriptive proposition to the expressive dimension (like an exclamative).

meaning of *damn* passes up its argument unchanged, along with the expressive proposition) – but Potts argues quite convincingly that resource-sensitivity is not essential. The flipside of it is, however, that a plausible way of defining compositionality, as a requirement that the meaning of an expression be dependent only on the meanings of its direct components, is not satisfied here.¹² For the CI proposition needs to be passed to the top node of the parsetree to be interpreted. That is, the meaning of the top node expression, e.g. the meaning of the whole sentence *The damn Republicans are aggressively cutting taxes*, is a compound of the meaning of its direct components and the meaning of *damn*'s expressive proposition. The (at-issue) sentence meaning, after all, is composed using the same rules as it would if it did not contain any expressives (basically applying the meaning of the verb phrase to the meaning of the noun phrase), as the latter's meaning is independent and not at-issue. And nothing in those rules deals with the content that comes after the bullet.

This way of framing the problem already suggests a solution – amend all rules of composition so that they take into account both at-issue and expressive meanings of the expressions to be composed. This is in fact the way taken by Gutzmann (2015) in his extension of LCI. The extended system is formally precise and compositional – however, it requires that all expressions of the language have two-dimensional meanings. This is easily handled technically by adding a lexicon-semantics interface rule which adds dimensions with trivial meanings to all expressions (e.g. a descriptive word such as *dog* would get an identity function as its expressive meaning, so that it contributes nothing to the expressive dimension, but can be composed multi-dimensionally).¹³

Because of the availability of solutions such as Gutzmann's I do not take the non-compositionality of Potts' original two-dimensional semantics to be a very serious issue, but one has to notice that the cost of the solution is the loss of the intuitive simplicity of Pott's basic idea of the logic of conventional implicature. It is easy enough to see why the meanings of words such as *damn* or *bastard* should be computed as separate but integrated parts of the meaning of the sentences in which they appear. It is much more difficult to see that all sentences should have multi-dimensional meanings, and that all expressions should contribute to all the dimensions (even if, or maybe especially if, most of these contributions and resulting contents are trivial). As an account of expressive meanings, this would require much more independent justification to be plausible.¹⁴

Another, slightly more serious problem with the Pottsonian approach to expressive meaning concerns the relation between the argument of the **bad** function and the object of the speaker's attitude. Consider the following two examples:

¹² This point was first raised by Barker et al. 2010.

¹³ In fact, in Gutzmann's extended system, all expressions have three dimensions of meaning, to accommodate different relations between different types of content, but the general idea can be illustrated with just two dimensions as I do here.

¹⁴ Note that Gutzmann does provide such justification, as his is a theory of "use-conditional" meanings construed much more broadly – expressives are just one among many disparate applications. However, this does not in any way help with what I consider to be more serious deficiencies of the semantic approach to expressives, which I discuss below.

(13) **My damn car** won't start again!

(14) I can't remember where I parked **my damn car**!

In the semantic parsetrees for both (13) and (14) the meaning of “damn” would be applied to the meaning of “car” (I ignore any interaction with the possessive pronoun) producing the CI proposition that the speaker holds a negative attitude towards the car. This proposition undergoes no further transformations and it is interpreted alongside the at-issue proposition once the whole tree is composed. But the result is counterintuitive – the most natural way to understand (14) is that the speaker is not actually upset with the car (as they clearly are in (13)), but rather with the whole situation as such.

There is no principled way of resolving this issue within Potts' theory or its extensions. Formal solutions are of course easily available – one way to get the intended reading of (14) would be to posit a type shift, so that the meaning of “damn” would be applied elsewhere in the tree and take the whole at-issue proposition as its argument. But (and this would probably go for any other solution, whatever the technical details) this is entirely *ad hoc*. There is nothing in the syntax of this sentence to indicate a type shift; in fact, there seems to be nothing to suggest that the syntax or semantics of “damn” in (14) are any different than in (13).

This is hardly a fatal flaw in the multi-dimensional semantics of expressives, but it does reveal the limits of this approach. The theory succeeds at integrating expressive meanings into a compositional (with caveats) formal framework, but it does very little in fact to illuminate the ways in which they contribute to expressing what the speakers have to say.

A more serious objection against the semantic theory of expressive meaning is that it only successfully accounts for two of the three explananda that I posited as minimal requirements in section 1. Independence and Nondisplaceability are, manifestly, core properties of Conventional Implicatures in Potts' account. What about Perspective dependence? In his original theory, Potts assumed that CIs, including expressive meanings, are always speaker-oriented. Counterexamples were soon found, and many authors, including Potts himself (see Potts 2007 and Harris and Potts 2009) later argued that non-speaker-oriented readings, in which an expressive appears to convey an attitude of someone other than the actual speaker are possible. Let me first present a few examples, before I discuss the theoretical ramifications.¹⁵

(15) My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that **bastard** Webster.

(16) [Context: We know that Bob loves to do yard work and is very proud of his lawn, but also that he has a son Monty who hates to do yard chores. So Bob could say:]

Well, Monty said to me this very morning that he hates to mow the **friggin** lawn.

(Amaral et al. 2007)

(17) My classmate Sheila said that her history professor gave her a low grade. The **jerk** always favors long papers.

¹⁵ See Hess (forthcoming) for a detailed discussion of the perspectival dependence of expressives and the relevant literature, as well as an extended criticism of semantic solutions. A suggestion that a *pragmatic* mechanism of perspective shift is involved was first made by Harris and Potts (2009).

Examples (15) (repeating (3) from section 1) and (16) come from a critical review of Potts' *Logic of Conventional Implicature* (Amaral et al. 2007). The most natural reading in both cases attributes the negative attitude conveyed by the expressive to a non-speaker agent:¹⁶ the father in (15) and Monty in (16). This is suggested by the context (explicitly provided in (16) and easily inferred in (15)) which contains the information that the actual speaker's attitude towards Webster and yardwork, respectively, is very positive and therefore incongruent with the use of a negative expressive. This incongruence is easily resolved by taking the speaker to be somehow mimicking (whether by directly reporting or indirectly representing) the actual words of the subject.

One could notice that in both (15) and (16) the expressive is embedded in a speech report, so the apparent shift in perspective can be a function of that. An analogy would be the way *tasty* shifts to a non-speaker oriented reading in (18).

(18) John said his **tasty** lunch was very expensive.

On a strongly preferred reading of this sentence, it is John's, not the speaker's taste that is relevant to the evaluation of the food. However, as we've already seen in (1) embedding in a speech report does not always shift the interpretation of an expressive – and the property of Nondisplaceability implies there should be no connection between overt embedding and perspective shifts. Example (17) demonstrates the converse point. It comes from an experimental study conducted by Harris and Potts (2009), in which respondents were confronted with items like this one and asked whose opinion it is that the professor is a jerk, the speaker's or Sheila's? In this and many other variants of the example (with different situations and different expressives), as many as 45% respondents answered that it is the subject's (i.e. Sheila's in this instance) attitude that is conveyed by the expressive. Many respondents were also undecided, which may indicate that both answers seemed likely to them. Thus, while a speaker-oriented reading of “jerk” in (17) is possible, the non-speaker-oriented one cannot be discounted. And the most important point is that the expressive here is not overtly embedded in a speech report.

It appears from these and many other examples that can easily be found or constructed that, while there is a strong bias towards a default speaker-oriented interpretation of expressives, perspective shifts to other individuals are possible in suitable contexts.¹⁷ How can the semantic theory of expressive content account for this?

There are several variants of the answer¹⁸, but they all come down to positing an indexical analysis – which *prima facie* seems like the natural choice. The central idea is simple: there is a special parameter (like a judge or evaluator) in the context which accounts for the orientation of expressive content. By default, this parameter is set to the actual

¹⁶ That is, an agent other than the *actual* speaker (which may be, and in the relevant cases very often is, a reported speaker).

¹⁷ What those contexts are exactly is not easy to define, but they most often seem to be narratives.

¹⁸ See Potts 2007 and Schlenker 2007 for two main options.

speaker, but in some circumstances it can be set to another salient agent, giving a non-speaker-oriented interpretation.

Without going into any details of possible formal implementations, let me quickly point out the problems with this solution. Firstly, and most importantly, it is explanatorily idle. There are no syntactic or semantic conditions definable by the theory that would engender a shift of the relevant contextual parameter – speech reports sometimes seem to facilitate a perspective shift of the expressive meaning, but not always; and sometimes they are not needed. The indexical analysis cannot predict the shifts in either case. And it is easy to see that no other potential predictor works better (again, this is a corollary of Nondisplaceability). This problem is similar to the one we have noticed already regarding the object of the attitude manifested by an expressive (see examples (13) and (14)) – technical devices are easily available that make it possible to incorporate any interpretation of expressives into the formal semantic apparatus, but they are always entirely *ad hoc*. This strongly suggests that more interesting answers lie elsewhere, beyond the purview of a formal semantic theory.

Furthermore, besides theoretical futility, the empirical adequacy of the indexical analysis with respect to perspective shifts of expressive meaning can be called into question. For the distribution of shifted expressives shows no apparent regularity and does not seem to resemble the distribution of other shiftable categories to which similar formal approaches have been plausibly applied. Take for instance predicates of taste, such as *tasty* – it is on Lasnik's (2005) account of these, which involved a shifting judge-parameter, that Potts (2007) modeled his indexical treatment of expressives. We have already seen in (18) that the meaning of predicates of taste normally shifts to a subject-orientation in speech reports (and to a hearer-orientation in questions etc.), while this is not in general true of expressives. To underscore the contrast, let us consider the following minimal pair.

(19) Jim said that he ate some **tasty** Brussels sprouts again.

(20) Jim said that he ate some **damn** Brussels sprouts again.

(Hess forthcoming)

The predictable shift of perspective occurs in (19) – the most salient reading is clearly that it is Jim who finds Brussels sprouts tasty. Without some additional cues, however, no such shift seems to occur in (20). It is the speaker, not Jim, who appears to hold a negative attitude (towards the food item, or maybe Jim's eating habits etc.). The same will hold for any other kinds of context where the meanings of predicates of taste easily or obligatorily shift – expressive meanings will by default remain speaker-oriented.¹⁹

I have mentioned three properties which I assume to be minimal explananda for a theory of expressive meaning: Independence, Nondisplaceability and Perspective dependence.

¹⁹ Schlenker's (2007) account of expressive perspective shifts is modelled on his theory of "shifting indexicals". (In some languages personal pronouns may shift, e.g. *I* in speech reports may refer to the subject, not the speaker.) Shifting indexicals, however, have very regular distributions; it is relatively easy to define in what kind of conditions their shifts are possible or obligatory – and these conditions can be formalized. Again, there is no similarity here with expressives.

A semantic theory of the kind first suggested by Kaplan and then developed by Potts and others provides a plausible and quite elegant account of the first two properties. It fares much worse when it comes to the third one – even if it can offer a formally cogent account of perspective shifts with expressives, it does not in fact explain anything.

Moreover, I have repeatedly stated that these are *minimal* explananda – and I want to suggest that even if they were satisfactorily dealt with, it would not be sufficient. For expressive meanings seem to be special, and very unlike the meanings of such words as *dog* or *every*, or even *tasty* – they *express* emotions and attitudes, rather than describe objects and situations; they have a certain intensity or immediacy, and reveal the speaker's thoughts in a way that is much more direct than simple assertions. The semantic theory is – by design – not concerned with those aspects, and in effect does not illuminate the nature of expressive meanings in any philosophically interesting way. We do not learn much, after all, about the meaning of *damn* by looking at the dummy function **bad**.

In light of this discussion, I wish to offer an alternative approach to the semantic theory of expressive meanings. Because I do not claim that the semantic theory is strictly speaking incorrect (nor do I offer a formal treatment of expressives) my pragmatic account may be treated as complimentary to it – but I do offer alternative answers to the question why expressives are characterized by the three main properties, and argue that their meaning is different *in kind* (not only in the way it is composed) from descriptive meanings.

In section 3 I briefly present some examples and reflections to motivate a certain way of thinking about expressives, which I will then develop into a more explicit account in section 4.

3 Speaker's choice

The first point that I want to bring up to suggest a different approach to expressive meanings is the way in which one can respond to an expressive-containing utterance, if one does not agree with or share the speaker's attitude. Expressives cannot be challenged or negated directly, but only through what may be called a *meta-linguistic challenge*. Consider the variants in (21):

- (21) A: I'm not going to mow the **friggin'** lawn.
 a. B: # The lawn is not friggin'. / # You don't hate mowing the lawn.
 b. B: Watch your language, son! / That's not a word we use in this house.

The answers in (21a.) – either targeting the expressive directly or challenging the attitude it supposedly reflects – are not felicitous. They seem to miss the point somehow. The answers in (21b.), however, are perfectly natural and exactly what one would expect from, say, a parent confronted with their teenage son's outburst. Those answers do not target the content of

“friggin’” directly, but rather challenge the way in which the speaker A chose to express himself.²⁰

Note that this is different than meta-linguistic negation in a traditional sense,²¹ as in *The king of France isn’t bald – there is no king of France*. Existential presuppositions, however, are not the only possible targets of meta-linguistic negation. Sometimes it can have more to do with differing perspectives on a situation (*The glass isn’t half full – it’s half empty*) or the choice of near-synonyms (*I’m not happy – I’m ecstatic!*). And something like this is possible with expressives, too:

(22) That BASTARD Kaplan didn’t get promoted – your GOOD FRIEND Kaplan did!²²

What I mean by *meta-linguistic challenge* is a broader category comprising both cases of meta-linguistic negation in a standard sense like (22) and responses such as (21b.), and anything in between. Two important points here are that, one, these are ways of challenging the way certain content is expressed (refusal to mow the lawn, Kaplan’s promotion) rather than the content of some additional items (like the existence of the king of France); and two, that it is a characteristic feature of expressives that they can only be challenged felicitously in such ways.

The importance of noting the ways in which expressives can be negated or challenged lies precisely in the *meta-linguistic* aspect. It is this aspect that is challenged in a felicitous response, because the speaker’s choice of expression is intrinsically related to the very meaning of expressives. Consider the two ways I could express my dissatisfaction with the semantic account of expressives (note that I’m not actually claiming either of these things):

(23) This theory is completely wrong.

(24) This theory is **bullshit**.

I assume that (23) is more or less the strongest way of saying that the theory in question is bad without actually swearing (if needed you can substitute “utterly misguided”, or “absolutely erroneous” etc.). It does not seem like (24) adds anything to that content-wise. And yet if I wrote that, or better yet, said it during a conference presentation, it would have a stronger effect – the audience would surely take note that I used language that is not normally considered acceptable in such a setting, and therefore could be entitled to infer that I consider the theory so bad, it warrants this kind of strong language.²³ (Both aspects, the breach of decorum, and the warranting of strong language will be central to my positive account in the next section.)

²⁰ An anonymous reviewer suggested that an answer like “Come on! I know you don’t hate mowing the lawn.” would also work. I am not sure if it is the expressive that is challenged here. But in any case this is also a meta-linguistic challenge in an important way: it targets the sincerity conditions of the utterance (Monty’s attitude).

²¹ Cf. Horn 1985.

²² *That bastard Kaplan didn’t get promoted – he’s not a bastard* is bad, indicating that expressive meanings are not presuppositions, as well as that there are important differences between types of meta-linguistic negation.

²³ This is not to say that the expressive meaning is an intensifier – “completely” plays this role in (23) to a very different effect.

We see in this example that the speaker's choice itself is in some way a vehicle of meaning. This is why there is such a strong bias for speaker-oriented interpretations of expressives – the speaker is the one responsible for the choice of words, even when those words appear, for instance, in speech reports or deeply embedded contexts. Let me illustrate this point with the following lovely quote from *The Wire*:

- (25) McNULTY: You know something? My ex-wife, the way she acts sometimes, the way she deals with shit... You would think a less enlightened man than myself, a cruder man than myself, a man less sensitized to the qualities and charms and value of women – a man like that, not me, but a man like that, he just might call her a **cunt**.
GREGGS: You just called the mother of your children a cunt.

(“The Pager”, *The Wire*, HBO)

In his utterance, McNulty goes to great lengths to distance himself from the expressive he will cite as something “a cruder man” could call his ex-wife, Elena. This is of course entirely transparent to Greggs, who calls him out on it, and rightly so. Three things should be stressed here. First is that despite all the hedging and embedding, the expressive “cunt” is correctly interpreted as conveying the attitude McNulty holds towards its object, i.e. his ex-wife. Second, he does not simply reveal his attitude, he can be held responsible and blamed for the use of the expressive. It's not just that McNulty expresses his feelings towards the mother of his children, he actually *calls* her a “cunt”. Third, Greggs does neither of these things. She reports on McNulty's use of the expressive, and despite the projective tendency of expressive content, she is not responsible for the vulgar language, and in effect, she is not interpreted as expressing her own negative attitude towards Elena.

The intuitive idea which I wanted to introduce through the examples in this section is the following. Expressives are strong, marked expressions; a speaker using them may be held responsible for the choice of words, and directly challenging this choice (rather than any content conveyed) is the most important way of challenging the expressive. Moreover, it is the speaker's choice that is the vehicle of expressive meaning – roughly, by choosing an expressive the speaker signals that it adequately reflects his emotional state, even if, or rather precisely because it constitutes a breach of decorum. In the next section I will develop this idea in a theoretical framework employing commitment attribution and Lewisian “scorekeeping in a language game”.

4 Expressives on a conversational scoreboard

To quickly preview the account I will offer here, I will posit that expressives are *pragmatically opaque*, in that rather than simply (transparently) conveying meaning (as descriptive items do) they focus the audience's attention on the speaker's choice of words.²⁴ That way they make the speaker's *expressive commitments* salient. These are to be

²⁴ A helpful way of articulating this sense of opacity, suggested to me by an anonymous reviewer, is by saying that expressives give rise to a *meta-linguistic implicature* to the effect the speaker is aware of breaking a standard of linguistic decorum, and takes responsibility for it because he or she believes that it is warranted.

distinguished from assertoric commitments. Attributing commitments to speakers and other agents is the core of discourse interpretation, which I will frame in Lewis’s “scorekeeping” model. Attributing an expressive commitment to a speaker is how one interprets an expressive.

I will begin with a presentation of the scorekeeping framework, based on Lewis’ (1979) classic account of “conversational kinematics”. A conversational scoreboard is an abstract object which keeps track of certain parameters that are important for the flow of conversation, such as e.g. the standards of precision for vague terms, salience of potential referents, shared presuppositions etc.²⁵ A good example is the first category mentioned. Imagine Tom is taller than Jerry, and one of the participants says that Jerry is tall. If no one objects, the scoreboard records that standard for the vague predicate *tall* has been set at such a level that Jerry qualifies as tall. Therefore, in the following conversation, it cannot be felicitously denied that Tom is tall as well, even though it is perfectly possible to set a standard according to which he would not be.

The only items tracked on the scoreboard which I will be interested in are commitments. I will introduce expressive commitments shortly, but one of the most important part of the scoreboard are assertoric commitments – commitments of participants of the discourse to the contents of the assertions they have made (this can be further extended to commitments relating to other speech acts). The basic principle of scorekeeping is that participants of a discourse should keep track of anything that makes a difference to what subsequent “moves” in the conversation are possible. And assertoric commitments, of course, make immediate and significant difference to what further utterances in the conversation are allowed, felicitous or expected.

Lewis originally posited a common scoreboard for all participants of a conversation, and there is of course a point to keeping track of those assertions to which all interlocutors have assented (to reflect the Stalnakerian common ground) – but there are also reasons to keep track of individual commitments of participants, and models of discourse that do this have been proposed by linguists and philosophers. For instance, Farkas and Bruce (2010) use individual discourse commitments to model the function of polar questions and reactions to assertions. Brandom (1994) develops a theory of language use in which the “kinematics” of assertoric commitments and resulting entitlements and justificatory obligations are crucial for an account of sentence meaning – this also requires keeping track of individual commitments of speakers.²⁶

The basic setting I adopt here is therefore this – a scoreboard model of discourse which keeps track of participants’ individual commitments (I ignore any other elements of the

²⁵ The metaphor comes from games such as baseball, where many different values are tracked throughout the game (strikes, balls, outs etc.) and the score at any given time (e.g. which team is on offense or the number of strikes on the batter) influences the eligibility and significance of further plays.

²⁶ Unlike Farkas and Bruce, Brandom explicitly frames his commitment-tracking account in terms of conversational scorekeeping. I am following his lead here. The concept of expressive commitment also comes from Brandom, although he seems to reserve it for the use of expressions that differ in inferential significance – this seems to exclude such “trivial” or extra-linguistic connotations as are relevant in (27) or (28) below.

scoreboard). I will now introduce *expressive commitments* into this framework. While assertoric commitments are commitments to the truth of asserted contents, expressive commitments concern the way contents (of assertions or other speech acts) are expressed – they are commitments to the applicability or appropriateness of a certain term or expression. They may be salient in a given context because there are importantly different ways of referring to a given object or situation, reflecting diverse perspectives or various associations and connotations. A speaker may wish to bring those perspectives and associations into focus, or downplay them (or they may do that inadvertently). Consider the following examples:

- (26) A: The **freedom fighters** succeeded in liberating the village.
 B: Those ‘**freedom fighters**’ butchered its inhabitants. They’re **terrorists**!
 (Brandom 1994)²⁷
- (27) a. John made Mary **a beergarita**.
 b. John made Mary **what he calls a beergarita**.
 (Harris 2014)
- (28) A: Do you want a **pop**?
 B: No, but I’d love a **soda**.

In the exchange in (26) speaker A calls a group of militants “freedom fighters” – a term with clearly positive associations – which correspond to her perspective on the events in question (note that “liberate” is also a marked expression). The speaker B disagrees with the assessment of what happens, and calls the militants “terrorists” – a term with a strong negative load. Both speakers may not disagree about the facts of the situation (the militants took control over the village, they killed many people), but they do differ in their interpretations, and because of that they take different expressions to be appropriate. A *commitment* to the appropriateness of “freedom fighters” and “terrorists”, respectively, may be attributed to them and recorded on the conversational scoreboard. (Quite obviously, these commitments are recorded in the individual columns of the speakers, because they are not shared).

Observe also the use of scare quotes in B’s first sentence in (26) (in speech, this could be marked with special intonation). They serve to distance the speaker from the expression and thus make it possible for B to talk about the same referent that A does, *without* undertaking the same expressive commitment. This is, it would appear, the main function of scare-quotes: to manage expressive commitments.²⁸

Other constructions can be used to a similar purpose – Harris (2014) discusses what he dubs transparent free relatives (TFR). A TFR is the kind of construction used in (27a.), a non-sortal *what* introducing an attributive verb (*call*, *think*, *say* etc.) embedding a noun phrase. (“what he dubs transparent free relatives” is also an example, of course). Consider the contrast in (27): in the variant (a.) the speaker uses the term “beergarita” in a transparent way, thereby (implicitly) undertaking the commitment to that term being applicable and

²⁷ Example modified.

²⁸ I do not elaborate on this thought, but Brandom (1994) does.

appropriate. In the variant (b.), however, the speaker – perhaps judging that “beergarita” is an extremely silly word – goes out of her way not to undertake this expressive commitment and explicitly attributes the use of the term (and therefore the commitment) to John. According to Harris, managing commitments is precisely what TFRs serve to do.

In those two examples, expressive commitments can appear immediately salient: in (27), the terms “freedom fighter” and “terrorist” carry heavy loads of assessment and emotion; a speaker using one of them reveals a lot about their political sympathies. In (28) matters are much less grave, but the name “beergarita” stands out (for most users of English at least) as an unfamiliar expression, perhaps meant as a joke. Whether it is to be taken seriously, what exactly it means and “does anyone actually say that” may be salient questions. However, we can imagine that (27a.) is said by one bartender to another, and that “beergarita” is a standard term for a certain type of drink (the ingredients of which are easy to divine) – in such a situation, the expressive commitment to “beergarita” would be no more important than the commitment to “village” in (17). There would be no particular reason to register it on the conversational scoreboard.

Example (28) shows the converse situation. For a large number of American English speakers “pop” is the standard, unmarked generic term for a sweetened carbonated beverage. Among those speakers, A’s way of framing his question would be entirely transparent. However, for many other speakers (the divide is geographical) “soda” is the standard, unmarked term with the same meaning. And so B can, jokingly, bring that up, because for her “pop” is not a default term (and, for unknown reasons, people generally like to tease each other about dialectal differences). A and B’s expressive commitments – to the appropriateness of “pop” or “soda” respectively – are relevant because of associations that are not only entirely contextual, but in fact extra-linguistic.

I will call this phenomenon *pragmatic opacity*. An expression is *pragmatically opaque* if it raises the issue of expressive commitment and therefore a commitment to its use must be recorded on the scoreboard. The reasons may be diverse, ranging from lexical to contextual to extra-linguistic; they may have to do with a nuance of meaning of the term, with its unfamiliarity to an interlocutor, with its association with a certain dialect or register etc. Expressions can also be made opaque through the use of scare-quotes, TFRs or other constructions (“so to speak” etc.). The important point is that an opaque expression brings attention to itself, as it were, or more generally to the way in which a speaker chooses to express herself. The effects of this may also be varied, from manifesting the speaker’s attitudes and beliefs (“freedom fighters”) to expertise signaling (use of technical jargon) to revealing where the speaker comes from. Sometimes (which will be important later) the opacity is resolved by attributing the expressive commitment to someone else than the speaker (again, constructions like scare-quotes or TFRs are ways of ensuring that).²⁹

²⁹ Pragmatic opacity should not be confused with referential opacity, but it is in a sense an analogue of it. “The man in the brown hat” and “the man seen at the beach” have the same referent in Quine’s classic example, just as “freedom fighters” and “terrorists” do in (26) or “pop” and “soda” in (28) – but it does make a difference which expression is chosen.

Regardless of whom the commitment is attributed to, the attribution can only be resolved if the interpreter (e.g. conversation partner) can infer a reason why the speaker takes the specific expression to be applicable or appropriate³⁰. In (26) A's reason for undertaking the commitment to appropriateness of "freedom fighters" is that he or she positively evaluates the actions and goals of the militants; in (27) "beergarita" may be a term of art used by bartenders; in (28) the use of "pop" or "soda" is based on where the speakers happened to grow up. In each case, this inference allows the expression in question to carry additional meaning – that the speaker supports the militants' cause, that beergarita is a thing, that the speaker comes from a certain part of the US. These additional meanings may be more or less conventionalized, but they may also be entirely independent of the semantic content of the expressions in question ("pop" and "soda" are entirely synonymous).

The concept of pragmatic opacity can serve as the key to understanding the nature of expressive meanings. For what is characteristic of expressives as a (fuzzy-bordered) class of lexical items is that they are strongly marked – they are typically taboo swear-words or at least highly colloquial; in any case they are non-neutral and "socially risky", as Lasersohn (2007) puts it, because their use is normally considered inappropriate (even if only mildly).³¹ A use of an expressive always constitutes a deviation from a certain standard, a breach of linguistic decorum, and thus is always pragmatically opaque. In other words, expressives inevitably raise the issue of expressive commitment, which needs to be resolved by answering the question why the speaker takes the expressive to be appropriate. I have suggested that already with regard to example (24) in the previous section ("This theory is bullshit").

My main claim, therefore, is this: expressive meanings result from the attribution of expressive commitments to speakers. They are, therefore, generated pragmatically in the concreteness of the linguistic and extra-linguistic context. By using an expressive a speaker is taking license, as it were, to depart from a standard of linguistic decorum; she is now (by default, in non-quotative contexts and barring any perspective shifts, about which see below) committed to this being appropriate. The full meaning of an expressive can only be conveyed as a function of this commitment and the context – as the audience must infer why the speaker takes herself to be warranted in this commitment.³² (The default interpretation being, for the core examples of expressives, that the speaker is in a heightened emotional state in connection with whatever object the expressive is used to refer to or describe.)

³⁰ That is why the issue of expressive commitment is not raised (or trivially resolved) for most of vocabulary – there's no question why someone accepts that a village should be called "a village" or a dog "a dog".

³¹ A borderline case are words like *totally* or *man* (in their non-descriptive intensifier uses they seem to have purely expressive meanings) – these are not taboo, but they are colloquial, and more importantly, semantically bleached. The latter aspect may account for their pragmatic opacity – a use of a word that contributes no definite semantic content raises the issue of applicability, i.e. expressive commitment. However, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, it is also possible that this analysis only partially applies to such words because they only partially resemble core examples of expressives such as *damn* or *bastard*.

³² When talking about inferences here, I mean only abstract steps of the construction of meaning in the discourse model; I claim nothing about psychological reality. In practice, the required inferences are probably processed automatically (unless there are some ambiguities as to the object and cause of a speaker's attitude), aided by things such as intonation and gestures.

Expressive commitments are thus unlike most of the objects that semanticists concern themselves with – they are not part of a combinatorial construction of truth-conditional meaning, or anything like that. However, they are an important part of discourse dynamics and need to be recorded on a conversational scoreboard, because they can influence the further flow of conversation just as assertions can.

Let me illustrate my account with a simple example of conversational scorekeeping for assertoric and expressive commitments. I will use a simple table, in which the A and B interlocutors' commitments are registered separately from the common ground, which comprises those commitments that both A and B agree on, as well as some other material, such as shared presuppositions, standards of precision, mutual beliefs about the extra-linguistic contents and so on (lets' call the whole set Presupp). I will use double-square brackets for a schematic representation of the propositional contents of assertoric commitments and double curly brackets for expressive commitments (these are not, obviously, formal representations, but can be stand-ins for whatever formal representation one would like to use here). Let A say the following:

A: Jerry told me some news today.

A' commitments	Common Ground	B's commitments
[[Jerry told A news]]	Presupp...	

B responds simply:

A: Jerry told me some news today.

B: Yeah?

A' commitments	Common Ground	B's commitments
	[[Jerry told A news]] Presupp...	

In this way, B acknowledges A's assertion and admits it into the common ground – both interlocutors accept that Jerry told A some news, so A can continue, with B's encouragement.

A: Jerry told me some news today.

B: Yeah?

A: That bastard Kaplan got promoted.

The scoreboard update will be more complex now, so let us divide it into two stages. First, add the assertoric commitment to A's column, just like with his first utterance.

A' commitments	Common Ground	B's commitments
[[Kaplan got promoted]]	[[Jerry told A news]] Presupp...	

But that is not all that A is saying – he’s used an expressive, and his commitment to this being appropriate should also be registered:

A’s commitments	Common Ground	B’s commitments
[[Kaplan got promoted]], {{‘bastard’ is appropriate}}	[[Jerry told A news]] Presupp...	

We can then imagine that B accepts the news – the assertoric commitment moves to the central column – and focuses on A’s strong language:

A: Jerry told me some news today.

B: Yeah?

A: That bastard Kaplan got promoted.

B: Come on, Kaplan is not that bad. And that’s no way to speak of a colleague.

A’s commitments	Common Ground	B’s commitments
{{‘bastard’ is appropriate}}	[[Jerry told A news]], [[Kaplan got promoted]], Presupp...	[[Kaplan is not that bad]], {{‘bastard’ is not appropriate}}

And so the conversation, and the scoreboard updates, continue. A’s expressive commitment becomes a salient part of the conversational record; it’s discursive significance is more or less equivalent to a Pottsian proposition ‘**bad**(Kaplan)’ – but instead of stipulating a semantic content of this sort, we can assume that B infers A’s negative attitude based on his choice of words.³³ In her response B can both target the inferred attitude and the inappropriate (in her opinion) use of language, but neither of those challenges involves the at-issue propositional content of what A said (that Kaplan was promoted). Expressive meanings are independent.

How does the expressive commitment theory of expressives compare to the multi-dimensional semantics approach? Although in an obviously very different way, my proposed theory can account for the projective behavior of expressives at least as well as the semantic approach.³⁴ Independence and Nondisplaceability of expressive meanings result not from the fact that they are computed in a separate dimension of the semantic composition and always passed up to the top of the parsetree by special rules (or whatever other implementation one could propose) – but because they do not belong to the semantic composition at all. The expressive meaning is conveyed by a speaker’s choice of words, which is an extra-semantic matter (hence Independence), just like the fact that one is speaking a particular dialect of English is an extra-semantic matter (and yet can carry a lot of information about the speaker).

³³ This makes it much easier to accommodate other interpretations – if, for instance, A is clearly just teasing and in truth quite happy that his good friend Kaplan got promoted; “bastard” serves more like an intensifier then, and B can infer this, thus attributing a different meaning to the expressive.

³⁴ It is worth noting that on my account the mechanisms of projection of expressive meanings are very different than the mechanisms responsible for other projective categories such as presuppositions. This is also an advantage, insofar as intuitively expressives and presupposition triggers do not have much in common.

And the speaker's choice is the only thing needed to account for Nondisplaceability, because the speaker is by default, in normal circumstances, fully responsible for the words he or she chooses to utter – regardless of any embedding or displaced context.³⁵ (And it is always in principle possible to convey the same (at-issue) content without the use of expressives.)

This way of thinking about expressives naturally accounts for the fact that they can only be challenged meta-linguistically, as expressive commitments are, in a concrete sense, meta-linguistic: they are commitments to a certain way of speaking, not (like assertoric commitments) to a propositional content. Descriptive contents can be inferred from the use of expressives (in the update example, *that A holds a negative attitude towards Kaplan* is a descriptive proposition in itself), but they are not what is directly manifested by it. Thus, a meta-linguistic challenge is, in fact, a more direct way of challenging expressives.

One of the problems I pointed out in the semantic theory was that it forces us to turn to *ad hoc* solutions such as type shifts to account for a kind of scope ambiguity characteristic of expressives. By saying *That bastard Kaplan got promoted* speaker A in the update example may be expressing his attitude towards the individual Kaplan or towards the situation as such. It's entirely possible that he would continue the exchange above by saying something like *Yeah, I know he's OK, I'm just upset for being passed over again*. Instead of assuming type shifts, on my pragmatic account we can posit that B's inferences regarding the reasons for A's expressive commitment to *bastard* may be more or less specific. Where the semanticists need to assume one or another meaning for *bastard* (taking an e-type or a t-type expression as argument), and subsequently posit a reanalysis if a different interpretation is forced, we can now simply take the meaning of *bastard* to be underdetermined until the reasons for the speaker's use of strong language are made clear. For the only thing that is fixed with regard to this word is that it warrants attribution of an expressive commitment to the speaker.

A more important problem which I discussed concerned the issue of perspective shifts and non-speaker-oriented interpretations of expressives. The pragmatic account I am suggesting offers a straightforward solution. We have already seen that expressive commitments can be explicitly manipulated: disavowed using scare-quotes or directly attributed to someone other than the speaker with TFRs. It should be noted that a speech report does not necessarily entail attribution of any relevant expressive commitments to the reported speaker, although it can make it more natural. Consider the following two examples:

(29) My 3-year old asked if she could play with my **3D printer** this morning – she called it the 'magic spitting machine', actually.

(30) John said he gave Mary a **beergarita**. Whatever that is.

In (30) the original question of the 3-year old is framed using a term that she apparently hadn't known (and so could not be committed to its appropriateness). This does not make the report infelicitous or deviant – to repeat, the actual speaker is by default responsible for the choice of words, even in reports. However, this default can be circumvented. In (29) the

³⁵ The only regular way of obviating this responsibility is direct quotation – and accordingly, expressives in direct quotes are not taken to express the quoting speaker's attitudes, but the original utterer's.

expressive commitment to the applicability of “beergarita” is attributed to John. The felicitous continuation makes clear that the speaker wouldn’t even know if the name applied to a given object (a drink, presumably) or not.

Such implicit shifts in expressive commitments are commonplace – and this observation is all that is needed to account for perspective shifts with regard to expressive meanings.³⁶ Example (3), repeated here again as (31), is very similar to (30). The context makes it clear that the expressive commitment is to be attributed to the subject of the report, as the actual speaker would not use the word “beergarita” or “bastard”, respectively. Things are much less clear in (17), repeated as (32), where the expressive is not overtly embedded – which is reflected in the differing interpretations among the respondents in Harris and Potts’ original experiment – but it is easy enough to imagine a context in which there are better reasons to attribute the negative expression to the subject than to the speaker.

(31) My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that **bastard** Webster.

(32) My classmate Sheila said that her history professor gave her a low grade. The **jerk** always favors long papers.

The immediate effect of the use of an expressive is to raise the issue of expressive commitment – to make this choice of words salient and bring the hearer’s attention to it. The resolution of this issue may consist in attributing the commitment to the actual speaker (the default option) and inferring a reason why they are speaking this way – why they take it that strong, perhaps taboo language is warranted in this situation. Or, in suitable circumstances, the issue may be resolved by assuming that the expressive commitment is to be attributed to someone else than the speaker. This can happen, specifically, when the speech and the manner of expression of another agent is made salient enough in the context. This happens clearly in (31) and potentially in (32) – the point of the reports in both cases is not only what the original speakers said, but also how they said it (the father screamed in a fit of rage, Sheila was extremely upset etc.).³⁷

5 Conclusion

In this discussion I tackled the question of the nature of expressive meaning, insofar as it is revealed in the functioning of expressives. I argued that a multi-dimensional semantic approach, which has become quite influential in the last years, is severely limited and beyond showing how expressives can be technically integrated in a formal semantic framework, offers no philosophical insight into the aspects of language use that are specific to them. As an alternative, I proposed a pragmatic account which focuses on the most salient feature of

³⁶ Still, the speaker default in expressives seems to be stronger than with other subsets of the lexicon – but that, as I argued, results from the inherent opacity of expressives (which in turn is a function of their taboo or low-register status).

³⁷ See Hess forthcoming for an elaboration of this aspect of the pragmatic account and a discussion of the factors potentially contributing to perspective shifts of expressive meanings.

expressives as a unique subset of the lexicon and places expressive meanings in a framework of conversational scorekeeping with commitment attribution.

The account I proposed is indeed multi-dimensional in a stronger and more specific sense than the Pottsian logic of conventional implicature. The latter assimilates expressive meanings to descriptive ones, only ensuring that they remain separated in the semantic composition. On my view, expressive meanings turn out to be of a very different kind than descriptive meanings – they are constituted at a different level, as it were. It is the level of commitment attribution, not of truth-value computation; it concerns more directly what people do with their words than what those words denote.

In this sense, the theory of expressive meaning I propose here is also a more direct implementation of the idea of *meaning as use*. The meanings of expressives are constituted directly in their use on this account: it is by choosing to utter those very words that a speaker expresses her attitudes and emotions. If we look at expressive meanings this way, it is possible to extend this line of thought beyond the relatively narrow class of words such as *bastard* and *damn*. Slurs (racial, ethnic, homophobic etc. insults) are a potential application: they do not carry any specific descriptive contents, but in choosing a derogatory word for a given group of people instead of a neutral, non-offensive term, a speaker makes her attitudes towards the target group manifest by undertaking an expressive commitment to the slur being appropriate. Other categories may also be included, even non-lexical ones like politeness – expressivity is, after all, a pervasive feature of language use. Expressives in the narrow sense are simply specialized tools to bring expressivity and subjectivity of speakers to the foreground.

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