

Expressives and the limits of compositionality

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APA Pacific Division, Symposium on the Semantics and
Pragmatics of Pejoratives, March 28, 2013



Overview

Goal

Some expressives do not contribute compositionally, but rather only pragmatically, by contextualizing the at-issue content.

Expressives of interest

- 1 the **damn** dog
- 2 **damn** good
- 3 abso-**freaking**-lutely
- 4 Ala-**damn**-bama
- 5 that **jerk/cretin/bastard/twerp/creep/skinflint** Kresge
- 6 Kresge ... the **jerk/cretin/bastard/twerp/creep/skinflint**

No claims made about

slurs or predicative expressives like *Dirk is an asshole*.

Morphosyntactic integration



the { damn } dog
 { darn }
 der verdammte Hund
 (German)

this idiot Sami
 ha-l-habiile Sami
 (Arabic)

who in the { hell }
 { heck }
 { Sam hill }
 { world }

Chris, you fool!
 Ich idiot!
 Idiotka ja! (Russian)

abso-friggin-lutely
 un-bloody-believable

Damn!

Ouch!

Oops!

(grunts, growls, cheers, gasps)

Compositionality

Sven Lauer:



Definition (Downward compositionality)

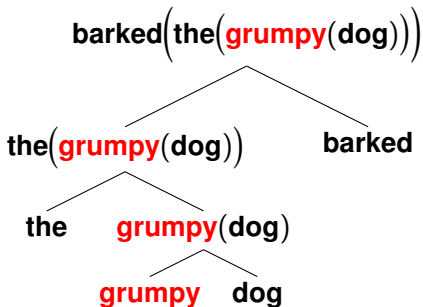
An expression e is downward-compositional iff the semantic contribution of e is a function from the meaning of the expression e syntactically combines with.

Definition (Upward compositionality)

An expression e is upward compositional iff the semantic contribution of expressions containing e are a function of the meaning of e (and its other constituents).

The usual case: upward and downward compositionality

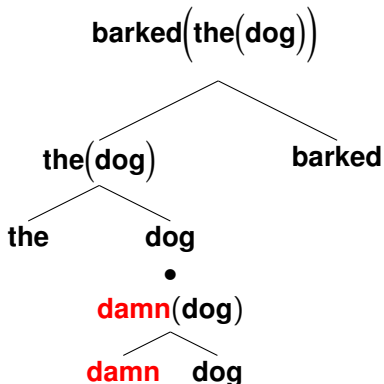
The grumpy dog barked.



- **Downward:** **grumpy** takes its complement as an argument
- **Upward:** **grumpy** contributes to the argument of **the** (and, by compositionality, all higher meanings)

Conventional implicature: only downward compositional

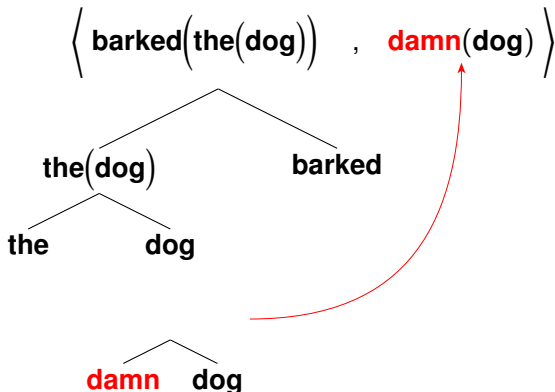
The damn dog barked.



- **Downward:** **damn** takes its complement as an argument
- **No upward:** **damn(dog)** is invisible to the rest of the compositional process

Conventional implicature: only downward compositional

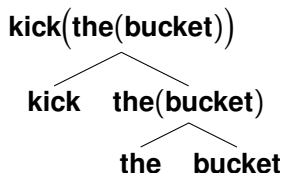
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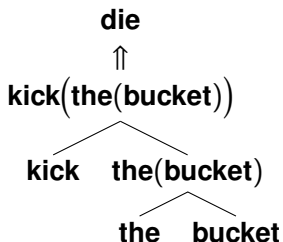
Only upward compositional?

- Terminal nodes without arguments are trivially only upward.
- More interesting: idioms as purely upward.



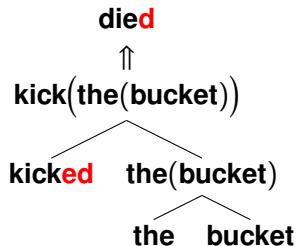
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Only upward compositional?

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- More interesting: idioms as purely upward.



- (Tense and aspect in idioms *are* upward; Nunberg et al. 1994; Sag et al. 2012)

Please: neither downward nor upward (Lauer)

- 1 Please stop humming.
- 2 Stop humming, please.
- 3 Could you please stop humming?
- 4 Could you stop humming, please?
- 5 Please, I need you to stop humming.
- 6 I need you to please stop humming.
- 7 ...

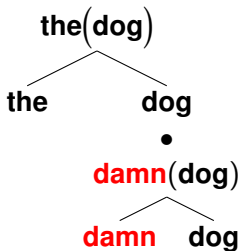
Please and syntactic position

Strategy	Politeness	Example
1. Gratitude	0.87 ***	I really appreciate that you've done them.
2. Deference	0.78 ***	Nice work so far on your rewrite.
3. Greeting	0.43 ***	Hey , I just tried to ...
4. Apologizing	0.36 ***	Sorry to bother you ...
5 Please	0.49 ***	Please do not remove warnings ...
6 Please start	-0.30 *	Could you please say more...
7. Indirect (btw)	0.63 ***	By the way , where did you find ...
8. Direct question	-0.27 ***	What is your native language?
9. Direct start	-0.43 ***	So can you retrieve it or not?
10. Counterfactual modal	0.47 ***	Could/Would you ...
11. Indicative modal	0.09	Can/Will you ...
12. Hedges	0.14 ***	I suggest we start with ...
13. Factuality	-0.38 ***	In fact you did link, ...

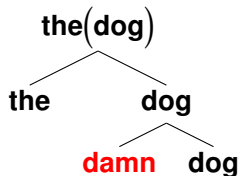
Table: From an annotation project we recently completed (10K requests).

Expressives: neither downward nor upward

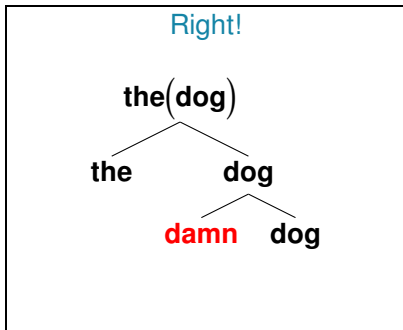
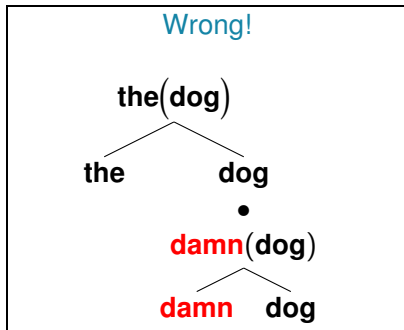
Wrong!



Right!



Expressives: neither downward nor upward



Expressives of interest

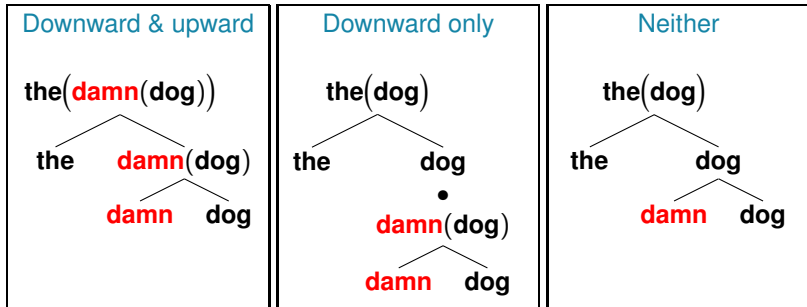
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- 4 Ala-**damn**-bama
- 5 that **cretin** Kresge
- 6 Kresge ... the **jerk**

Plan

- 1 Evidence that these expressives aren't upward compositional
- 2 Evidence that they aren't downward compositional
- 3 Evidence that expressives cannot be semantically bound
- 4 Towards a pragmatics for expressives

No upward compositionality

The evidence in this section rules out the leftmost analysis but doesn't distinguish between the other two.



The usual case in terms of scope

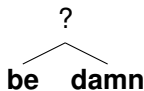
- 1 I didn't **fucking** lose. (cf. “fucking” lose)
- 2 I might **fucking** feed the dog — it depends on my mood.
- 3 If I **fucking** feed the dog, I should calm down.
- 4 Usually, when I pour wine, the bottle **fucking** drips.
- 5 That **idiot** Kresge was late for work yesterday. (#But he's no idiot today, because today he was on time.)
- 6 The complaint says that the **idiot** filled in a box labeled “default CPC bid” but left blank the box labeled “content CPC bid (optional)”

Problem

It is very hard to characterize what these expressives contribute to simple sentences, to say nothing of trying to sort out what their scope is.

Predicative positions

- 1 The dog is furry.
- 2 *The dog is **damn**.
- 3 The **friggin'** dog is on the couch.
- 4 *The dog is **friggin'**.
- 5 The **bloody** dog is on the couch.
- 6 The dog is **bloody**. (literal only)
- 7 *I consider the dog **bloody/damn/friggin**.



NP or no NP (Pullum and Rawlins 2005)

The NPs must be string identical.

- 1 Water or no water — I'm not hiking in this heat.
- 2 *Water or no H₂O — I'm not hiking in this heat.
- 3 Cold water or no cold water — I'm not hiking in this heat.
- 4 *Water or no cold water — I'm not hiking in this heat.

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Expressives escape the restriction.

- 5 Water or no **fucking** water — I'm not hiking in this heat.
- 6 Wound or no **bloody** wound — you have to wait to see a doctor like everyone else.

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Generalization

The relevant notion of matching is semantic and excludes the expressive dimension.

Quick note on methods

- Intuitions about the limits of these constructions are not stable.
- The instability is exacerbated by musing.
- So we queried Google thousands of times using terms like

"* * or no * *"

downloaded the results and then used regular expressions to identify cases of interest.

as AP or as AP can be (Potts et al. 2009)

The NPs must be string identical.

- 1 I'm as sure as sure can be.
- 2 *I'm as sure as certain can be.
- 3 *I'm as sure as absolutely sure can be.
- 4 as secular and religiously neutral as neutral and secular can be.

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Hindi correlatives (Potts et al. 2009)

Hindi correlatives of the form *Which NP ... , that NP ...* require that the two NPs match. Epithets are the exception. Some semi-English to give you a sense of the Hindi pattern.

- 1 Which man you were talking with, that man is suing me.
- 2 *Which man you were talking with, that teacher is suing me.
- 3 Which man you were talking with, that **jerk** is suing me.

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Japanese predicate topicalization (Potts et al. 2009)

Japanese predicate clefts are matching constructions. The only permitted mismatches involve honorifics or antihonorifics.

- 1 Read, I read (but didn't necessarily understand).
- 2 *Read, I perused.
- 3 Read, the professor read.**HONORIFIC.**

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Ellipsis resolution (Potts et al. 2009)

Expressive modifiers can be ignored under ellipsis: this sets them apart from other modifiers.

① A: I saw your fucking dog in the park.

B: No, you didn't Δ — you couldn't have Δ . The poor thing passed away last week.

② A: I saw a shaggy dog in the park.

B: I did too. $\#\{\text{The one I saw/It}\}$ had no hair.

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Generalization

The relevant notion of antecedent–ellipsis matching is semantic and excludes the expressive dimension.

Indexical binding (German version)

- 1 Only you did your homework. (addressed to Sandy)
 - a. Sandy is the only x such that x did Sandy's homework.
 - b. Sandy is the only x such that x did x 's homework.

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only you.FORMAL have your.FORMAL homework done

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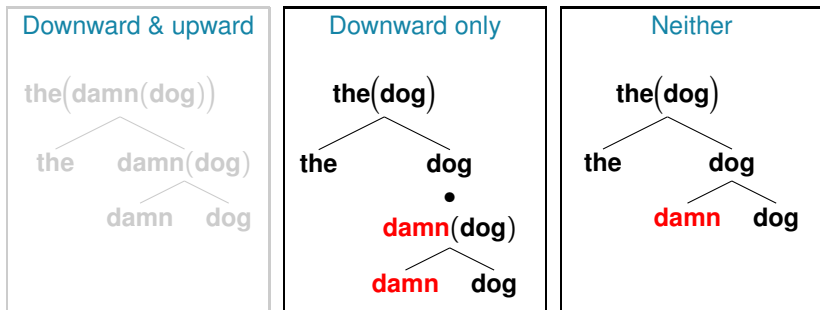
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Generalization

Pronouns are feature bundles. Their honorific components cannot be bound because they are not upward compositional.

No downward compositionality

The central theme of the above examples is that the expressives under discussion here are not the arguments to higher functors. This rules out the left analysis.



Arguments against the middle account seek to show that *damn* does not semantically modify *dog* here.

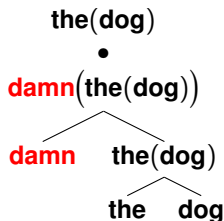
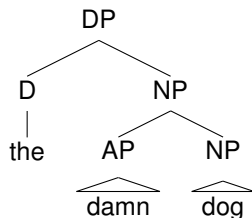
Attributive uses as adnominal

A syntax–semantics mismatch:

Example (The **damn** dog barked.)

⇒ heightened emotion about dogs

→ heightened emotion about the unique salient dog



Not devastating, though. To Chris Barker and Chung-Chieh Shan, this is a familiar case of a word acting on its semantic environment (Barker 2002, 2004; Barker and Shan 2008; Barker et al. 2010).

Attributive uses as non-attributive

- 1 The **damn** dog barked.
 - ⇒ heightened emotion about dogs
 - ⇒ heightened emotion about the unique salient dog
- 2 I stubbed my **damn** toe.
 - ⇒ heightened emotion about toes
 - ⇒ heightened emotion about the speaker's toe
- 3 Linnea Faris, a woman from Michigan who was wearing a “Remember Alex” T-shirt, shook her head in disbelief. Faris told me, “My husband doesn't really understand it. I can't fully explain it myself. But I've spent hours crying over that **damn** bird.”

The meanings conveyed

“Sam bought that damn bike.”

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- 3 **Solidarity**: You and I have been losing races to Sam ever since . . .

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(This is just a glimpse of the variation.)

Adverbial or generalized intensive?

Degree adverbs?

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 damn good/silly | 4 very good/silly |
| 2 fucking amazing/awful | 5 really amazing/awful |
| 3 freaking gorgeous/gross | 6 extremely gorgeous/gross |

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Non-gradable adjectives

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| 3 freaking acquainted | 6 extremely acquainted |

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Proposal

Expressives intensify without directly modifying the standard of comparison. Similar to *big*, *big*, *big dog* and *iiiiiiiiiiig dog*.

Expressive infixation: distribution

Small sample from the Urban Dictionary

a-freaking-dorable
A-fucking-ruba
absa-fucking-lootly
abso-motherfucking-lutely
Ala-fuckin-bama
al-fucking-together
all-fucking-ways
ama-fucking-zing
am-dam-nesia
astro-fucking-nomical
auto-fucking-matically
be-fucking-cuz
Cali-fuckin-fornia
Cinder-fuckin-rella
confi-fucking-dential
con-fuckin-dential
con-fuckin-fused
congrat-u-fucking-lations
conver-fuckin-sation
de-fucking-lirious

de-fucking-nied
di-fucking-sgusting
dis-fucking-gusting
ele-fucking-phant
enter-fucking-tainment
eu-fucking-reka
fan-friggin-tastic
fan-damn-tastic
for-fuckin-ever
for-fuckin-got
gi-friggin-ormous
guaran-damn-tee
guaran-fucking-tee
halle-freakin-leujah
hi-fucking-larious
ignor-fucking-ant
in-fucking-deed
lade-freaking-da
mon-fuckin-day
No-fuckin-vember

Okla-fucking-homa
out-fucking-standing
pa-fucking-thetic
pa-fuckin-lease
pa-fuckin-thetic
panda-fuckin-monium
pro-fucking-fessional
re-fuckin-gardless
ri-god-damn-diculous
sen-fucking-sational
Taber-fucking-nac
trans-fucking-mission
trauma-fucking-tized
Tues-fuckin-day
unbe-bloody-lievable
un-freakin-beliveable
un-fucking-fassbar
Uni-fucking-code
what-fucking-ever
whoop-dee-damn-doo

Expressive infixation: distribution

McMillan (1980):

GLOSSARY

abso-bally-lutely 1914, 1924, 1929 *OEDS* (1972) sv *absolutely* adv 1942 Berrey and Van den Bark *American Thesaurus of Slang* 845.

abso-bleeding-lutely 1947 S Boal *New York Post* 11 June quoted in Montague (1967, 270) “At last you’ve come back to the only friends you abso-bleedinglutely have.”

abso-blessed-lutely 1923 J Manchon *Le Slang* 84 “This information was abso-blessed-lutely good.”

abso-bloody-lutely 1934 Weseen *Dictionary of American Slang* 301 1935 Weekley *Something about Words* 24 1936 Mencken *The American Language* 314 1942 Berrey and Van den Bark *American Thesaurus of Slang* 845 1945 Mencken *The American Language* Supp 1 683 (Australian) 1970 Partridge *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* 66 1975 Bolinger *Aspects of Language* 58

abso-blooming-lutely 1956 A J Lerner and F Lowe *My Fair Lady* Philips Mini-groove recording AA 07245.1 “Wouldn’t it be absobloomin’lutely lovely?” (from lyric of song “Wouldn’t It Be Lovely”) 1972 Hartmann and Stork *Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* sv *infix* “An example from English might be the colloquial *abso-bloomin’-lutely*.”

Expressive infixation: distribution

McMillan (1980):

- God eternally damn it** ca 1938 J Alsop in 1974 *Washington Post* 18 Dec A-15/2
“God eternally damn it, Joe, you don’t even seem to read your own god-dam newspapers.”
- good and bloody ready** 1961 N Culotta (J O’Grady) *They’re a Weird Mob* 159
“When I’m good an’ bloody ready.”
- guaran-absolutely-tee** 1976 Sept reported by S Zeigler as heard at the Univ of Alabama
- guaran-damn-tee** 1973 T Wicker *Facing the Lions* 285 “I guarandamtee you that.” J D MacDonald *The Turquoise Lament* 193 “I can guaran-damn-tee you can’t make ol’ Howie mad.” 1975 Mar 14 “Police Woman” NBC-TV
“You wouldn’t be lying here now, I’ll guarandamntee ye.”
- guaran-goddamn-tee** 1971 J D MacDonald *A Tan and Sandy Silence* 251 “And on the bottom of the package in small print was the guaran-goddamn-tee.”

Expressive infixation: distribution

McMillan (1980):

- take your bloody time** 1976 R Campbell *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* 62 “‘You took your bloody time,’ Edmond said.”
- tally-bloody-ho** 1975 D Francis *High Stakes* 148 “‘We’re off,’ I said. ‘Stratford tomorrow.’ ‘Tally bloody ho!’”
- terra-extremely-firma** 1976 D Francis *In the Frame* 136 “Mine, it appeared, had suffered from the full thud of my five-eleven frame hitting terra extremely firma.”
- thanks a fucking lot** 1976 S Dobyns *Saratoga Longshot* 192 “Thanks a fucking lot.”
- theo-jolly-logical** 1846 W Carleton *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* 6: 186 “Theo-jollylogical vartues: the four sins that cry to heaven for vengeance.”
- to fucking surrender** 1976 P F Kluge *The Day That I Die* 105 “We are not going to fucking surrender!”

Expressive infixation: distribution

McMillan (1980):

Remarkably few forms occur as inserts: **sixteen expletives**: *bloodiest, bloody, bloody-dictator-Stalin, bloody Fascist, by God, by heaven, damn, the devil, for God's sake, the fuck, fucking, fucking-A, goddamn, goddamned, the hell, mother-fucking*; **eight euphemisms**: *bally, bleeding, bleep, blessed, blooming, the fug, fugging, jolly*; **fourteen neutral terms (which may be euphemistic)**: *absolutely, awfully, down the drain, eternally, extremely, flaming, flipping, H., H. McCarty, H. Particular, one-hundred-percent, posi, Pygmalion, something-or-other*. Of these, only 23 are used for lexical infixing, as distinct from syntactic interposing (discussed below), and a small handful account for most of the forms. I have found none of the four-letter words for genitalia or excreta used as inserts (but see note 7).

Expressive infixation: targets

- The expressive seems to have no meaningful argument.
- We might allow another syntax–semantics mismatch:

fan-fucking-tastic ⇒ **fucking**(fantastic)

- But what function is **fucking** on this account? What is it doing to its argument?
- If we accept my earlier argument that it isn't changing the standard of comparison, then the semantics looks unhelpful.

Urban Dictionary definitions

Fan-fucking-tastic

- 1 “Something not good, said with sarcasm.”
- 2 “Really fantastic. Often used with a sarcastic tone.”
- 3 “A bastardization of the word ‘fantastic’ with the word ‘fuck’ added in for intensification.”
- 4 “Something good or bad in a big way. Usually said in a sarcastic voice.”
- 5 “i.e. WOW! or thats good.. or another word for brilliant lol”
- 6 “To emphasize the greatness of sexual activity with a mechanical or manual fan.”
- 7 “Absolutely great, better than fantastic, emphasized”

Urban Dictionary definitions

Abso-fucking-lutely

- 1 “Absolutely, with bells on! Has to be said with emphasis.”
- 2 “Meaning absolutely, but with meaning. :)”
- 3 “An expression used to convey supreme agreement.”
- 4 “A combination of the expressions ‘absolutely’ and ‘fuck yeah’ (absofuckinglylutely) that means a very firmative yes”
- 5 “you can use this word to express the same of ‘without doubt’.”
- 6 “something is so right, its crazy.”
- 7 “so absolute, it’s fucking crazy.”
- 8 “Something that you are definitely certain on and there is no way it is a mistake”

Urban Dictionary definitions

Cali-fucking-fornia

- 1 “A derogatory remark used when seeing a Californian living or driving in the Northwest.”
- 2 “you can also use the term to express amazement and delight for the State of Cali.”

Mon-fuckin-day

- 1 “when you’re having a fuckin monday and you just want it to end, then you realize that the next day won’t be better, then tuesduckinday comes alive.”

No-fuckin-vementer

- 1 “The month of November, but enhanced with the sheer chaotic glory caused by the Return of the Jamesernaut.”

What does control positioning?

If expressives don't take semantic arguments, what controls their positioning and their senses?

- Expressives are syntactically restricted.
- Expressives affect prosody.
- Expressives affect information structure.
- Proximity to a taboo element could matter.

Semantic binding of expressive meanings?

- Semantic binding of an expressive element would be a kind of upward compositionality.
- We saw earlier that quantifiers can't see expressive elements:

Only you.FORMAL did your.FORMAL homework

- Recent accounts of some attitude predicates treat them as *monsters* in the Kaplanian sense: operators that can shift the context.
- Are expressives 'shifted' by such lexical items? If so, they would at some level be arguments to higher functions, making them distantly upward compositional.

Background

“Expressives are speaker-oriented no matter where they appear in the linguistic structure.”



Potts (2005)

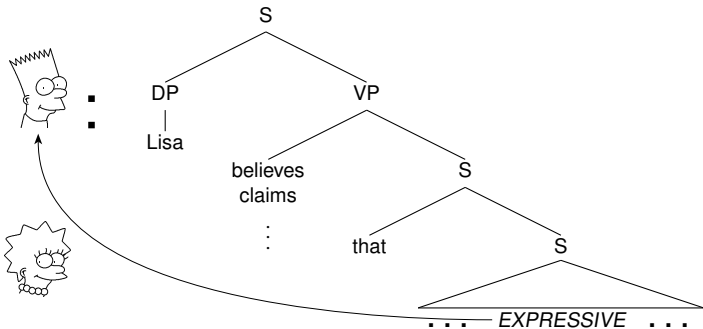
Background

“Expressives are speaker-oriented no matter where they appear in the linguistic structure.”



Potts (2005)

Abstract configuration



Background

“Expressives are speaker-oriented no matter where they appear in the linguistic structure.”



Potts (2005)

Examples

- 1 The complaint says that the **idiot** filled in a box labeled “default CPC bid” but left blank the box labeled “content CPC bid (optional)”
- 2 “For my Penance she [the Sister] made me say the **damn** rosary.”
- 3 “The story says that the **idiot** broke into Clements’ home and attacked and robbed him.”

Challengers

- Wang et al. (2005)
- Karttunen and Zaenen (2005)
- Amaral et al. (2007)
- Schlenker (2007)
- Sauerland (2007)

Apparent narrow scope

Example (Amaral et al. 2007)

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 (perhaps in response to his partner's suggestion that Monty be asked to mow the lawn while he is away on business).

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

Central questions



Harris and Potts (2009a,b): we are persuaded by the evidence offered by our colleagues. We take it as a starting point for answering the following more specific questions:

- 1 What are the underlying linguistic causes of non-speaker-oriented readings?
- 2 How widespread are such readings?

Hypotheses

Configurational (involves upward compositionality)

The source of non-speaker-oriented readings is semantic binding: their content can be bound by higher operators like attitude predicates, thereby shifting it away from the speaker (Schlenker 2003:98; Schlenker 2007:§4; Sauerland 2007).

Hypotheses

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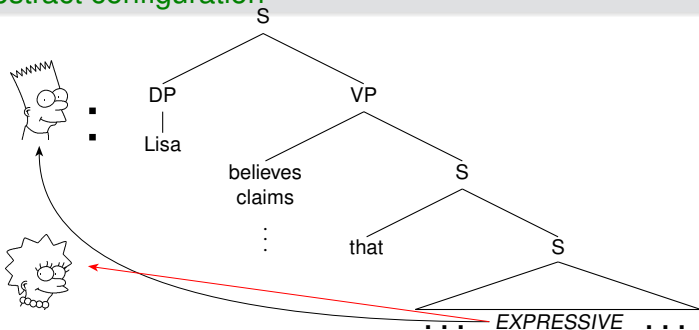
Contextual (consistent with no compositionality)

The source of non-speaker-oriented readings is the interaction of a variety of pragmatic factors. In general, these interactions favor speaker-orientation, but other orientations are always in principle available, regardless of syntactic configuration (Potts 2007).

Scientific intuitions

The motivating examples for our studies were crafted by linguists adept at creating a perfect storm of conditions for putting my speaker-orientation claim to the test.

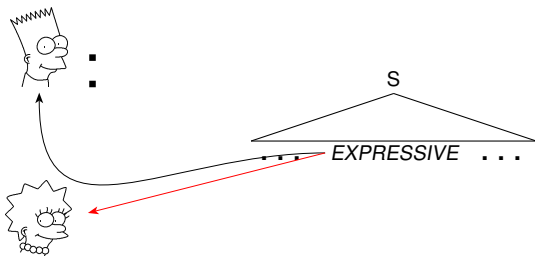
Abstract configuration



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Abstract configuration



Expressive shifting without embedding

Example

Source A Harper's editorial by Lewis Lapham, the liberal, populist essayist and political commentator.

Textual context I was struck by the willingness of almost everybody in the room — the senators as eagerly as the witnesses — to exchange their civil liberties for an illusory state of perfect security. They seemed to think that democracy was just a fancy word for corporate capitalism, and that the society would be a lot better off if it stopped its futile and unremunerative dithering about constitutional rights.

Sentence Why humor people, especially poor people, by listening to their idiotic theories of social justice?

Experiment on embedded expressives

Context hypothesis

Biasing contextual evidence will suffice to push people to perceive non-speaker-oriented readings for expressives. Absent such biasing evidence, they will favor speaker-orientation.

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Intensives hypothesis

If we seek to amplify the biasing effects with intensives like *really*, *totally*, and *super*, then we will see even more non-speaker-oriented readings.

Materials and methods

- A. My classmate Heidi said that the judge awarded her a *lousy* prize at the science fair. The cretin was probably taking bribes.
Negative, N
- B. My classmate Heidi said that the judge awarded her **such** a *lousy* prize at the science fair. The cretin was probably taking bribes.
Negative, Y
- C. My classmate Heidi said that the judge awarded her a *great* prize at the science fair. The cretin was probably taking bribes.
Positive, N
- D. My classmate Heidi said that the judge awarded her **such** a *great* prize at the science fair. The cretin was probably taking bribes.
Positive, Y

The twerp barely cracked a book all term.

Whose view is it that the judge is a cretin?

- a. Mine
b. Heidi's
c. Mine and Heidi's

Speaker
Subject
Both

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Positive, N

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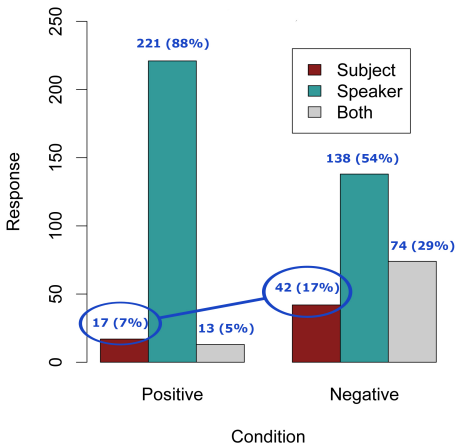
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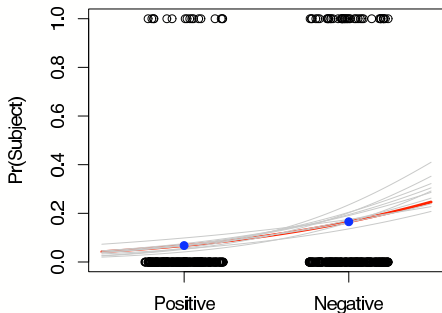
Speaker
Subject
Both

The influence of context

To what extent does the nature of the context (Positive or Negative) predict Subject readings?



Regression analysis: Graphically



Red: Regression
Gray: Uncertainty in the model
Blue: Predicted probabilities
Black: responses (jittered display)

Negative = 1; Positive = 0

- $\text{logit}^{-1}(-2.62 + 1.00 \cdot \text{Negative}) = 0.17$
- $\text{logit}^{-1}(-2.62 + 1.00 \cdot \text{Positive}) = 0.07$

Findings

- 1 Speaker-oriented readings predominated, but non-speaker-oriented readings are robustly attested.
- 2 The context manipulation was successful; with a single lexical change, we can trigger a cascade of pragmatic effects that push people to a particular interpretation.
- 3 In related experiments, we showed that syntactic embedding encourages non-speaker-oriented readings (vindicating our colleagues' intuitions), but it is not required for such readings.

Discussion

Risky strategy

A speaker who utters an expressive with the intention of having it be understood as non-speaker-oriented has undertaken a strategy that runs counter to hearer expectations. (**Perspectically-rich contexts** can mitigate the risk.)

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Causes

- Perspectival dependence and underspecification (Farkas 1992; Giannakidou and Stavrou 2008; Lasersohn 2005)
- There is no general morphological convention for specifying the perspective, so it must be left to the context.
- The speaker might violate a taboo even with a non-speaker-oriented readings. (We see more of such readings with appositives, where taboos are not an issue.)

Conclusion

Minimal semantics, radical pragmatics:



Expressives contextualize the main content, revealing information about attitudes and perspectives that guides our understanding of the speaker's intentions, plans, goals, and preferences.

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