

Expressives, descriptive ineffability and the procedural-conceptual distinction

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of whether there can be a unitary account of expressive meaning by considering the descriptive ineffability of expressives such as *damn* or *bastard*, on the one hand, and repetition, on the other. Drawing on my previous work on the semantics of discourse markers and Wharton's work on the pragmatics of non-verbal communication, I show that the notion of procedural meaning can not only provide an explanation for descriptive ineffability of expressives such as *damn*, but can also can provide an explanation of the similarities between such linguistic expressives and non-linguistic expressive behaviour such as gesture and tone of voice.

Keywords: *descriptive ineffability, expletive, expressive, interjection, non-verbal communication, procedural meaning, relevance*

1. EXPRESSIVES: A DISPARATE RANGE OF PHENOMENA

The term 'expressive' has been applied to a wide range of phenomena including such clearly linguistic phenomena as expletive and non expletive NP epithets (*the bastard, the poppet*), expletives (*shit, damn*), diminutives (*dearie, kitty*), expressive APs (*bloody*); borderline linguistic phenomena such as interjections (*gosh, oh*) and prosodic features of discourse; speech acts linked to conventional expression of greeting, thanks or apology; structures which have stylistic effects (for example, repetition); and clearly non-linguistic phenomena such as gestures and facial expressions. Given this variety, it is not surprising that different theorists have tended to focus on different types of expressive meaning. Thus while Potts (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2008) notes the similarity between gestures and the meaning of linguistic expressives such as *damn* and *the bastard*, he focuses on the task of accommodating the latter within a theory of linguistic semantics rather than on the question of identifying the basis for this comparison. At the same time, work on tone of voice (e.g. Scherer 1994, Schroeder 2000) has been conducted independently of research on the semantics of lexical expressives.

This raises the question of whether there could or even should be a unitary account of expressive meaning. Fludernik (1993), whose concern with the role of expressivity in signaling 'mimetic closeness to the original speech and thought act' in free indirect style texts leads her to consider a considerably wider range of phenomena than the ones listed above, notes that the expressive quality of the devices she discusses has rarely been defined with any precision (1993:267).

However, Potts (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2008) who, as we have seen, focuses on expressivity which is encoded in the conventional meanings of words such as *the bastard* and *damn*, has argued that the meanings communicated by linguistic expressives are characterized by a number of specific properties. The present paper is part of a larger piece of work which focuses on just one of these properties – descriptive ineffability – and aims to establish whether all expressive phenomena can be said to exhibit descriptive ineffability in the same way. Here I shall draw on

previous work by Blakemore (1987, 2002) on the semantics of discourse markers to show that the notion of procedural meaning can provide an explanation for the descriptive ineffability of expressions such as the ones considered by Potts. This will provide the basis for the explanation for the similarities between linguistic expressives and natural behaviours such as gesture which I develop in a further paper (Blakemore in preparation).

2. DESCRIPTIVE INEFFABILITY AND PROCEDURAL MEANING

Potts (2007a) has argued that the descriptive ineffability of expressives can be compared with the descriptive ineffability of certain discourse particles (cf Blakemore 2002). Thus just as a native speaker of English finds it difficult, if not impossible, to provide the meaning of discourse initial *well* or *so* in descriptive terms, they will similarly 'hem and haw' when asked to provide a propositional paraphrase for the meaning of *damn* or *bastard*. However, Geurts (2007) suggests that this property of descriptive ineffability is not restricted to expressives and discourse markers, but pervades the whole language. According to him, *the*, *at*, *because*, *languid*, *green*, *pretty* are all descriptively ineffable and this means that descriptive ineffability cannot be used to draw the line between descriptive and expressive language.

In this paper, I shall argue that not all the expressions mentioned by Geurts are descriptively ineffable in the same sense: in particular, the descriptive ineffability of a word such as *languid* must be distinguished from the descriptive ineffability of words such as *well* and *damn*. I shall draw on work by Sperber and Wilson (1998) and Carston (2002) to show that while there is a sense in which the concept communicated by words such as *languid* varies from context to context, *well* and *damn* are descriptively ineffable in the sense that they encode procedures rather than concepts (cf Blakemore 2002, Wilson and Sperber 1993). While this may mean that this sort of descriptive ineffability is not unique to expressives and hence does not provide us with a tool for defining expressivity as such, it provides evidence for the existence of a distinctive class of meanings which includes the linguistic expressives discussed by Potts and excludes words such as *languid*.

2.1 Procedural meaning

As Blakemore (2002) and Wilson and Sperber (1993) have pointed out, discourse markers such as *so* or *however* are notoriously hard to pin down in conceptual terms. A native speaker who is asked what these words mean is more likely to provide a description or illustration of their use than a straightforward paraphrase. Moreover, native speakers are unable to judge whether two of these expressions – say *but* and *however* – are synonymous without testing their intersubstitutability in all contexts (Blakemore 2002:83).

How do discourse markers have meaning if they cannot be associated with a particular concept? Blakemore's (1987) characterization of these expressions as semantic constraints on relevance has been taken to suggest that their meanings must be articulated in terms of the role that they play in indicating how the utterance they introduce is interpreted. On this construal, it could be argued that the meaning of *so* in (1) is to indicate how the utterance of 'You've spent all your money' achieves relevance in the context in which it is uttered. In particular, it indicates that this utterance is relevant as a contextual implication that can be derived from this context:

- (1) [hearer enters room laden with parcels]
So you've spent all your money.
(from Blakemore 1987:86)

However, Blakemore (2002) draws attention to a use of certain discourse markers which cannot be described in this way. For example, consider (2) produced by a university teacher after hearing a secretary's summary of the explanation given by a student for the failure to submit her work:

- (2) Nevertheless.
(from Blakemore 2002:85)

It might be assumed that the interpretation of (2) involves constructing a proposition expressed by an utterance which might have followed the discourse marker. But as Blakemore (2002) pointed out, there is a whole range of assumptions which might be constructed by a hearer of (2), for example:

- (3) The student could have handed in some of the work.
The student's circumstances do not justify bending the rules.
There are other students whose circumstances have been difficult.
The student could have tried harder.

It is possible to add further examples of course. However, although there is a whole range of assumptions that the hearer might have constructed, the interpretation is constrained in the sense that whatever assumption the hearer constructs it must be one which can take part in the particular inference activated by *nevertheless*. In other words, the discourse marker simply activates a particular kind of inferential process and the hearer is required to recover an assumption which can take part in this process.

This analysis of (2) suggests that the emphasis in an account of the meaning of *nevertheless* should be on the particular cognitive procedure it activates, and it contributes to the interpretation of an utterance it introduces only in the sense that that there is some aspect of interpretation which is recovered via the cognitive procedure *nevertheless* triggers. In the case of discourse markers such as *nevertheless* and *so*, the cognitive procedure triggered is an inferential procedure involved in the recovery of implicit content. However, as Wilson and Sperber (1993) have argued, the inferential procedures encoded by linguistic expressions may be ones that are involved in the recovery of different aspects of explicit content, for example reference or attitude predicates in higher-level explicatures. More generally, they argue that a linguistic expression could activate *any* cognitive procedure already available to a human. Thus Wilson (2009) argues that we can think of procedural meaning as a relationship between a linguistic expression and a state of the language user, while conceptual meaning is a relationship between a linguistic expression and an element in the language of thought.¹

From the perspective of a speech act theoretic approach to utterance interpretation, the claim that there is a relationship between a linguistic expression and a state of the language user might be construed as a claim that there is a direct relationship between a linguistic expression and a propositional attitude, say a belief state, a state of feeling gratitude or of being under an obligation towards someone.

Thus construed, Wilson's proposal would be much the same as the claim made by Austin (1962) that certain linguistic expressions (performatives, certain sentence adverbials) indicate illocutionary information (see also Urmson 1966, Rieber 1997).²

However, speech act theoretic approaches to utterance interpretation aim for what Chomsky (1992) has described as person-level explanation: *people* have beliefs, feel gratitude or put themselves under an obligation to another person. Relevance theory, in contrast, assumes that utterance interpretation involves cognitive processes and aims to provide sub-personal explanations rather than person-level explanations. As Carston (2000) has pointed out, this means that relevance theoretic pragmatics, like generative grammar, is concerned with computations – for example inferential computations – which are not accessible to *people*.

From this perspective, Wilson's claim that there are expressions which have meaning in the sense that they correspond systematically with states of language users must be construed as a claim that there are expressions which systematically correspond to sub-personal computations, or in other words, computations which cannot be accessed by users of these expressions. If this is right, then it is not surprising that the meanings of expressions which encode procedures cannot be pinned down in conceptual terms – or, in Potts' words, that they are descriptively ineffable.

The claim that there are expressions which correspond to procedures which are inaccessible does not necessarily mean that we cannot attempt to conceptualize the interpretation which these procedures deliver. Any theorist who wrestles with an analysis of their meanings in an academic paper could be seen as doing just that. On the other hand, there are perfectly ordinary examples of attempts to provide conceptual descriptions of interpretations derived from the procedures triggered by these expressions. For example, someone might report the speaker's utterance in (4) in an utterance such as (5), the speaker's use of *nevertheless* in (6) as in (7), or B's utterance in (8) as in (9):

- (4) [hearer arrives laden with shopping]
So you've spent all your money.
- (5) She concluded that I had spent all my money.
- (6) [Janet has just listened to an explanation of why a student has not handed in her work] Nevertheless.
- (7) Janet objected to the student's explanation.
- (8) A: How long is Henry going to be away?
B: Well, he said three weeks.
- (9) B couldn't tell me for certain how long Henry is going to be away.

However, the fact that we might report the utterance in (4) by producing (5) cannot be taken to mean that there is some constituent of the proposition expressed by (5) which corresponds to the meaning of *so*. What would this be? And how would this approach help us in explaining the meaning of *so* in an example such as (10)?

- (10) [Speaker has just arrived at a friend's house]
So what do you want to do?

Similarly, we cannot say that the meaning of *nevertheless* is some constituent of the proposition expressed by (7) or that the meaning of *well* is encapsulated in the proposition expressed by (9). All we can say is that each of these expressions has triggered a process which gave rise to a particular interpretation in the particular context described – an interpretation which might be reported in another utterance.

By the same token, we should not assume that *accessible* means ‘encoded in a public language’. Consider, for example, what is communicated by the word *depressed* in (11) and (12):

- (11) Don’t bother talking to Henry. He’s been depressed ever since Arsenal lost the match on Wednesday.
- (12) I’m worried about Jane. She’s been depressed ever since she lost her job last year.

The fact that the concept recovered from *depressed* in (11) is not the same as the concept recovered from the same word in (12) suggests that a concept cannot be treated as an internalization of the word that is used to communicate it. Indeed, it is possible to use the same word to communicate a concept which one has not previously encountered and which has properties that are idiosyncratic to a specific situation. Consider Sperber and Wilson’s (1998) example in (13):

- (13) John: Do you want to go to the cinema?
Mary: I’m tired.

As Sperber and Wilson show, on the assumption that the speaker has aimed at optimal relevance the speaker will pragmatically enrich the encoded meaning of *tired* to the point that it allows the hearer to infer that Mary does not want to go to the cinema. In this way, the concept that Mary intends to communicate must be understood as an *ad hoc* concept of tiredness that is linked to the particular circumstances of the utterance: a concept of tiredness which warrants the derivation of the conclusion that Mary does not want to go to the cinema. The fact that there is no specific lexical item for this concept of tiredness does not matter: it can still be communicated.

If the concept recovered from a word on a particular occasion is not fully determined by its encoded meaning, how can the speaker be certain that the concept that he/she intends by using it is identical to the concept that the hearer recovers as a result of the process of contextual inference? According to relevance theory communication is not geared towards the duplication of thoughts, but to what Sperber and Wilson (1995) describe as the enlargement of mutual cognitive environments (Sperber and Wilson 1995:193). On this view, an utterance is simply (public) evidence for a (private) thought, and the interpretation recovered by a hearer can only be an *interpretation* of the thought communicated. Communication will succeed to the extent that the optimally relevant interpretation of the utterance achieves the sort of ‘loose’ coordination which, as Sperber and Wilson say is ‘best compared to the coordination between people taking a stroll together rather to that between people marching in step’ (1998:123).

The fact that a concept is not encoded by a specific word does not mean that it cannot play a role in conscious mental processes. Although someone may not have a word which encodes the concept he/she recovers on seeing Jane, he/she may

recognize the effect that unemployment is having on her, entertain thoughts about her state of mind, regret that she is in this state of mind, hope that this state of mind is not permanent, and use these thoughts in inferences for the derivation of other thoughts. And, as we have just seen, someone may communicate this thought on the assumption that the hearer will use his contextual assumptions to derive an interpretation of the thought on the basis of the (incomplete) evidence provided by the utterance. The same points apply to the concepts communicated by *languid* in (14) and (15).

- (14) She floated on her back enjoying the shadows of the trees overhead and then turned over and swam with long languid strokes to the bank.
- (15) and there standing against the wall, dressed to perfection, tall and languid looking, was Osborne.
(From reading of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, BBC Radio 4, 3/12/10)

This means that there is a sense in which such a concept is accessible to a person even though there is no specific word which encodes it: it is a constituent of a thought which may be entertained as the object of a range of attitudes, used in inferences and, indeed, communicated. This suggests that *depressed* and *languid* must be contrasted with words such as *nevertheless* and *so* which, as we have seen, cannot be constituents of thoughts which take part in mental processes, but which rather play a role in triggering mental processes.

The claim that the meaning of a word is just a starting point for pragmatic processes which yield different concepts on different occasions of its use is not restricted to words which communicate psychological or emotional states. As Carston (2002) has argued, the claim that the concept communicated by a word is underdetermined by its encoded meaning applies to any word which communicates a concept. Compare what is communicated by *mother* in (16a) with what it communicates in (16b), or what is communicated by *rectangle* in (17a) with what it communicates in (17b):

- (16) (a) [Child angered by his mother's apparent lack of maternal feeling]
You're not a real mother.
(b) [Child to teacher who has mistaken child-minder for his mother]
She's not my mother
(from Blakemore 2002:20)
- (17) (a) There's a small rectangle of lawn at the back.
(from Carston 2002:344)
(b) [Teacher to children in mathematics class].
Now I want you all to get your set-squares out and draw a rectangle.

However, while Carston may be right to argue that this linguistic under-determinacy applies right across the board to any word which communicates a concept, it does not apply to discourse connectives such as *well* and *so*. For in contrast with words such as *depressed*, *mother*, *rectangle* and *languid*, these words do not communicate concepts at all. They encode inferential procedures – procedures which are not accessible to the users of these expressions, and which cannot be pinned down in conceptual terms. Thus *contra* Geurts (2007), it is not true that words such as

languid are descriptively ineffable in the same sense as words such as *well* and *so*, and there is a case for saying that the descriptive ineffability of *well* and *so* is evidence for a distinguished class of meanings – a class, which, as we shall see in the following section, includes expressives such as *damn* and *bastard*.

3. EXPRESSIVES AND PROCEDURAL MEANING

If the cognitive procedures available to humans include procedures which result in the representation of a person's emotional state, then it is possible that there are linguistic expressions which trigger such procedures. In this section I show what it would mean to develop a procedural account of expressions such as *damn* and *the bastard*.

Potts (2007a) reports that only one of all the people he has interviewed about expressives has told him that *bastard* means 'vile, contemptible person'. A native speaker who is asked what words such as *bastard* and *shit* mean out of context may be able to tell you that these words are often used to vent emotion or that they are taboo words. Moreover, they may have views about some words (e.g. *damn*, *shit*) being less taboo than others (e.g. *fuck*). And, as Jay and Janeschwitz (2007) point out, while speakers may be able to articulate their reasons for using expressive language on a particular occasion, it is not possible to say independently of a particular context of use what degree of emotion (anger, annoyance, frustration, amused annoyance) is associated with a particular word, or how these words differ in meaning. A speaker who believes that *damn* is less taboo than *fuck* may nevertheless use *damn* to express an extreme degree of emotion, and *fuck/fucking* to express mild or amused annoyance. And as the title of Potts (2007a) points out, an expressive such as *bastard* does not need to be used in situations in which the speaker is expressing any kind of negative emotion at all.

Apart from this, the identity of the target of the expressive is not necessarily transparent from the linguistic meaning of the utterance and must be derived inferentially on the basis of the context. This is clearly the case in stand-alone utterances (e.g. *Damn!* or *Shit!*) However, even when the expressive occurs as part of a larger utterance, it cannot be assumed that it must be directed at a person or object mentioned. When I mutter *bastard* after the copyright symbol appears on the screen instead of the letter 'c', it is less clear that I am attributing my computer (or myself) with being recalcitrant than I am simply expressing my frustration at the whole situation. Similarly, in Potts' example in (18) (due to Asudeh) the speaker is not upset about anything mentioned in the sentence but by 'something situational' (Potts 2008):

(18) Where the hell are my bloody keys?

As Potts says, there is a 'disconnect' between the expressive and the sentence which houses it.

This leads Potts away from his earlier analyses in which the meanings of expressives are tied to the syntactic environment in which they appear (cf 2005, 2007a) and towards the analysis in Potts (2007b) in which the emphasis is more on the role that expressives play in 'pragmatic inference and discourse structure'. According to this analysis, the role of the expressive is to 'enrich' the context and in this way affect 'our understanding of the rest of the content that the speaker offers'

(2008:12). Thus according to Potts (2007b, 2008) every context comes with an *expressive setting* or index which represents the 'emotive attitudes that the discourse participants have about the individuals, entities, and situations in the domain' and is set at neutral, negative or positive. An expressive acts on this setting by either maintaining it or intensifying it 'Thus if I am clearly feeling affectionate towards my friend Sam, I can refer to him with you bastard, and it will reinforce our good cheer. If I am clearly feeling negatively towards Sam, then that expression will sharpen my negativity' (Potts 2008:9-10). In this way, the meaning of an expressive is defined in terms of the way it determines the expressive index or context rather than its role in determining descriptive content.

Potts' characterization of an emotional setting is a rather one-dimensional approach to the range of emotive attitudes and states which can be communicated by an expressive. How, for example, does a feeling of frustration sit on this scale, or the sense of trepidation or fear that can be communicated by utterances of *Shit*, or the sort of frustrated amusement that can be evoked by some situations or people?

As stand-alone utterances of expressives such as *shit*, *damn* and *bastard* show, the role of an expressive is not always to remain in the background to affect our understanding of the rest of the content communicated by the utterance. Moreover, it seems that whatever *bloody* communicates in an example such as (17), it communicates it in addition to what is interpreted by the descriptive content of the utterance which contains it. Such utterances may contribute to the communication of representations of the speaker's emotional state on their own. The question is how they do this if, as Potts argues, they do not contribute to descriptive content.

Potts' account seems to assume an approach to context in which the context for utterance interpretation is fixed in advance and is then modified or 'pragmatically enriched' (Potts 2008:12) as a result of interpreting an expressive utterance. The setting proposed by Potts is a setting for particular individuals, objects and situations in the 'domain'. However, as we have seen, the target for an expressive is not always identifiable from the utterance itself but must be inferred pragmatically as part of the process of interpreting the utterance. In other words, its identification is the result of utterance interpretation rather than a prerequisite for it.

More generally, it seems clear that the representation of a speaker's emotional state that a hearer recovers from an utterance containing an expressive will depend on a range of contextual assumptions about the speaker, situation, any objects or individuals mentioned, and the relationship that the speaker has towards these objects and individuals. It will also be affected by non-linguistic clues such as accompanying gesture, tone of voice or facial expression. Indeed Potts (2008:13) suggests that the emotive enrichments he describes are possible without the presence of expressive language and that the context alone might suffice to support them.³ However, since expressives, tone of voice, facial expression and gesture may work in tandem for the recovery of a representation of the speaker's emotional state, we must assume that the processes which yield such representations must be the same in each case – that the processes which deliver such representations on the basis of linguistic indicators must be the same as the processes which are involved in their recovery from non-linguistic indicators.

Accordingly, I would suggest that Potts' suggestion that an account of expressives should focus on the role that they play in pragmatic inference should be re-interpreted in more cognitive terms so that what distinguishes these expressions is not the 'emotive settings' or contexts they modify, but the kind of processes which

they activate. Like discourse markers, these expressions correspond to procedures for interpretation. However, in contrast with discourse markers, they activate procedures for retrieving representations of emotional states.

Clearly, such representations are not encoded directly in a public language. As we have seen in the previous section in the discussion of the interpretation of *depressed*, it is possible that we experience and represent emotions for which there is no specific word. And the same word may be used in different contexts to communicate a variety of emotions. However, an expressive is not descriptively ineffable because it communicates a different concept in different contexts or because the conceptual information it encodes may be pragmatically enriched in different ways in different contexts. It does not encode conceptual information at all. In contrast with *depressed* and *languid*, a word such as *damn* or *bastard* plays a role in the communication of a speaker's emotions by corresponding to a procedure for retrieving representations rather than by corresponding to a constituent of a propositional representation.

If this account is on the right lines, then it seems that we must distinguish the uses of *shit* and *bastard* discussed so far with the non-expressive uses in (19) – (21):

- (19) I used to think he was a real shit but I don't now.
- (20) I felt really shit on Saturday but I feel better now.
- (21) Henry thought he was a bit of a bastard at first, but he quite likes him now.

As they are used in these examples, *shit* and *bastard* do seem to contribute conceptual content to the interpretation of the utterances that contain them – conceptual content which can be questioned or denied:

- (22) A: Do you think Henry's really a bastard?
B: No, I think he's just doing what he's been told to do.
- (23) A: I feel shit, so I'm not going to the seminar.
B: You don't look that bad to me.

In fact, as they are used here, these words do not have the properties which Potts (2007a) has argued distinguish expressives. In contrast with the uses discussed earlier in this section, they can be used to report past thoughts and emotions and are hence not non-displaceable. Moreover, as (21) shows, in this sort of use, these expressions are not perspective dependent in the sense that they must be understood from the perspective of the speaker in most contexts. However, it also seems that in this sort of use, these words are not descriptively ineffable in the same way as the expressive uses of these words discussed earlier, since they must be interpreted as contributing towards the conceptual or descriptive content of the utterances that contain them. What is communicated by *shit* in (19) may not be what is communicated by the same word in (20). However, this simply shows that there is a gap between linguistically encoded meaning and the concept communicated.

4. CONCLUSION

Thus the conclusion is essentially the same as the one drawn in the previous section: Potts is right to say that the expressive uses of *shit* and *bastard* are

descriptively ineffable in the same sense that discourse markers such as *well* and *so* are, and thus used, these words can be distinguished from words like *languid* and *depressed*. However, as (19)-(23) show, there are non-expressive uses of some words that have been classified as expressives, and in these uses their contribution to interpretation is the same as any word which is used to communicate a concept. If this account is right, then it seems that the study of expressive uses of words such as *shit* and *bastard* belongs to a wider study of devices which are used to activate cognitive procedures, and in particular, to the study of devices which activate procedures for the recovery of the representation of the hearer's emotional state – for example, interjections, gesture, and tone of voice (cf Wharton 2009).

NOTES

1. This is based on an earlier distinction made by Sperber and Wilson (1995: 172-30): '... a language is a set of semantically interpreted well-formed formulas. A formula is semantically interpreted by being put into systematic correspondence with other objects; for example, with the formulas of another language, with the states of the user of the language, or with possible states of the world'. The hypothesis is that conceptual expressions correspond systematically to elements in a language of thought, procedural meanings correspond systematically to states of language users, and the language of thought corresponds systematically to possible states of the world (Wilson 2009).
2. It has been argued that Grice's (1985) account of conventional implicature can be seen in these terms (see Blakemore 2002 (particularly Chapter 2), Wilson and Sperber 1993).
3. However, it seems that here Potts must have in mind a different, more general conception of context than the one which includes the emotional setting which he says accompanies every utterance and is modified by an expressive.

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