Perspectival expressives

Leopold Hess*

Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Expressives, i.e. words such as "damn" or "bastard" are *perspective-dependent*: their content is always evaluated from a certain perspective. Because expressive content projects out of all environments, this perspective is *normally* the speaker's. Perspective-dependence of expressives can be investigated by focusing on exceptions to this rule. Potts (2005) presents an influential theory of expressive content as a kind of conventional implicature. It is a definitional feature of expressive content on this account that it is always speaker-oriented. This claim has quickly come under criticism, and a variety of counter-examples have been offered (cf. Amaral et al. (2007), Lasersohn (2007), Potts (2007), among others). Harris and Potts (2009) consider examples of non-speaker-oriented expressives given in the literature, as well as experimental data, and argue for an explanation based on a mechanism of pragmatic perspective shift (as opposed to an approach based on semantic binding, as in, e.g., Schlenker (2007), Sauerland (2007)). The objective of this paper is to develop a theoretical understanding of such a mechanism. The approach suggested is based on a model of discourse pragmatics which focuses on commitment attribution as an element of hearers' interpretation (based on Morency et al. (2008) and Lewis (1979)). At-issue commitments are distinguished from commitments *de lingua* (cf. Harris (2014, 2016)). It is a characteristic property of expressives as a lexical class that they are pragmatically "opaque" and always raise the issue of *de lingua* commitment. The orientation of expressive content cannot be strictly predicted, and thus a fully formal treatment is implausible, but the theory offered here accounts for all factors that influence non-speaker-oriented readings, as well as for the very strong bias towards speaker-oriented ones. A limited, testable prediction of the account is presented.

© 2018 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The topic of this paper is the pragmatics of *expressives*,[1] i.e. highly charged (often taboo) words, such as the boldfaced expressions in the examples below.

---

* Erasmusgebouw 16.11, Erasumsplein 1, 6526 HT Nijmegen, The Netherlands.
 E-mail address: leopoldhess@gmail.com.

[1] It is not easy to define the class of expressives clearly. My discussion, following the example of Potts (2005), will focus on the prototypical examples of negatively charged, vulgar epithets, such as "bastard" or "asshole", and expressive adjectives, such as "damn" or "fucking" - and only when they are used attributively ("that bastard Kaplan"); as Potts already observes, the same words used predicatively ("He is a bastard") behave differently and convey at-issue content (this difference is certainly worth further consideration, but I will ignore it here). Other groups of words can be considered non-prototypical examples of the category of expressives: positively charged modifiers ("awesome"), ethnic slurs ("kike"), expressives used as intensifiers ("damn good") etc. The observations and arguments made here, as well as in most of the existing literature on expressives, will apply to those groups to a greater or lesser extent, corresponding to the extent to which they share the relevant properties of prototypical examples. For instance, non-speaker oriented readings of ethnic slurs are much more difficult to obtain, and this seems somehow related to the fact that slurs are not purely expressive, but have a descriptive component as well (they have a specific group as their extension), cf. Hay (2013).

(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.

The most salient characteristic of expressives, and one which has attracted a lot of attention from linguists and semanticists in recent years (at least since Kaplan (1999)) is that they do not seem to contribute to the main, at-issue content of an utterance, but rather to express the speaker's attitude towards an object or situation. I will have little to say about this property, or about the semantics of expressives as such, although I will suggest a novel way of understanding the exceptional nature of expressives. The issue that I will discuss here is a property of expressives which is called their "perspective-dependence": expressive content represents or manifests the attitude or emotion of the speaker, rather than some impersonal or fully objective fact. Moreover, in some circumstances expressives may be used to represent the perspective of someone else than the actual speaker, as in example (3) (which I will discuss at length later):

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

It is in particular this latter point that makes it worthwhile to inquire into the mechanism of their perspective-dependence. Thus, in this paper I will focus predominantly on the so-called non-speaker oriented uses - or *readings* (as the interpretation side will be most prominent here) - of expressives. An analysis of them will serve to develop a model of expressive perspective-dependence which accounts for properly speaker-oriented readings as well. This theoretical account represents a thoroughly pragmatic way of thinking about perspective in language, in contrast to strictly semantic approaches typically proposed for other kinds of perspective-dependent items, such as predicates of personal taste etc.

The structure of my argument is as follows. From a semantic point of view, to repeat, the most salient property of expressives is that they introduce content independent of the main content of the utterance. Potts (2005) presents an influential theory which accounts for this property by treating expressive content as a kind of conventional implicature. It is a definitional feature of expressive content on this account that it is always speaker-oriented. This claim has quickly come under criticism, and a variety of counter-examples have been offered (cf. Amaral et al. (2007), Lasersohn (2007), Potts (2007), among others).[2] Harris and Potts (2009) consider examples of non-speaker-oriented expressives given in the literature, as well as experimental data, and argue for an explanation based on a mechanism of pragmatic perspective shift (as opposed to an approach based on semantic binding, as in, e.g., Schlenker (2007), Sauerland (2007)). Taking their analysis as my starting point, I will propose a theoretical understanding of such a pragmatic perspectival mechanism.[3]

I begin (in Section 2) with an overview of the variety of situations in which non-speaker-oriented (henceforth NS) readings of expressives are possible; in Section 3 I distinguish them from purported cases of (modal or temporal) displacement, which I argue are not genuine. This leads to the conclusion that expressive content is attributed to the most salient perspectival agent in the context. After a brief discussion of Potts' and Schlenker's indexical analyses (in Section 4), I propose to reject the assumption that there is a default, semantically motivated, speaker-oriented reading, which can be overridden by pragmatic factors. Instead, I submit that expressives are inherently underspecified for their orientation (following a suggestion made already in Harris and Potts (2009)). Rather than look for conditions under which a different context variable can be fed into semantic composition, I propose to look at the process of interpretation, construed as commitment attribution. In Section 5, I enumerate the factors that may influence the perspectival salience of a non-speaker agent[4] (these include such diverse aspects as techniques and textual strategies like free indirect discourse or sarcasm, quotation, discourse coherence and inferences based on world-knowledge). It turns out that NS readings of expressives are available in a variety of contexts. There is, however, a strong bias towards speaker-orientation and I put forward a hypothesis regarding the source of this bias (following Lasersohn (2007)), grounded in what I will call the "pragmatic opacity" of expressives (their unavoidable markedness which always makes the manner of speaking - the choice of vocabulary - a prominent aspect of an utterance).

To account theoretically for these observations, I propose, in Section 7, a model of discourse which keeps track, besides the set of propositions that form the common ground, of the individual commitments of discourse participants (cf. Farkas and Bruce (2010)). Following Morency et al. (2008), I understand commitment attribution as an essential element of hearer's interpretation of what speakers are communicating. In this sense, commitment can be attributed to other agents besides the speaker, e.g. to the original speaker in an indirect report. The proposal of Morency et al., (2008) can be combined with the "scorekeeping" account of Lewis (1979) to yield an abstract model of hearers' interpretation in discourse. In Section 8, I extend this model further, by introducing "commitments *de lingua*" (based on Harris (2014, 2016)), which are attributed by interpreters as commitments to the appropriateness or applicability of a certain expression.

---

[2] The literature on (non-)speaker-orientation of appositives and other kinds of non-at-issue content is richer than this, and dates well before Potts (cf. the bibliography in Harris and Potts (2009)). My focus, however, is exclusively on expressives.

[3] Harris and Potts offer little in terms of a theoretical description of this mechanism, as their article is focused on experimental material. Nevertheless, the notion of a *pragmatic perspective shift* has been picked up by other authors, e.g. AnderBois (2014), who employs it to explain away the exceptional behavior of reportative evidentials in some languages. Without a better idea of what a pragmatic perspective shift is, however, it is impossible to say whether expressives and reportative evidentials are indeed similar in any relevant respects.

[4] Throughout this paper by "non-speaker agent" I understand an agent who is not the *actual* speaker - very often it will be a reported speaker.