Really fucking brilliant

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The title of this note has a two-tiered interpretation. On the “use” level, it expresses my admiration for the ingenuity and elegance of Christopher Potts’s paper, which is not diminished by the fact that I disagree with him practically across the board. On the “mention” level, my title denotes the key phrase in Potts’s example (2), which will figure rather prominently in the following remarks.

It is evident that the information speakers convey by way of linguistic and para-linguistic devices comes in various kinds, and widely agreed that we have distinguish, at the very least, between Fregean content, presupposition, and conversational implicature. If Potts is right, expressive content should be added to the standard triad, and in this, quite fundamental, respect I concur. I disagree with Potts on two main points. First, I have my doubts about Potts’s pre-theoretical description of expressive words. Secondly, I am not convinced that the theoretical apparatus Potts develops in the second half of his paper is just what we need for dealing with expressives.

Potts belabours the peculiarities of expressives to such an extent that one starts wondering why they are words at all – rather than, say, grunts or facial contortions. I am inclined to adopt the opposite course, and argue that expressives are perfectly ordinary lexemes. Granted, words like *damn*, *fucking*, and *bastard* are special in certain ways, but then *all* words are special in certain ways. Potts argues for a very strict separation between what he calls “expressive” and “descriptive” uses of language. The following exchange illustrates why I wonder if Potts’s dichotomy may perhaps be too strict:

- (1) A: That bastard Schmidt is playing Schubert again.
B: Schmidt is not a bastard.

A's use of *bastard* is expressive, in Potts's sense of the word, and I take it that in B's statement *bastard* is to be construed descriptively. But then how does B manage to contradict A? On the naive account, it is because A's utterance entails that Schmidt has the property of being a bastard, which is what B denies. This also predicts that (2a) is tautologous, and that (2b) is a contradiction, and these predictions seem correct to me:

- (2) a. That bastard Schmidt is a bastard.
- b. That bastard Schmidt is not a bastard.

One would expect these facts to fall out directly from the semantics of *bastard*, which on Potts's analysis they don't. To be sure, there are ways of capturing these observations in his framework, e.g. by constraining the class of admissible contexts in such a way that the descriptive and expressive meanings of *bastard* become interlocked. But an explanation along these lines is bound to be ad hoc.

One of the characteristics of expressive idioms, according to Potts, is that they are typically hard to define:

... speakers are generally unable to articulate meanings for a wide range of discourse particles. When pressed for definitions, they resort to illustrating where the words would be appropriately used. Expressives in general manifest this *descriptive ineffability*. (p. 11)

As this quote makes clear, however, "descriptive ineffability" is not the prerogative of expressives. As a matter of fact, it is all over the lexicon, as witness such disparate items as *the*, *at*, *because*, *languid*, *green*, *pretty*, and so forth. Descriptive ineffability doesn't draw the line between descriptive and expressive language.

One of my English dictionaries defines one of the senses of *bastard* as "unpleasant or despicable person" (I trust that the disjunction is meant to be read inclusively). It also defines *fucking* as an adjective or adverb "used for emphasis or to express anger, annoyance, contempt, or surprise" (here, too, *or* appears to be inclusive). These definitions admittedly fall short of the full signification of their definienda, as do the vast majority of lexical definitions. However, if Potts is right, they aren't just imperfect but entirely beside the point – and this seems too radical to me. I don't believe it is wrong to say that, in at least one of its expressive senses, *fucking* is an intensifier that expresses anger, annoyance, etc.; and it also

seems correct to me that in its primary expressive meaning, *bastard* is used to refer to unpleasant and/or despicable persons.

Potts argues against this kind of definition that (a) in addition to its more common deprecating uses, *bastard* has “a wide range of affectionate uses”, and that (b) *bastard* is occasionally applied to things rather than persons (p. 11). However, these observations merely show that, like nearly all words, *bastard* is polysemous, i.e. it has several related senses. The word *bastard* was initially used for persons born out of wedlock. From this meaning, its primary expressive sense (“unpleasant and/or despicable person”) was derived, which in its turn spawned further senses. If expressive words were radically different from descriptive ones, as Potts proposes, it would come as something of a surprise that they underlie the same processes of meaning change. Moreover, as Potts notes himself, his theory fails to capture the fact that words like *bastard* have positive as well as negative uses (p. 20). Hence, Potts’s observations point away from his own analysis.

A further respect in which expressives are unexceptional is that, by and large, they appear to combine with other words in rather ordinary ways. Not so on Potts’s account. His semantic analysis of *the damn dog* is $\llbracket \text{damn} \rrbracket$ ($\llbracket \text{the dog} \rrbracket$) rather than $\llbracket \text{the} \rrbracket$ ($\llbracket \text{damn dog} \rrbracket$), as one should have expected. In the same vein, I would like *really fucking brilliant* to be analysed as $\llbracket \text{really} \rrbracket$ ($\llbracket \text{fucking brilliant} \rrbracket$), and to entail “very brilliant”; of course, the most straightforward way of accomplishing this is by assuming that *fucking* is like “very” (or maybe “very very”) both syntactically and semantically. But if this is right, then *fucking* counter-exemplifies Potts’s independence property (“we can change or remove the expressive content of a phrase without affecting its descriptive content”, p. 3), which he claims to be an essential trait of expressives.

Another property Potts attributes to expressives is “nonreplaceability”:

Expressives cannot (outside of direct quotation) be used to report on past events, attitudes, or emotions, nor can they express mere possibilities, conjectures, or suppositions. (p. 5)

The following examples from the Google corpus suggest that, contrary to Potts’s generalisation, *fucking* is “displaceable”:

- (3) a. Scary thing is that I don’t feel that fucking brilliant. I don’t feel that fucking deep or talented.

- b. Even if you're fucking brilliant, you can still lose the role just because you're not exactly the right height, look, or body type.
- c. Perhaps it's the codeine laced cough syrup I've been taking for a few days now or maybe these lines are fucking brilliant!
- d. I do not want us to be shit, I want us to be fucking brilliant.

I think that, in each of these cases, *fucking brilliant* allows for a construal that is (a) expressive, (b) entails "very brilliant", and (c) is evaluated within the scope of an operator. But if this is right, Potts's concept of expressiveness does not correspond to a natural class.

Potts discusses an example due to Florian Schwarz in which, *prima facie*, an expressive is dependent on an adverbial quantifier:

- (4) Whenever I pour wine, the damn bottle drips. (= Potts's example (12))

According to Potts, this is in fact evidence in favour of his nondisplaceability criterion, because what we infer from (4) is not that the speaker is in a "heightened emotional state" on every wine-pouring occasion; rather, "we infer from the speaker's use of *damn* that he is in a heightened emotional state *right this minute*." (p. 6) I'm not so sure that I share this intuition. I *am* sure that a speaker who utters (4) truthfully will tend to be annoyed whenever he pours wine, and don't see how an analysis of *damn* à la Potts could account for that intuition.

Some of Potts's generalisations about expressives may be distorted because his pet example, *that bastard Kresge*, happens to be indexical. The nondisplaceability property is a case in point. It is true that *that bastard Kresge* is almost invariably interpreted relative to the utterance situation, but this much follows already from the fact that it is indexical; there is no reason to assume that this peculiarity is due to the fact that *bastard* is expressive.

Potts makes much of the idea that descriptive and expressive words not only have their meanings in different dimensions, but also associate with different kinds of information: propositional vs. non-propositional. I don't understand this distinction. As far as I can tell, Potts's expressive indices are simply type *t* objects in disguise. For example, the intended interpretation of $\langle a \uparrow b \rangle$, which Potts uses in his analysis of formal pronouns, is simply that *a* stands in a formal (or, better perhaps, non-informal) social relation to *b*, which surely may be true or false. Nor am I convinced that

the propositional/non-propositional distinction is needed in Potts's framework. What is essential, it seems to me, is just the notion that expressive words have a semantic dimension of their own. The idea that they carry non-propositional information is an idle wheel in the machine.

Potts says that expressive words are "repeatable". If the speaker repeatedly uses the word *damn*, for example, the effect is reinforcement rather than redundancy, which is what we observe when a descriptive expression is repeated. One of Potts's example is (5a), which he contrasts with (5b):

- (5) a. Damn, I left my damn keys in the damn car. (= Potts's example (34c))
- b. ?I'm angry! I forget my keys. I'm angry! They are in the car. I'm angry! (= Potts's example (35))

Potts observes that, whereas the expressive *damn* is repeatable, its descriptive counterpart *I'm angry!* is not, but he also admits that, on his own account, the comparison between (5a) and (5b) is misleading, since his claim is that *damn* doesn't have descriptive content, and it is therefore unclear how it could have a descriptive counterpart, in the first place. This raises the question whether, if Potts is right, the repeatability property can be made explicit at all. And there are more problems with it.

For starters, it should be noted that some non-expressives are eminently repeatable; an obvious case in point is the entire class of definites, including anaphoric pronouns, indexicals, and names. I am fairly sure that, wherever *that bastard Kresge* can be reiterated, the name *Kresge* can be used, too. This makes it even more doubtful that the notion of repeatability can be sharpened so that it will separate expressive words from non-expressive ones.

Potts concedes that, in some cases, repetition of a descriptive word is permissible, and has an effect of strengthening not unlike what we observed in (5a); his example is *big big apple*. Potts dismisses this example on the grounds that it allows for a straightforward compositional explanation: a big big apple is an apple that is big for a big apple. However, this argument does not extend to examples like *far far away* or *many many years ago*. (Potts also mentions *salad salad*, which may be used for picking out stereotypical salads, but this may be a different thing altogether, e.g. because I suspect that cross-linguistically it is less common than the other use of reduplication.)

Finally, Potts's theory of *damn* fails to explain his own observations. First, his analysis stipulates that *damn* is of type $\langle e, \varepsilon \rangle$, and therefore doesn't apply to the first occurrence of *damn* in (5a). Secondly, since the phrases *my damn keys* and *the damn car* denote different entities, they will have different expressive indices associated with them, which on Potts's formal analysis are mutually independent: there is nothing in his theory that would allow the expressive index for the speaker's keys to constrain that associated with the speaker's car. Thirdly, it is doubtful that assigning expressive indices to the speaker's keys and car is going to be of much help, because what we have to account for is the intuition that multiple use of *damn* signals an elevated level of annoyance directed *not* at the speaker's keys or his car, but rather at the whole damn situation. An explanation of this fact will require more than semantic interpretation alone: it will have to rely on world knowledge and pragmatic inference.

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