

## Really fucking brilliant

BART GEURTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

17 ... speakers are generally unable to articulate meanings for a wide range of dis-  
 18 course particles. When pressed for definitions, they resort to illustrating where  
 19 the words would be appropriately used. Expressives in general manifest this *de-*  
 20 *scriptive ineffability*. (p. 11)

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

26 One of my English dictionaries defines one of the senses of *bastard* as  
 27 "unpleasant or despicable person" (I trust that the disjunction is meant  
 28 to be read inclusively). It also defines *fucking* as an adjective or adverb  
 29 "used for emphasis or to express anger, annoyance, contempt, or sur-  
 30 prise" (here, too, *or* appears to be inclusive). These definitions admittedly  
 31 fall short of the full signification of their definienda, as do the vast major-  
 32 ity of lexical definitions. However, if Potts is right, they aren't just imper-  
 33 fect but entirely beside the point – and this seems too radical to me. I  
 34 don't believe it is wrong to say that, in at least one of its expressive senses,  
 35 *fucking* is an intensifier that expresses anger, annoyance, etc.; and it also  
 36

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

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

17 A further respect in which expressives are unexceptional is that, by and  
18 large, they appear to combine with other words in rather ordinary ways.  
19 Not so on Potts’s account. His semantic analysis of *the damn dog* is  
20 [[damn]] ([[the dog]]) rather than [[the]] ([[damn dog]]), as one should have  
21 expected. In the same vein, I would like *really fucking brilliant* to be ana-  
22 lysed as [[really]] ([[fucking brilliant]]), and to entail “very brilliant”; of  
23 course, the most straightforward way of accomplishing this is by assum-  
24 ing that *fucking* is like “very” (or maybe “very very”) both syntactically  
25 and semantically. But if this is right, then *fucking* counter-exemplifies  
26 Potts’s independence property (“we can change or remove the expressive con-  
27 tent of a phrase without affecting its descriptive content”, p. 3), which he  
28 claims to be an essential trait of expressives.

29 Another property Potts attributes to expressives is “nonreplaceability”:

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

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

35 (3) a. Scary thing is that I don’t feel that fucking brilliant. I don’t feel  
36 that fucking deep or talented.  
37

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

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

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

- 12 (4) Whenever I pour wine, the damn bottle drips. (= Potts's example  
13 (12))  
14

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

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

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

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

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

- 9 (5) a. Damn, I left my damn keys in the damn car. (= Potts's exam-  
 10 ple (34c))  
 11 b. ?I'm angry! I forget my keys. I'm angry! They are in the car. I'm  
 12 angry! (= Potts's example (35))  
 13

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

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

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

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

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