I like that damn paper –
Three comments on Christopher Potts' *The expressive dimension*

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1. Introduction

Christopher Potts has put forward a precise formal analysis of the semantics of expressives, which accounts for their characteristic properties quite well, and which will certainly further our understanding of these expressions. In this short reaction, I concentrate on three aspects where - I think - the proposed analysis of expressives is in need of refinement, or where it is in need of complementation. The three aspects concern (i.) the suggested non-accessibility of expressive content to the descriptive meaning dimension; (ii.) the internal structure of expressive indices and the nature of index-changing operations; (iii.) and the semantic behavior of discourse particles in relation to expressives proper.

2. Non-accessibility of expressive content to the descriptive content

Potts takes the semantic type of expressives, ε, to be a strict output type. This means that the expressive content may be sensitive to the descriptive content in some cases, but the descriptive content is never sensitive to the expressive content. Technically, constructions containing expressives are of semantic type <ε> or <σ, ε>, but never of type <ε,σ>, where σ stands short for the (types of) descriptive content. The type restriction on expressives directly accounts for the observed semantic one-way *independence of descriptive content from expressive meaning* (2.1, p.3) and for the *non-displaceability* of expressives (2.2, p.5). However, as noted by the author himself, it also raises a problem for the limited number of cases where the descriptive content appears to be sensitive to the content of an embedded expressive after all, such as (1) from Kratzer (1999) (Potts' ex. (15)):

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

I would like to elaborate on the proposed non-accessibility of expressive content to the descriptive meaning by looking at a wider range of facts with a potential bearing on the issue: First, otherwise expressive elements appear to have an effect on the descriptive content when occurring in predicative position. This is best seen by comparing Potts' examples (8a-c) with (2a-c):

(2) *Employee in daycare institution:*
   a. Yesterday, little Kresge was a real bastard. But today I like him again.
   b. It's not true that little Kresge is a real bastard. In fact, I feel sorry for him.
   c. If little Kresge should be a real bastard again, I will send him home.

Like attributive instances of *bastard*, the predicate *real bastard* in (2) appears to express a negative emotive relationship of the speaker to little Kresge. However, the semantic contribution of *bastard* in predicative position can be contrasted (by *but*) with a positive evaluation by the same speaker on another occasion (2a), it can be negated (2b), and it can form part of the conditional antecedent in (2c). Intuitively, the reason for the descriptive interpretation of *bastard* in these cases seems clear. If it were interpreted as a pure, context-changing expressive, it would 'provide no argument for the copular verb' (Potts: 26). This line of reasoning restricts expressives to positions that are syntactically, and semantically optional, such as the attributive position, and Potts claims so much on p.26: 'All predicates that appear in copular position must necessarily fail to be expressive.'

This account fails to explain, though, *why* the sentences in (2a-c) are well-formed at all, or, what is predicated of the subject in these sentences. In order to maintain that the expressive

content is inaccessible to the descriptive content, one could assume that expressions such as *bastard* are lexically ambiguous between a descriptive and an expressive interpretation, but this assumption does not account for the fact that the respective readings depend on the syntactic position of these expressions. Nor does it account for the fact that the two interpretations share important properties, such as the *default perspective dependence on the speaker* (2.3, p.8), and *descriptive ineffability* (2.4, p.10). In this connection, it is interesting to observe that the semantic contribution of *real bastard* in (2a) cannot be contradicted by other speakers, as shown by the infelicity of (3B):

(3) A: Yesterday, little Kresge was a real bastard.
B: #But today you like him again.

There are other expressions and constructions that exhibit slight interpretive changes depending on whether they occur in attributive or in predicative position. Prenominal genitives, for instance, lose their uniqueness presupposition when occurring in predicative position (Holmberg 1993), next to shifting their semantic type from <e> to <e,t> (Hartmann & Zimmermann 2001):

(4) a. Brian is *Ede's student*, and Bruce is *Ede's student*, too.
b. *#Ede's student* is smart, and *Ede's student* is dumb.

This raises the question of whether the slight change in meaning observed with expressives in predicative position can be reduced to a parallel type-shift operation, in place of lexical ambiguity. On the type-shift account, a predicative use of expressives will turn their basic denotation, namely an emotive attitude (typically) of the speaker towards another individual, into a property of type <ε,t> that is based on this emotive attitude. The first clause of (2a) can then be paraphrased as in (5):

(5) Yesterday, little Kresge had the property that I did not like him very much.

The type-shift account gives a principled account for the link between syntactic position and semantic interpretation. The disadvantage is also clear: If the type-shift account is correct, expressives do not always denote output types.

A final technical point concerns the syntax-semantics interface. According to Potts' (45a), attributive expressives like *damn* in (6a) are of type <e,ε>, mapping an individual to a function that changes expressive indices.

(6) a. … the damn dog …
b. … damn the dog …

Syntactically, the expressive still seems to function as an adjective, though. It combines with the property-denoting NP *dog*, and not with the individual-denoting DP *the dog*, cf. (6b). It is not clear, then, to what extent the semantic derivation of expressives is a compositional procedure based on surface structures.

3. The Internal Structure of Expressive Indices

Pott's system has expressives operate directly on the domain of *expressive indices*, where expressive indices form part of the context, and have the structure in (7), cf. Potts' (23/37):

(7) An *expressive index* is a triple $\langle a \; \mathbf{I} \; b \rangle$, where a and $b \in D_e$ and $\mathbf{I} \sqsubseteq [-1,1]$.

An expressive index serves to establish an emotive relationship between an individual *a*, typically the speaker, and another individual *b*. The exact nature of this relationship is specified by the size and location of the interval **I**: If **I** is (for the most part) located above zero, the attitude of *a* to *b* will be positive. If **I** is located below zero, it will be negative. The smaller **I**, the more intense the emotive relationship will be.

An expressive can affect the domain of expressive indices c_ε in either of two ways, cf. Potts' (32) and (41). It can introduce a new expressive index of the form in (7), indicating the existence of a new emotive relationship between two individuals. Or else, it replaces an already existing index **I** with a new index **I'**, thus further specifying an already established emotive relationship between two individuals. Importantly, this replacement function on intervals is subject to a severe restriction found in the final conjunct of Potts' (41b): The new interval **I'** must be a sub-interval of the original interval **I**, making the index-changing function of expressives downward monotonous. Because of this, the intervals of modified expressive indices become smaller and smaller, and the corresponding emotive relationships become more and more articulate.

There are thus three characteristic properties of expressive indices and the semantic impact that expressives have on these: (A) The internal structure of expressive indices is *graded*; (B) they establish a relationship between two *individuals*; (C) the interpretation of expressives is restricted to *interval-reducing* effects. While property A seems to be empirically well-founded, I think that the other two characteristic properties are in need of revision, in that (B) should be more general, and (C) more restrictive.

Turning first to the graded nature of expressive indices and the emotive relationships conveyed, this assumption neatly ties in with the fact that natural language has another means of expressing emotive attitudes - albeit towards facts or events. It is well known that intonation languages can employ specific emotive prosody for conveying various emotional states of the speaker, such as anger, indifference, sadness, agitation, joy etc. (cf. Gussenhoven 2004). The respective intonational contours do not seem to differ categorically, but only gradually, underlining the non-discrete nature of expressive meaning.

Turning to property (B), Potts concedes that 'we are very likely to require a generalization of (37) [= (7), MZ] that allows more than just real intervals, as the middle coordinate' (p.17). I would like to contend that the format for expressive indices in (7) should be generalized even more, such that the emotive relationship expressed is not restricted to hold between individuals only. As shown in (8), expressives appear to sometimes denote emotive relationships between an individual and an intensionalized property:

(8) Peter is a *damn Republican*, but I still like him as a person.

The expressive *damn* in the first clause in (8) cannot convey a negative feeling of the speaker towards Peter, for this would be inconsistent with the positive feeling professed in the second clause. Rather, it seems that *damn* in (8) only modifies the intension of the predicate *Republican*, expressing a negative attitude of the speaker to the property of being a Republican. Notice that this interpretation is independent of the fact that *damn* modifies a syntactic predicate, for the same effect shows up in (9), where it modifies an argument.

(9) I can't help it. I still like that *damn Republican*.

In order to capture this property-directed use of expressives, the formal definition of expressive indices in (7) needs to be generalized, raising the question of how to restrict the range of semantic types permitted for *b* in (7). A more radical alternative would be to assume that speakers always entertain emotive relationships to properties, such that we never feel

positive, or negative towards individuals per se, but towards the quintessential properties impersonated by them.

Finally, the interval-reducing effect of expressives on indices (property C) theoretically allows for the existence of expressives that introduce an interval of range [-.1, .1]. Empirically, this raises the questions of whether there are any emotive relationships that correspond to such intervals, how they should be characterized, and which (kinds of) expressive elements would be used for indicating them. It seems to me that there are no such lukewarm expressives of the 'I definitely don't care'-type. Rather, the very nature of expressives restricts them to express either positive or negative attitudes towards individuals or properties. If this empirical claim is correct, there should be a second restriction on the semantic effect of expressives in Potts' (41b), cf. (10): Expressives must not only narrow down existing intervals, but - in addition - the new intervals must be biased towards a positive or negative value.

(10) if c_ε contains an expressive index <a **I** b>, where **I** ≠ **I'**, then <a **I** b> ∉ c'$_\varepsilon$ and **I'**⊑ **I**, and for **I'** = [j', i'], if i'/ j' < 0 then i'- j' ≥ .1

The added clause says that if the left and the right boundary of **I'** (*i'* and *j'*) are of different polarity (i'/j' < 0), then their difference must be greater than *.1*, ensuring that **I'** will be biased towards a positive or negative value.

4. The Status of Discourse Particles

In section 4, Potts extends the formal treatment of expressives to the analysis of formal and familiar pronouns, by replacing the intervals in (7) with two new formal objects that indicate a formal and a familiar relationship between individuals *a* and *b*, respectively. He is more skeptical, though, when it comes to the question of whether discourse particles should be analyzed as expressives, too, despite the fact that these show no effect on the truth-conditions and therefore on the descriptive content of a sentence either. Closer inspection of German discourse particles shows that there is indeed good reason for being skeptical about treating these elements as expressives. It shows that some discourse particles are sensitive to their syntactic environment, e.g. to the type of sentence they occur in (Zimmermann, to appear). In this they contrast sharply from genuine expressives and formal/familiar pronouns as shown by the following examples involving the particle *wohl*, which expresses some uncertainty concerning the proposition expressed.

(11) a. Ihr Tierarzt hat den verdammten Köter wohl schon eingeschläfert.
your vet has the damn cur PRT already put.down
‚I suppose your vet has already put down that damn cur.'

b. Hat Ihr Tierarzt den verdammten Köter wohl schon eingeschläfert?
Has your vet the damn cur PRT already put.down
'Tell me your suspicion: has your vet already put down that damn cur?'

The semantic effects of the formal pronoun *Ihr* and the expressive *verdammter Köter* are the same in the declarative clause (11a) and the interrogative (11b). In both cases, *Ihr* puts the addressee in the formal register, and the expressive indicates an attitude of the speaker. The semantic behavior of *wohl* is context dependent, however. In (11a), it locates the uncertainty with the speaker, whereas in (11b) it locates the uncertainty with the addressee in (11b). If *wohl* were an expressive, too, its sentence-type sensitivity would be totally unexpected, given that expressives merely alter the context parameter.

The different semantic behavior of discourse particles and expressives raises a general problem for the definition of expressive meaning, if expressive meaning is to be understood

more generally as the counterpart of descriptive, or truth-conditional meaning. It seems that expressions with no truth-conditional effects fall into various sub-classes with different semantic behavior. E.g., although both expressives and discourse particles satisfy the negative characterization as having no effect on truth-conditions, they behave differently when it comes to embeddability and contextual shift. From a unifying perspective, this is undesirable, as it raises the question of just how many different kinds of non-descriptive elements there are. In the worst case, we are left with as many formal analyses as there are classes of non-descriptive elements traditionally recognized by descriptive grammarians.

This may be correct, but it leaves one wondering what general insight into the nature of non-descriptive meaning is to be gained from the analysis of individual sub-classes of non-descriptive expressions. It is not up to Chris Potts to answer this question all by himself, but it clearly shows the need for more work in this domain in order to get a better understanding of similarities and differences between various kinds of expressions contributing to the non-descriptive content of utterances.

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