

That bloody so-and-so has retired: Expressives revisited

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Abstract

In this paper, I revisit my own work (2003a,b, 2009) on interjections and non-verbal behaviours and build on Blakemore's (2011) account of the descriptive ineffability of expressive meaning. Whilst I agree with Blakemore's claim that expressives are best explained through an analysis that uses, on the one hand, procedural meaning, and, on the other, the idea that they show one's emotions, rather than mean_{NN} anything in the Gricean sense, I ask two questions by way of developing the account further. Firstly, what is the relationship between the procedural meaning in Blakemore's account of expressives and the kind encoded by discourse connectives? Secondly, to what extent do we want to say that expressives mean anything at all? In answering these questions I aim to shed light on what expressive meaning is, and how it works.

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"Fuck off" doesn't mean "go away" [...] There is no English equivalent for "fuck off".

Billy Connolly, 2005

1. Introduction

No one with a serious interest in the study of meaning dismisses insights from truth-conditional semantic theories. The link between knowing the truth-conditions of an utterance and understanding the meaning of the sentence uttered remains perhaps *the* key insight in the study of linguistic meaning. However, an interesting challenge to the approach is posed by the existence of a range of patently meaningful linguistic expressions that make no contribution to the truth conditions of the utterances that contain them.

Consider, for example, the emboldened phrase in (1):

(1) **That bloody so-and-so** has retired.

'That bloody so-and-so' clearly communicates something over and above merely identifying a referent. And whatever this something is, it does not seem to be a part of the proposition expressed by an utterance of (1), which is equivalent to that expressed by (2):

(2) She has retired.

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And while (3) might be an appropriate response to (1), (4) would not:

- (3) That's not true: she's just on a sabbatical.
 (4) That's not true: she's not a bloody so-and-so.

The emboldened expressions in (5)–(7) below represent further examples of non-truth conditional meaning:

- (5) She may have retired **but** I doubt we've seen the last of her.
 (6) She's moved to The Peak District, **they say**.
 (7) **Frankly**, we were all hoping she'd go back to Wellington

A number of different frameworks have been devised within which non-truth-conditional expressions can be analysed. Most of these involve separating non-truth-conditional from truth-conditional content. In the account proposed by Grice (1967, 1989), 'but' does not contribute to *what is said* in an utterance of (5); instead, it conventionally implicates non-truth conditional information about a particular relationship between the two conjoined propositions. For Urmson (1952:495–496), parentheticals (see (6)) are 'not part of the statement made, [...] but function with regard to a statement made rather as READ WITH CARE functions in relation to a subjoined notice'. According to the standard speech act account (see Searle, 1965, 1969; Bach and Harnish, 1979), illocutionary adverbials such as 'frankly' in (7) pattern with parentheticals. They do not form part of the *descriptive* content: they *indicate* the performance of a particular illocutionary act.

But what sets the non-truth-conditional meaning in (1) apart from the other examples above is the fact that the noun phrase in (1) contributes information about the emotional state of the speaker (Kaplan, 1999; Potts, 2005, 2007a,b, 2008; Blakemore, 2011). Moreover, this information is expressed directly rather than described. Compare the direct expression of emotion in (8) with the description of it in (9):

- (8) **Damn!** That's really annoying.
 (9) **I'm cross.** That's really annoying.

The primary interjection¹ in (10) and the emotional intonational contour in (11) (uttered in a high key with high falls on the nuclei 'loved' and 'thank' – represented by \) also convey expressive meaning:

- (10) **Wow**, this book is really interesting!
 (11) `She \)loved the o toy | \)Thank you |

In this paper, I build on previous accounts of expressive meaning, paying particular attention to an account I have developed myself (2003a,b, 2009), and work by Blakemore (2011, 2013). In doing so, I focus on three particular properties expressives seem to share. The first of these is that it follows from their non-truth-conditional that they contribute to speaker meaning in a manner that is somehow independent from the utterance(s) in which they appear. In this sense they pattern with the emboldened expressions in (5), (6) and (7). The second is that the kind of meaning they convey is extremely difficult to pin down: just what does 'bloody so-and-so' mean? To use a term adopted in Potts (2007a), expressive meaning is 'descriptively ineffable', a point succinctly illustrated by the Billy Connolly epigraph above. The final shared property is that while expressive meaning is often conveyed by non-linguistic means (see (10) and (11) above) even *linguistic* expressives (such as those in (1) and (8)) have a flavour of the non-linguistic about them. As I say above, they are used to convey emotion *directly* (cf. (10) and (11)) rather than merely report it: this needs to be explained.

The paper is organised as follows. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of the relevance-theoretic approach to utterance interpretation; this provides the backdrop against which much of the discussion below takes place. In section 3, I present a historical overview of expressive meaning and a summary of some of the explanatory accounts offered in linguistics and the philosophy of language. In sections 4 and 5 I summarise my own (2003) account of interjections, those partly natural, partly conventional semi-words that are paradigm examples of expressive meaning, and Blakemore's (2011) account of the descriptive ineffability of expressive meaning, looking in particular at the crucial difference between

¹ A primary interjection is an expression that cannot be used in any sense other than as an interjection, e.g. *wow*, *oops*, *ouch*; primary interjections are contrasted with secondary interjections, words such as *hell*, *shit*, *damn*, which have an established, and separate linguistic meaning but can be used as interjections (see (8) above – the secondary interjections *hell* and *shit* would work equally well in this example).

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