

Expressivity and adjectives

Abstract Expressive adjectives are, as the name suggests, adjectives exhibiting an expressive meaning. This article first gives an overview of the basic semantic and morpho-syntactic properties of expressive adjectives and then discusses several modeling possibilities dealing with the discombobulating syntax-semantics mismatches expressive adjectives present us with. The literature presents two competing accounts for the behavior of expressive adjectives: Accounts based on pragmatics and more or less strict syntactic accounts. The available evidence strongly suggests that the kind of evaluation intended (positive, negative, or neutral) as well as the exact evaluation target are driven by pragmatics.

Keywords: expressivity, expressive adjectives, syntax, pragmatics

1 Introduction

Expressive adjectives, like English *damn*, *bloody*, or *fucking*, are a special class of adjectives which convey that the speaker is in an “heightened emotional state” (Potts 2007: 171). Thus, expressive adjectives convey a speaker-oriented meaning. This meaning is typically negative (1a), but can also be positive (1b). There are, thus, two dimension two expressive adjectives. On the one hand, these adjectives indicate that the speaker is in an affected emotional state, often called “arousal”. On the other hand, these adjectives have what is called “valence”, that is, they bring about a positive or negative evaluation (for the terms valence and arousal see Russell & Barrett 1999; Scott et al. 2019).

- (1) a. That fucking cat drank my beer!
- b. This cat is a damn beauty!

As expressive adjectives are expressive in nature they do not change the truth conditions of a clause. That is, a clause with and the same clause without an expressive adjective are truth-conditionally equivalent. Instead, expressive adjectives have use-conditions. This means that an expressive adjective can be felicitously used if the speaker is in an emotionally affected state. Thus, a sentence like the one in (1a) has truth- and use-conditions (marked with *t* and *u* respectively, see Gutzmann 2013; 2019):

- (2) a. [[That fucking cat drank my beer!]]^t
 = true, iff the cat drank the speaker's beer.
 b. [[That fucking cat drank my beer!]]^u
 = felicitous, iff the speaker is in an affected emotional state (which targets the cat).

Note, however, that expressive adjectives sometimes can function as intensifiers or degree modifiers of nouns.

Besides pure expressive adjectives (which belong to the class of “expletive use-conditional items” Gutzmann 2013), like *damn*, there are also mixed expressive adjectives, like *shitty*, which have both truth-conditional and use-conditional (i.e., expressive) content (Gutzmann 2019: 72). These adjectives consequently do change the truth-conditions of the clause they are embedded in. One noteworthy observation is that expressive adjectives can sometimes function as intensifiers or degree modifiers of nouns. Being *a beauty* and being *a damn beauty* are probably not truth-conditionally equivalent because the latter is a more extreme case of the first. This intensifier interpretations seem to emerge in copula constructions as in (1). Nevertheless, the speaker in such cases also indicates that she is in an emotionally affected state. This means that expressive adjectives sometimes also have mixed-expressive uses. Most of the research on expressivity in the realm of adjectives has concentrated on pure expressives. For this reason this will also be the main topic of the current contribution. Nevertheless, mixed-expressive adjectives will also be briefly discussed.

It is sometimes not immediately obvious whether one is dealing with an expressive adjective or not. A simple test is to embed the adjective under consideration into an idiom. If the resulting construction preserves the idiomatic meaning the adjective is expressive and otherwise it is descriptive (or a mixed expressive). This is illustrated for the expressive adjective *damn* and the descriptive adjective *cold* in (3).

- (3) a. Finally, she broke the ice.
 ✓Idiomatic reading
 ✓Literal reading
 b. Finally, she broke the damn ice.
 ✓Idiomatic reading
 ✓Literal reading
 c. Finally, she broke the cold ice.
 ✗Idiomatic reading
 ✓Literal reading

Example (3a) shows the original English idiom *to break the ice* which has an idiomatic as well as a literal reading. The example in (3b) shows that the idiom still works if the expressive adjective *damn* is inserted and (3c) shows that the idiom does not work if a descriptive adjective like *cold* is inserted. In this case, only the literal meaning survives.

This article is structured as follows: In Section 2, the basic semantic properties of expressive adjectives are discussed.¹ In Section 3, morphological and syntactic properties of expressive adjectives setting them apart from descriptive adjectives are introduced. Section ?? is devoted to the discussion of mixed-expressive adjectives. Section 5 discusses different theoretical and experimental approaches to the question of how the different interpretive properties of expressive adjectives can be modeled. Finally, Section 7 concludes the chapter.

2 Basic semantic properties

As mentioned, expressive adjectives contribute a not-at-issue speaker-oriented meaning. This means that expressive adjectives, like other expressives, do not contribute to the truth conditions of the clause they are embedded in, a property labeled “independence” by Potts (2007: 166). From this, it follows that the meaning contribution of an expressive adjective cannot be dissented with. This is illustrated in the dialogue in (4) where A’s utterance contains the English expressive adjective *damn* which here is used to express a negative evaluation of a contextually available cat.

- (4) A: The damn cat drank my beer.
 B: That’s not true. #You don’t have a negative attitude towards the cat.

As with other speaker-oriented meanings, the semantic contribution of expressive adjectives outscopes tense. More broadly speaking, expressive adjectives exhibit what Potts (2007) calls “nonreplaceability”: Their semantic import is “valid only for the utterer, at the time and place of utterance” (Cruse 1986: 272). This is illustrated in the sentences in (5). Although the sentences involve different tenses the speaker’s negative evaluation of the cat is an evaluation at speech time.

¹ Note that this article is only concerned with expressive adjectives and with different theoretical approaches to them. There are many accounts of expressives in general which were also applied to expressive adjectives (e.g., Potts 2005; 2007; Kubota & Uegaki 2009; Barker, Bernardi & Shan 2010; McCready 2010; Giorgolo & Asudeh 2012; Gutzmann 2015; 2019) which will not be discussed in detail in this article.

- (5) a. The damn cat is drinking my beer again.
 ‘The cat is drinking my beer again now, and I have a negative attitude towards the cat now.’
 b. The damn cat drank my beer again.
 ‘In the past, the cat drank my beer again, and I have a negative attitude towards the cat now.’
 c. The damn cat will drink my beer again.
 ‘In the future, the cat will drink my beer again, and I have a negative attitude towards the cat now.’

In addition, expressive adjectives project. What this means is that the evaluation brought about by an expressive adjective still holds when embedded under the scope of an entailment-canceling operator (see, for example, [Simons et al. 2010](#)). Examples of entailment-canceling operators are negation (6a), antecedences of conditionals (6b), and questions (6c). In all of the following cases, the negative speaker evaluation contributed by *damn* is still understood.

- (6) a. It wasn’t the damn cat.
 b. If the damn cat drank my beer, I have to buy another one.
 c. Did the damn cat drink my beer again?

Expressive adjectives also project if they occur in an embedded clause: Even when embedded under a speech reporting verb the meaning contribution of an expressive is not only still an evaluation at speech time but also an evaluation attributed to the speaker. This is exemplified in (7), where the negative evaluation expressed by *damn* is not an evaluation of the subject of the matrix clause (i.e., Elias), but an evaluation by the speaker (at utterance time).

- (7) Elias said that the damn cat drank my beer.

[Potts \(2007\)](#) calls this phenomenon “perspective dependence”, [Gutzmann \(2019\)](#) speaks of “speaker linking”. However, there are cases of embedded expressive adjectives where no speaker linking can be found. This is illustrated by [Gutzmann \(2019: 16\)](#) by using an altered version of an example from [Kratzer \(1999\)](#):

- (8) My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that damn Webster.

In this case, the negative evaluation is not necessarily linked to the speaker, but to the subject of the matrix clause (i.e., the speaker’s father). According to [Potts \(2007\)](#), expressive adjectives are not directly linked to the speaker,

but are dependent on a “contextual judge” instead which by default is the speaker (the term “contextual judge” goes back to Lasersohn 2005).

What makes expressive adjectives an interesting, but also puzzling area of study is that there is a mismatch between their overt syntactic position and the position in which they are semantically interpreted. Many, though not all, descriptive adjectives are interpreted intersectively. Let’s take the descriptive adjective *black* as an example. A *black cat* can be paraphrased as ‘an x , which is black and a cat’. A *damn cat*, in contrast, is not ‘an x , which is damned and a cat’. This property, however, is not a defining criterion for expressive adjectives as other, non-expressive adjectives like *good* also have non-intersective interpretations, as shown in (9).

- (9) a. $[[\text{black cat}]] = \{x|x \text{ is black}\} \cap \{x|x \text{ is a cat}\}$
 b. $[[\text{damn cat}]] \neq \{x|x \text{ is damned}\} \cap \{x|x \text{ is a cat}\}$
 c. $[[\text{good linguist}]] \neq \{x|x \text{ is good}\} \cap \{x|x \text{ is a linguist}\}$

In the course of this chapter, it will become apparent that many characteristic properties of expressive adjectives are not confined to this special class of adjectives. Nevertheless, any theory of expressive adjectives somehow needs to account for such facts. Note that this does not mean that expressive adjectives receive an interpretation which is similar to non-intersective adjectives like *good* (or *alleged* or *former*). While *good* in (9c) restricts the interpretation of the (predicate denoted by the) noun to a specific domain, the same cannot be said for the expressive adjective *damn* in (9b). Instead, and this is the crucial and puzzling part, expressive adjectives “can receive a reading in which they take the entire DP as their argument” (Gutzmann 2019: 87). This is puzzling because expressive adjectives are overtly positioned inside the DP they take scope over. Future research should also consider the relationship between other adjective types not discussed here for reasons of space (for overviews see Hamann 1991 and Partee 2007) and expressive adjectives, especially the relationship between non-restricting uses of adjectives (see Leffel 2014).

To make the interpretation expressive adjectives can receive visible Gutzmann (2019) makes use of an easy to read smiley notation where the expressive part which is (negatively) evaluated is put in the numerator of a fraction while the descriptive meaning is put in the denominator:

$$(10) \quad \text{the damn cat} = \frac{\ominus (\text{the cat})}{\text{the cat}}$$

This notation also captures the intuition that uttering a noun modified by an expressive adjective makes two simultaneous contributions: When uttering *The damn cat drank my beer* a speaker makes a statement and thus adds a

proposition to the common ground while at the same time making a negative evaluation:²

$$(11) \quad \text{The damn cat drank my beer} = \frac{\ominus (\text{the cat})}{\text{The cat drank my beer.}}$$

Interestingly, the fact that expressive adjectives are not interpreted in their DP-internal surface position is not the only puzzling interpretive property of this kind of expressives. When embedded into a clause, the evaluation contributed by the expressive adjective can also target the whole sentence. This is illustrated in (12) where the expressive adjective *damn* overtly modifies *cat*. The sentence, however, intuitively can not only express a negative attitude towards the cat, but also towards the whole situation as indicated by the (abbreviated) smiley notation.

$$(12) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{The damn cat drank my beer.} \\ \ominus (\text{the cat}) \\ \ominus (\text{the cat drank my beer}) \end{array}$$

Still, there are more interpretive possibilities when it comes to expressive adjectives. While the expressive adjective in (12) modifies the subject of the sentence, the sentence interpretation seems also to be available if the adjectives modifies the object (13). In fact, even though *damn* does not modify the noun *cat*, the sentence still seems to be able to receive an interpretation in which it is the cat which is the target of the negative evaluation (see [Frazier, Dillon & Clifton 2015](#); [Gutzmann 2019](#); [Bross 2021a](#)).

$$(13) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{The cat drank my damn beer.} \\ \ominus (\text{the cat}) \\ \ominus (\text{the beer}) \\ \ominus (\text{the cat drank my beer}) \end{array}$$

² Of course, the fact that there are two layers of information, one being descriptive and one being expressive is not special to expressive adjectives, but is a property of expressives in general. As a side note, it is interesting that the existence of a difference between “propositional” and “non-propositional” language (with the latter including not only expressives, but also other cases of non-at-issue meanings) has not only been noted early by theoretical linguists and logicians (e.g., [Frege 1897/1979](#); [Bühler 1934/1982](#)), but also by aphasiologists ([Hughlings-Jackson 1879](#)). The reason why expressives play a role in the study of language disorders is that this kind of language is often preserved in, for example, aphasia or in Gille de la Tourette syndrome ([Van Lancker & Cummings 1999](#)) because emotions and emotional language is (usually) not represented in the left, but in the right hemisphere ([Wechsler 1973](#); [Cicone, Wapner & Gardner 1980](#); [Blonder, Bowers & Heilman 1991](#)). See also [Donahoo, Pfeifer & Lai \(2022\)](#) for evidence that expressive adjectives are associated with neural patterns distinct from those of descriptive adjectives.

Gutzmann (2019) calls interpretations where a constituent larger than the DP an expressive adjective is part of is negatively evaluated cases of “argument extension” and interpretations where a DP different from the one an expressive in part of cases of “argument hopping”. The different modeling options for this behavior of expressive adjectives are discussed in Section 5 below. As there is an obvious syntax-semantics mismatch with expressive adjectives, it is worth looking into the morpho-syntactic behavior of expressive adjectives.

3 Basic morpho-syntactic properties

Adjectives, in general, can occupy different structural positions in a clause, most prominently they can either modify a noun or serve as the complement of a copula verb. Expressive adjectives, in contrast, can only be used as attributive adjectives (14a), but not as predicative adjectives (14b).

- (14) a. The damn cat drank my beer.
b. *The cat is damn.

Note that this property is not special to expressive adjectives as there are other classes of adjectives which show a similar distribution. This is true of, for example, temporal adjectives like *former* (*the former president* versus **The president is former*). One problem for any theory of expressives is how to make sense of such restrictions. One possibility is to ascribe the fact that expressive adjectives cannot appear in predicative positions to their semantics. This is done, for example, by Gutzmann (2019: 117–119), who assumes that the predicative restriction is caused by the fact that expressive adjectives are truth-conditionally empty. An alternative route is to ascribe such restrictions to the syntax (see Section 6.1 below).

In many languages, expressive adjectives are ambiguous between an expressive and a literal (descriptive) meaning. German *verdammte*, for example, can mean ‘damn’ as well as ‘condemned’. While the attributive use allows for both readings (15a), the predicative use only allows for a descriptive meaning (15b).

- (15) a. die verdammte Katze
the damn/condemned cat
‘the damn cat/the condemned cat’
b. Die Katze ist verdammt.
the cat is condemned
‘The cat is condemned.’

A similar asymmetry can be found in French where the adjective *foutu* ‘fucked’ receives an expressive interpretation in prenominal position and a literal interpretation when occupying a postnominal position, as illustrated by the examples in (16) from Cuonzo (2021: 145).³

- (16) a. ce foutu garçon
 this fucked boy
 Expressive: ‘this fucking boy’
 b. ce garçon foutu
 this boy fucked
 Literal: ‘this screwed boy/this boy who someone had sexual intercourse with’

In addition to being able to modify nouns, expressive adjectives can modify other adjectives, i.e., they can occur in an adverbial function. While this difference is not easily visible in English, languages exhibiting adjectival inflection, like German, mark this contrast morphologically. In German, attributive adjectives agree in case, number, and gender with the nouns they modify. This inflection is missing if an expressive adjective modifies another adjective as illustrated in (17).

- (17) a. die verdamnte Katze
 the.NOM.SG.FEM damn.NOM.SG.FEM cat.NOM.SG.FEM
 ‘the damn cat’
 b. die verdamnten Katzen
 the.NOM.PL.FEM damn.NOM.PL.FEM cats.NOM.PL.FEM
 ‘the damn cats’
 c. die verdammt dumme
 the.NOM.SG.FEM damn stupid.NOM.SG.FEM
 Katze
 cat.NOM.SG.FEM
 ‘the damn stupid cat’

The examples in (17a) and (17b) show that the adjectival inflection changes according to whether the modified noun is singular or plural. In (17c), the expressive does not modify the noun, but the adjective *dumm* ‘stupid’. In this case, the expressive does not bear any inflectional marking. This article is only concerned with expressive adjectives proper and not with adverbial

³ For a general overview of effects of adjective positions see Cinque (2010).

modification of this kind. But note that the fact that expressive adjectives bear inflectional morphology is interesting for another reason as it presents us with an argument that they truly belong to the DP-layer (Gutzmann 2019). On the one hand, this is in line with their surface position. On the other hand, this is contrary to the aforementioned fact that expressive adjectives take scope above the DP.⁴

Interestingly, in some languages, expressive adjectives follow an agreement pattern different from descriptive adjectives. In Mainland Icelandic, there are two different agreement paradigms. To be more precise, adjectives bear either weak or strong inflection. Simply speaking, weak inflection surfaces if the adjective's base-position is c-commanded by a definite determiner and otherwise the adjective bears strong inflection. However, under some circumstances adjectives can exhibit strong inflection even though a superficially c-commanding definite determiner is present. As noted by Pfaff (2017), the meaning contribution of the adjective in these cases is not-at-issue and a reading arises as if the adjective had been merged in a position above the DP. Tellingly, this is also the case for expressive adjectives, i.e., this class of adjectives also exhibits strong inflection.

Thus, in Icelandic we similarly find that expressive adjectives surface in a position which seems to be inside the DP, but the interpretation (and the morphological marking) does not coincide with this. However, in this language, such readings show a morphological reflex as illustrated in (??).⁵ In (??) the adjective *blessa* occurs with weak inflection and receives a literal interpretation ('blessed'). In (??), in contrast, the same adjective is interpreted as an expressive as it occurs with strong inflection. Examples from Pfaff (2017: 309).

- (18) a. *blessað-i hringur-inn*
 blessed-WK ring
 'the blessed ring'
 b. *blessað-ur hringur-inn*
 blessed-STR ring
 'the damn ring'

Other languages also exhibit morpho-syntactic asymmetries between descriptive and expressive adjectives, at least under certain circumstances. In German, for example, adjectives usually appear in a prenominal position as shown

⁴ As noted by an anonymous reviewer the fact that expressive adjectives take scope above the DP is not unique to this class of adjectives, but probably also true of, for example, non-restricting adjectives (see Leffel 2014).

⁵ German also distinguishes between strong and weak adjectives, but the morphological pattern described here for Icelandic is not found in German.

above (except maybe in poetic style). Under some circumstances, however, postnominal adjectives do occur. In this case, however, the adjective cannot be inflected (Dürscheid 2002). This pattern is illustrated in (19). The example in (19a) shows the unmarked case in which an attribute adjective precedes a noun and bears inflectional morphology. (19b) shows a postnominal, non-inflected adjective and (19c) shows that the same adjective cannot occur postnominally if non-inflected.⁶

- (19) a. feine Erbsen
 fine.NOM.PL.FEM peas.nom.pl.fem
 ‘delicious peas’
 b. Erbsen fein
 peas.nom.pl.fem fine
 ‘delicious peas’
 c. * Erbsen feine
 peas.nom.pl.fem fine.NOM.PL.FEM
 Intended: ‘delicious peas’

As noted by Gutzmann (2019), expressive adjectives cannot occur postnominally in German:

- (20) * Katze verdammt
 cat.NOM.SG.FEM damn
 Intended: ‘damn cat’

However, in verbless exclamatives, inflected expressive adjectives, and only expressive adjectives, are allowed to follow the noun they modify (21a). In the most common type of such postnominal inflected expressive adjectives the noun is a mixed expressive, as in (21b), i.e., this phenomenon is usually found with expressive concord (that is the co-occurrence of more than one (mixed-)expressive lexical unit where one expressive would lead to the same meaning; in the example here we find an expressive adjective and a mixed-expressive noun contributing only one negative evaluation).

- (21) a. Katze verdammte!
 cat.NOM.SG.FEM damn.NOM.SG.FEM
 ‘Damn cat!’
 b. Scheiße verdammte!
 shit.NOM.SG.FEM damn.NOM.SG.FEM
 ‘Damn shit!’

⁶ Note that it is not clear whether (19b) indeed is a DP structure.

The fact that this pattern only occurs with expressive adjectives and is not found with descriptive adjectives might be an indication of the fact that there is something special about their syntax, although it is clear how the underlying structure of such example looks like (they might actually be bi-clausal). In general, this construction needs more research.⁷

As with other non-truth-conditional elements (like modal particles) expressive adjectives resist coordination (Gutzmann 2019). Neither can two expressive adjectives be coordinated, nor can an expressive adjective be coordinated with a mixed expressive or a descriptive adjective. This property distinguishes them from descriptive adjectives:⁸

- (22) a. **Coordination of two descriptive adjectives:**
the beautiful and black cat
- b. **Coordination of an expressive and a descriptive adjective:**
*the damn and black cat
- c. **Coordination of an expressive and a mixed expressive:**
*the damn and shitty cat
- d. **Coordination of two expressive adjectives:**
*the damn and bloody cat

Nevertheless, expressive adjectives and different semantic classes of descriptive adjective can occur in one DP. It is well known that adjective classes cross-linguistically occur in a fixed order inside the extended DP projection (e.g., Whorf 1945; Sproat & Shih 1991; Cinque 1994; Laenzlinger 2010). In English or German, for example, a partial representation of this order is shown in (23). Note that deviations from this order are possible for information-structural reasons. It is, for example, possible to contrastively focus a size adjective (perhaps by moving it to a DP-internal focus projection) which then can precede an evaluative adjective.

- (23) Determiner > Quantification > Evaluation > Size > Shape > Color > Material > Noun

Although using a slightly different terminology, Gutzmann (2019: 77–78) shows by transitivity testing that expressive adjectives are hosted in-between

⁷ While most native speakers of German I consulted accepted concord cases like (21b), not all agreed that an expressive adjective can follow a descriptive noun in (21a). It could also be that this phenomenon is subject to dialectal variation as this construction seems to be more productive in southern dialects of German.

⁸ Again, this topic needs more attention by future investigations. In general, the native speakers of German I consulted agreed that coordinating two expressive adjectives are uncommon, but the judgments varied from totally unacceptable to very marked, but not ill-formed.

the position for quantification (e.g., *many*) and the position for evaluative adjectives (e.g., *ugly*):⁹

- (24) Determiner > Quantification > Expressives > Evaluation > Size > Shape > Color > Material > Noun

Thus, expressive adjectives occupy a structurally high position inside the nominal spine (see also Jay & Janschewitz 2007 and Cuonzo 2021). This is in line with the general observation that the more subjective and the more speaker-oriented a category is, the higher up in the functional architecture—no matter whether this is, for example, the DP or the CP or TP—the category will be hosted (cf. Cinque 1999). Note, however, that this topic also needs more attention in the future as the hierarchy in (24) was proposed by Gutzmann (2019) by using only a single example in a single language.

The core class of descriptive adjectives allows for morphological marking of comparison in many languages (positive: *red*, comparative: *redder*, superlative: *reddest*). Additionally, most regular adjectives can be modified by adverbs (e.g., *a presumably red car*). Expressive adjectives, in contrast, cannot appear in a comparative or superlative form (e.g., **damn-est*) and cannot be modified (Gutzmann 2019: 78–80). This is true for degree modifiers, like English *very* or German *sehr*, as well as for adverbs, like English *probably* or its German equivalent *wahrscheinlich*:

- (25) a. *Die sehr verfuckte Katze hat das Bier getrunken!
the very fucking cat has the beer drunk
'*The very fucking cat drank the beer.'
- b. *Die wahrscheinlich verfuckte Katze hat das Bier getrunken!
the probably fucking cat has the beer drunk
'*The fucking damn cat drank the beer.'

Other forms of degree intensification are, however, possible, e.g., the use of degree suffixes on expressive adjectives in Italian (Cuonzo 2021) or the use of so-called “prefixoids” like English *god-* or German *gott-* ‘god’ or *drecks-*, literally ‘dirt’:¹⁰

⁹ Transitivity testing is the pairwise comparison of allowed orders. Suppose there are three different categories A, B, and C then transitivity testing works as follows: “if A must occur on B’s left, and B must appear on C’s left, we can infer that A will appear to the left of C and test it as a prediction of our theory. It is possible to construct a theoretical sequence of positions, A, B, C, etc., even if the three never appear together” (Benincà 2001: 42).

¹⁰ Example (26b) was taken from https://books.google.de/books?id=cPhfDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT199&lpg=PT199&dq=%22drecksverdammt%22&source=bl&ots=T_MZaZPNvj&sig=ACfU3U0g18cAwNI3-0bWIZ_PfI9gkbotmA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwinzrzI9P_2AhXrhP0HHfT1C0A4ChDoAXoECA4QAw

- (26) a. Die gottverfluchte Katze hat das Bier getrunken!
 the god.damn cat has the beer drunk
 ‘The goddamn cat drank the beer!’
 b. Drecksverdammtter Sumpf! Schlamm und Matsch, egal
 dirt.damn swamp sludge and mud no.matter
 wohin man tritt.
 where one steps
 ‘Goddamn swamp! Sluge and mud no matter where you step.’

Clearly, prefixoids occupy a different structural position compared to degree modifiers. While the former come into being via word-formation, the latter are hosted in a syntactic position of their own. Thus, one idea might be that degree modifiers and expressive adjectives compete for one position or maybe expressive adjectives move through this position and leave a trace blocking it. Another idea would be to ascribe the restriction that expressive adjectives cannot be modified to their semantics. This path is followed by Gutzmann (2019), who ascribes the modification ban to the fact that expressives are truth-conditionally empty. However, as this modification ban only bans certain modifiers (see below) one could alternatively argue that the choice of the modifier depends on the scale type (see Kennedy & McNally 2005) and that intensifiers like *very* are simply not of the right kind.

Another kind of modifiers which seems to be fine with expressive adjectives are veracity adverbs which also are some sort of degree modifiers. This is illustrated for German using the veracity adverbs *absolut* ‘absolute’ in (27a)¹¹, *wirklich* ‘real’ in (27b)¹², and *richtig* ‘real’ in (27c).¹³ Note that all veracity modifiers in (27) are non-inflected indicating that they are indeed modifying the expressive adjective and not the noun. In general it needs to be mentioned, however, that the modification of expressive adjectives has not received much attention in the literature and different types of modification (see, for example Kennedy & McNally 2005) clearly need to be tested more systematically in the future. A point of departure might also be Beltrama (2018) who analyzes intensifiers like *totally*, which were labeled here as “veracity adverbs”, as pragmatic adverbs strengthening the speaker’s commitment.

- (27) a. Ja, ist mein absolut verdammtter fucking Ernst.
 yes is my absolute damn fucking seriousness

¹¹ <https://www.konsolentreff.de/themen/atp-wta-tour-season-2022.2225/seite-28>, spelling slightly adapted

¹² <https://archiv.wartower.de/forum/showthread.php?t=136863>.

¹³ <https://www.pferd.de/threads/158692-pferdekauf/page4>

- ‘Yes, I am really damn fucking serious.’
- b. Oder das ist ein wirklich verdammt Zufall.
 or this is a real damn coincidence
 ‘Or this really is a damn coincidence.’
- c. Na super, heute war wieder so ein richtig verdammt
 well super today was again such a real damn
 Scheisstag, kaum läuft mal was gut im Leben schon
 shit.day hardly goes once something well in.the life yet
 holt’s einen auch wieder runter.
 gets one also again down
 ‘Well, great! Today was a really damn hell of a day. Once some-
 thing goes well in life it gets you down soon.’

Discussing the semantic and morpho-syntactic properties of expressive adjectives showed that semantically, expressive adjectives are interpreted above the DP layer, while the surface structure seems to indicate that they belong in a position below the DP (and above the NP). If we take what was said so far together several tests can be used to identify an expressive adjective: As they are not-at-issue standard diagnostics for at-issueness can be applied (see, for example, [Simons et al. 2010](#)), it can be tested whether the adjective can be embedded into an idiom, whether it can be used in predicative position, or whether it can be coordinated with a descriptive adjective. Different accounts were put forward in the literature to account for these facts which either tried to find a pragmatic or a syntactic solution for the scope-taking behavior of this word class. Before discussing these two types of approaches in Section 5 the following section briefly touches upon mixed-expressive adjectives.

4 Mixed-expressive adjectives

While expressive adjectives have received much attention in recent years, mixed-expressive adjectives were investigated to a much lesser extent. While the current article mainly focuses on pure expressives, some basic properties of mixed-expressive adjectives and some open questions are discussed in the following paragraphs. Expressive adjectives, as mentioned, do not contribute truth-conditional meanings. Mixed-expressive adjectives, in contrast, contribute both a truth-conditional meaning and a non-truth-conditional part. The German mixed-expressive *beschissen* and its English counterpart *shitty*, for example, are said to contribute the descriptive content ‘bad’ plus a use-

conditional evaluation (Gutzmann 2019: 84). Gutzmann (2019) illustrates this by using the following example:

- (28) Ich schreibe eine beschissene Note nach der anderen ...
 I write one shitty grade after the other ...
 ‘I am writing one shitty grade after the other ...’

If *beschissen* ‘shitty in (28) only had an expressive meaning it would simply mean that the speaker writes one grade after the other (and evaluates this negatively), which clearly is not what is meant. Instead, *beschissen* expresses that the grades are bad. Using a pure (or “expletive” in Gutzmann’s terminology) expressive adjective modifying the same noun, in contrast, does not lead to reading in which the grade is bad:

- (29) Deine verdammte Note ist mir egal.
 your damn grade is me indifferent
 ‘I don’t care about your damn grade.’

As mentioned, mixed-expressive adjectives can, in contrast to their pure expressive relatives, be used in predicative position, as illustrated for German and English (cf. the paraphrases) in (30). While an expressive adjective *verdammnt/damn* cannot be used predicatively (30a), a mixed-expressive adjectives can (30b).

- (30) a. *Die Party war verflucht.
 the party was fucking
 ‘*The party was fucking.’
 b. Die Party war beschissen.
 the party was shitty
 ‘The party was shitty.’

Using a mixed-expressive adjective as in (30b) leads to a predicate of personal taste as noted by an anonymous reviewer. One test to identify a predicate of personal taste is the faultless disagreement test according to which this kind of predicates trigger the intuition that in cases of disagreement neither party need be wrong (Stojanovic & Kaiser 2022):

- (31) Paula: The party was shitty.
 Gökce: No, it wasn’t.
 ✓ If the party was shitty to Paula, but not to Gökce, then neither of them speaks falsely.

The exact relationship between mixed-expressive adjectives and predicates of personal taste need to be explored by future research. Another difference between expressive and mixed-expressive adjectives is that expressive adjectives

can only appear in their positive form, but not in the comparative or superlative. This is different for mixed expressives (cf., *shitty* – *shittier* – *shittiest*).

Gutzmann (2019) notes that mixed expressive adjectives can sometimes also have pure interpretations which is probably the reason that they can appear in idioms as described at the beginning of this article. An example of such a pure use is given in (32).¹⁴

- (32) Ich frage mich wirklich, wieso ich deine beschissene Nummer
 I ask myself really why I your shitty number
 gewählt habe!
 dialed have
 ‘I really ask myself why I dialed your damn number.

There clearly is an expressive evaluation in (32), but the speaker surely does not descriptively express that the number of the addressee is bad in some way. It is an open question under which circumstances mixed-expressive adjectives receive pure interpretations. This question becomes even more pressing if one considers cases in which mixed-expressive adjectives seem to be descriptive only. This is, for example, true in some cases in which mixed-expressive adjectives are embedded in questions (cf. As utterance in (33) or under negation (cf. Bs reply in (33)).

- (33) A: Hatte er denn ein beschissenes Leben?
 had he PARTICLE a shitty life?
 ‘Did he have a shitty life?
 B: Nein, er hatte kein beschissenes Leben.
 no he had no shitty life
 ‘No, he didnt have a shitty life.

The same effect can be observed under similar entailment-cancelling operators, such as conditionals:

- (34) Ich liebe dich, auch wenn du mal einen beschissenen Tag hast.
 I love you also if you once a shitty day have
 ‘I still love you even if you have a shitty day once in a while.

A related open question is whether and under which circumstances otherwise pure expressive adjectives like *damn* can receive mixed interpretations. As mentioned in the introduction, pure expressives sometimes trigger an intensifier reading which could be regarded as a mixed-expressive use with an intensifying plus an evaluative function:

¹⁴ Example from <https://www.wattpad.com/amp/1183437480>, received 15.08.2024.

- (35) The cat is a damn beauty!

So far it seems as if mixed adjectives (like *shitty*) in some cases convey a descriptive and an expressive meaning at the same time, while in other cases they are only expressive, and in still other cases, they seem to lose their expressive meaning only keeping their descriptive content. It is, however, neither clear whether this applies to all cases of mixed-expressive adjectives nor whether this holds true for all languages. Beltrama & Lee (2015) discuss the Italian mixed-expressive adjective *gran* ‘great’ (not to be confused with the descriptive adjective *grande* ‘big’):

- (36) Marco mangiò una gran pizza lo scorso mese.
 Marco ate a great pizza last month
 Truth-condition: ‘Marco ate a great pizza last month.’
 Expressive: ‘The speaker is excited about the pizza.’

In contrast to German *beschissen* ‘shitty’, the expressive meaning of Italian *gran* seems to go away under entailment-cancelling operators. Embedding *gran*, for example, in a question is only possible as a reinsurance question, but not as a real information-seeking question:

- (37) Ha ricevuto un gran regalo ieri Marco?
 has received a great gift yesterday Marco
 ‘Has Marco received a great gift yesterday?’

That is, the question in (36) can only be felicitously be used if the speaker is excited about the gift and wants the addressee to confirm that the gift indeed was great, but not to ensure that the gift was indeed exciting.¹⁵ Taken together, mixed-expressive adjectives exhibit a great deal of flexibility which might be subject to a lot of variation that should be addressed by future studies.

5 Syntax-semantics mismatches: pragmatics or syntax?

The problem any account on expressive adjectives should be able to deal with is that they are interpreted above the DP, although they are overtly located inside the extended DP domain: “the expressive is interpreted as if it were higher in

¹⁵ This judgment is based on the intuitions of only two native speakers of Italian and should, thus, be taken with caution.

the syntax than it actually is” (Frazier, Dillon & Clifton 2015: 299). While Pfaff (2017) argued that expressive adjectives syntactically still belong to the extended nominal domain, but are interpreted in a position above the DP, the more severe problem is that expressive adjectives can also be interpreted as targeting larger constituents (i.e., argument extension is possible) and that they are seemingly able to even target a DP different from the one they appear in (i.e., argument hopping is possible). In the following, different views on which of these interpretations are actually possible and how the interpretation of expressive adjectives comes about are presented. Note already that more recent research suggests that the interpretive possibilities are actually much freer than assumed by the studies discussed here (see Section ??).

5.1 Frazier, Dillon & Clifton (2015): a pragmatic account

Following ideas developed by Potts (2005; 2007), Frazier, Dillon & Clifton (2015) assume that the meaning contribution of an expressive adjective is a quasi-independent speech act (see also Dillon, Clifton & Frazier 2014 and EXPRESSIVITY AND SPEECH ACT THEORY, this volume). The term “quasi-independent speech act” reflects the intuition that a clause containing an expressive makes a propositional statement (or asks a question, gives an order etc.) and additionally contains an evaluation. However, the evaluation is not completely independent of the propositional material in the clause (but see Section 6.2). If this “speech-act hypothesis” is correct then expressive adjectives should be able to lead to interpretations in which the adjective expresses an evaluation of the whole situation expressed in its prejacent similar to what is achieved when an expressive adjective is used as a holophrastic utterance:

(38) Damn! The cat drank my beer!

In fact, the speech-act hypothesis brought forward by Frazier, Dillon & Clifton (2015) is much broader as it states that the meaning contribution of expressive adjectives is (quasi-)independent of the at-issue material contained in a clause. That is, the speech-act hypothesis predicts that expressive adjectives “behave as if they were uttered independently and search their target from that unintegrated position in a purely pragmatic way”, as Gutzmann (2019: 95) puts it. Thus, Frazier, Dillon & Clifton (2015) suggest that the interpretation an expressive adjective receives is not driven by its syntactic position, but only by pragmatic considerations. Based on this idea, Frazier, Dillon & Clifton (2015) put forward another hypothesis they dub “culprit hypothesis”: In a clause containing a transitive verb, an expressive adjective will be more

likely to be interpreted as targeting the subject if the subject can be understood as the causer of the event denoted by the verb—no matter whether the expressive is overtly modifying the subject or the object DP. This is illustrated in (38), where the expressive adjective is overtly modifying the object in both examples (examples from Frazier, Dillon & Clifton 2015: 294).

- (39) a. My son totaled the damn car.
b. The holiday is on the damn weekend.

While the subject of the clause in (38a) can be understood as having control over the event described, the subject of (38b) clearly has no control over the event described in the clause. The culprit hypothesis now predicts that a subject interpretation is more likely to arise in (38a) than in (38b), as there is an agentive causer in the former, but not in the latter clause.

To test these hypotheses, Frazier, Dillon & Clifton (2015) constructed “causal” and “non-causal” examples including expressive adjectives and asked subjects (forty-eight undergraduate students) to indicate what the most likely interpretation of the sentences they were presented with were. In addition to the two conditions causal versus non-causal, they manipulated whether the expressive adjective preceded the sentences or whether it overtly modified the subject or the object DP. Examples from their experiment are shown in (39) and (40).

- (40) Causal items
a. Damn. The dog is on the couch.
b. The damn dog is on the couch.
c. The dog is on the damn couch.
- (41) Non-causal items
a. Damn. The holiday is on the weekend.
b. The damn holiday is on the weekend.
c. The holiday is on the damn weekend.

Participants were asked for each item whether they thought that the speaker wanted to express a negative attitude towards the whole situation (called “sentence interpretation” from now on), towards the subject or the object DP.

The sentence interpretation in this experiment was most often chosen if the expressive was preceding the clause. In addition, participants also often chose the sentence interpretation when the expressive occurred inside the subject or the object DP. However, this interpretation was more likely for the non-causal

items than for the causal ones. In any case, [Frazier, Dillon & Clifton](#)'s experiment presents evidence for the speech-act hypothesis as the sentence-level interpretation seems to be possible no matter where the expressive adjective is located in the clause. In addition, their results also support the culprit hypothesis as participants indeed were more likely to choose the subject interpretation with causal compared with non-causal items, again, no matter where the expressive adjective was located in the clause. In fact, participants chose the subject interpretation with causal items in nearly 100 % of the cases. While this does not exclude that other interpretations exist this nevertheless is a really strong effect.

5.2 *Gutzmann (2019): a syntactic account*

[Gutzmann \(2019\)](#) takes [Frazier, Dillon & Clifton](#)'s (2015) speech-act hypothesis as his starting point and claims that it makes wrong empirical predictions. As an example of such a wrong prediction he takes the sentence in (41), in which the expressive adjective *damn* is located inside the embedded clause and investigates which interpretations should, in principle, be available if the speech-act hypothesis was correct.

- (42) Peter said that the dog ate the damn cake.

First, the speech-act hypothesis predicts that the expressive should lead to a local interpretation, i.e., one in which the expressive targets the cake. Furthermore, the expressive should be able to target the dog as well as the situation described by the embedded clause. However, in addition to that, the sentence should have a reading in which it is the subject of the matrix clause, i.e., Peter, that is the target of the negative evaluation. Another reading which should theoretically be available is one in which the whole sentence receives a negative evaluation. That it, the speech-act hypothesis predicts that there should be a reading in which the speaker negatively evaluates the fact that Peter said that the dog ate the cake. The matrix-subject interpretation and the matrix-clause interpretation are, however, not available according to [Gutzmann \(2019\)](#), a claim he also tests empirically. To do this, participants (sixty undergraduate students) were presented with root clauses containing an expressive either modifying the subject or object DP (42) as well as embedded clauses with the same modifications (43). Note that [Gutzmann](#)'s original experiment was conducted in German.

- (43) a. Last night, the damn neighbor mowed the lawn.
b. Last night, the neighbor mowed the damn lawn.

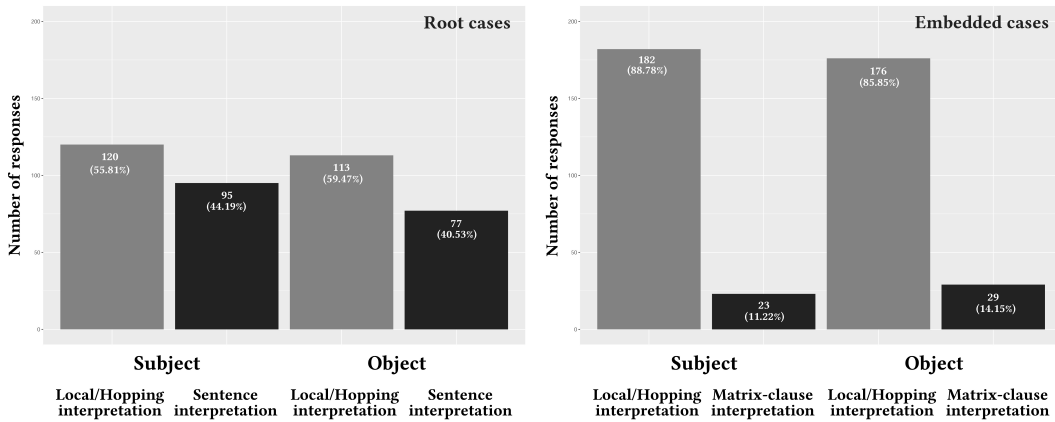


Figure 1: Results from Gutzmann's study. The root-clause condition is shown on the left and the embedded-clause condition on the right. The labels "subject" and "object" indicate the position of the EA.

- (44) a. Susanne said that the damn neighbor mowed the lawn last night.
 b. Susanne said that the neighbor mowed the damn lawn last night.

Participants were asked what they thought was the most likely target of the speaker's negative evaluation of the sentences they were presented with. Three choices were available: The referent of the subject DP, the referent of the object DP, or the the whole situation described by the clause. Note that, for the embedded cases, this means that the situation involved the matrix plus the embedded clause. In (43a), for example, choosing the situation response means that the target of the negative evaluation would be the fact that Susanne said that the neighbor mowed the lawn last night. The results of this experiment are summarized in Figure 1. The left part of the figure shows the root clauses. The light gray bars indicate non-sentential responses (i.e., the expressive was judged to target the subject or object). That is, participants either judged a local interpretation or a hopping interpretation as being most likely. The dark bars indicate the sentential responses. The more interesting cases are the embedded clauses, shown on the right. Here, participants nearly exclusively chose the non-sentential interpretations.

Gutzmann takes these results to mean that the speech-act hypothesis is not on the right track. Instead, he proposes that expressive adjectives are clause-bound. This means that an expressive adjective inside an embedded clause cannot be interpreted in the CP of a matrix clause. But he also identifies even more problems for an account purely based on pragmatic considerations. There should be three different interpretive possibilities which an expressive adjective

can trigger if its distribution is free: The expressive should be able to target a constituent bigger than the one it is embedded in (argument extension), the expressive should be able to target a constituent different from the one it is part of (argument hopping), and, and this case has not been discussed so far, an expressive adjective preceding an utterance should be able to target only a sub-constituent of the clause it precedes (argument lowering).¹⁶ The speech-act hypothesis predicts that all these interpretations should, in principle, be available. Let us start with argument lowering. At first sight, an expressive adjective preceding a clause can not only receive a sentence interpretation, but also one in which the speaker negatively evaluates, for example, the subject (here, the cat):

(45) Damn. The cat drank my beer!

The problem with such examples is, according to [Gutzmann \(2019\)](#), that this kind of argument lowering is only possible when the sentence interpretation is active at the same time. If the expressive was really able to choose its target freely (guided by pragmatic considerations) it should be possible for the expressive to exclusively target the subject. To test whether this is possible [Gutzmann \(2019\)](#) tries to make the sentence level interpretation semantically unlikely by modifying the sentence with a positively evaluating sentential adverb. This, however, leads to a contradiction (at least if one wants the expressive to target the sentence):

(46) #Damn. Luckily the cat drank my beer.

Adding positive evaluating sentential adverbials to clauses containing expressive adjectives additionally seem to block argument hopping as shown in the control examples in (46). Thus, the sentence in (46a) seems not to have a reading in which the speaker negatively evaluates the beer and (46b) seems not to have a reading in which the speaker negatively evaluates the cat.

- (47) a. Luckily, the damn cat drank my beer.
b. Luckily, the cat drank my damn beer.

From the fact that hopping interpretations seem not to be possible if the sentence interpretation is made implausible, [Gutzmann \(2019\)](#) concludes that hopping interpretations are generally derived pragmatically via inference. Thus,

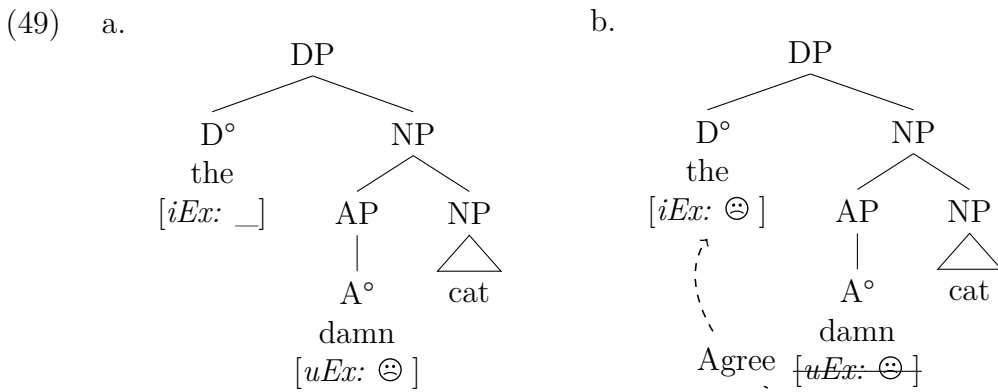
¹⁶ Note that this would require the expressive to be part of the clause. However, it is also a legit assumption that expressive adjective preceding a clause are really independent speech acts. It might also be that both options are available. This issue surely needs more attention in the future.

while argument extension is a real grammatical process, argument lowering and argument hopping are pragmatic processes which can only arise when the sentence interpretation is active. This is illustrated for a hopping scenario in (47).

- (48) *The cat drank my damn beer.*
 $\approx \ominus$ (the cat drank my beer) (argument extension)
 $+ >$ The speaker is angry about the cat. (implicature)

Now the question is how argument extension works. To model this, [Gutzmann \(2019\)](#) adopts an unidirectional, upward-looking version of agreement developed by [Zeijlstra \(2012\)](#). On this account, expressive adjectives come equipped with an uninterpretable, but valued expressivity feature which looks up in the structure for an interpretable, unvalued counterpart it can agree with. It is only the position of this interpretable expressivity feature where the expressive adjective is interpreted.

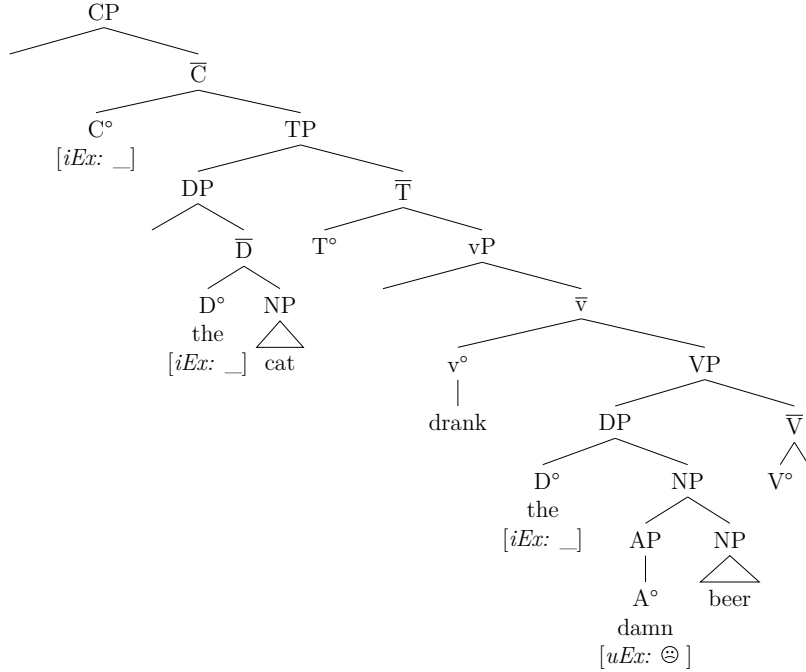
The most simple case is shown in the trees in (48). Here, the expressive adjective *damn* inside the DP *the damn cat* receives a local interpretation. The tree in (48a) shows the starting configuration with an unvalued interpretable expressivity feature in D° . The expressive adjective, in contrast carries a non-interpretable expressivity feature which looks upwards for an agreement target. The tree in (48b) shows that the uninterpretable feature gets deleted after it found its agreement target higher up in the structure. As this interpretable feature is located in D° , we arrive at the correct semantics as it is interpreted in a position having scope over the whole DP structure.



The tree in (49) shows why argument hopping is syntactically not possible. The tree shows the sentence *The cat drank the damn beer*. Again, the expres-

sive adjective carries an uninterpretable expressivity feature. As this uninterpretable expressivity feature can only look for an agreement target inside a c-commanding domain, argument hopping is not possible because even if there is an interpretable expressivity feature in the DP *the cat*, the expressive adjective and this feature are not in a c-command relation (except if one would assume feature percolation, that is, except if one would assume that the DP node containing *the cat* somehow inherits the expressiveness features). Argument extension from a subject or object DP to a sentence interpretation, in contrast, is possible assuming that C° can carry an interpretable expressivity feature similar to D° , as illustrated in (49).

(50)



5.3 *Bross (2021a): problems with a syntactic account*

Bross (2021a) criticizes that Frazier, Dillon & Clifton (2015) and Gutzmann (2019) asked their participants what the most likely interpretation of a sentence is as what is important to decide which interpretive possibilities exist is not the most probable but all possible (and impossible) readings a sentence containing an expressive adjective can receive. However, even though Gutzmann (2019) asked for the most likely interpretation of sentences involving an expressive adjective in an embedded clause, more than ten percent of his stimuli were judged to have a matrix clause interpretation (cf. the right part of Figure

1). Bross (2021a) argues that this does not speak in favor of a syntactic CP-blocking effect, but instead suggests that this interpretation is simply unlikely when a sentence is presented without context.

To decide between Frazier, Dillon & Clifton's (2015) pragmatic and Gutzmann's (2019) syntactic account, he uses a sentence-to-context matching task. In his experiment, participants (eighty-three undergraduate students) were presented with a context making clear that the speaker has a positive attitude towards all referents appearing in a target sentence, except for one. Crucially, the noun describing the latter was not modified by an expressive. Thus, the contexts were constructed in a way ruling out a local interpretation. The target sentences were either root clauses containing an expressive adjective modifying the object DP or the subject DP, or complex sentences with an expressive adjective in the embedded clause. The root clauses all started with a positively evaluating sentential adverbial to rule out a sentence interpretation.

The stimulus in (50) shows an example of the root condition in which the expressive adjective modifies the object (note that Bross' original stimuli were in German). The example consists of a context, a target sentence, and two options for the participants to choose. While pragmatic accounts in the vein of Frazier, Dillon & Clifton (2015) predict that argument hopping should be possible (i.e., participants will choose option 1), Gutzmann's syntactic account predicts that option 2 is chosen.

- (51) Jasmin hates ants and is scared of them. In her garden she built an ant trap consisting of a hole filled with honey. She is very proud of her construction. Suddenly, she is surrounded by ants and gets scared. But then she realizes that the ants are not interested in her, but in the honey in the hole. She is happy about this and says to herself:

Fortunately, the ants will jump into the damn trap.

Option 1: I think it is possible for Jasmin to utter this sentence to negatively evaluate the ants and at the same time NOT to negatively evaluate the trap.

Option 2: I think it is not possible to use this sentence in this context.

The stimulus in (51) shows an example of the root condition in which the expressive adjective modifies the subject. The basic make-up is pretty much the same as above. Again, a pragmatic account predicts that participants will choose option 1, while a syntactic account predicts that option 2 is chosen.

- (52) Patrick works as a programmer and has developed a computer program of which he is very proud. The program was installed on the computers of an important customer who recently was the victim of a hacker attack. An investigation of the attack revealed that Patrick's program ensured that the viruses the hackers wanted to load on the customer's computers were blocked. Patrick reports the events to a colleague:

Fortunately, the damn computer program blocked the viruses.

Option 1: I think it is possible for Patrick to utter this sentence to negatively evaluate the viruses and at the same time to NOT negatively evaluate the computer program.

Option 2: I think it is not possible to use this sentence in this context.

Finally, the example in (52) shows an example of the embedded condition. Again, the pragmatic and the syntactic accounts make different predictions. The pragmatic accounts predicts that option 1 (the expressive targets the matrix subject) and option 2 (a matrix-clause interpretation) should be chosen, whereas the syntax-based accounts predicts that option 3 is chosen as the embedded CP should present a syntactic barrier.

- (53) Jean bought a new car which he really likes. He is super happy. Originally, the money he spent on the car was meant for a new computer he needs for school, but he doesn't care about that. After he learns that his brother Bob snitched on him and told his father about him buying the car he tells his buddy about the events:

My brother Bob told my dad that I bought the damn car.

Option 1: I think it is possible for Jean to utter this sentence to negatively evaluate his brother Bob while he does NEITHER negatively evaluate the car NOR the fact the he bought the car at the same time.

Option 2: I think it is possible for Jean to utter this sentence to negatively evaluate the fact that his brother Bob told his dad that he bought the car while he does NEITHER negatively evaluate the car NOR the fact the he bought the car at the same time.

Option 3: I think it is not possible to use this sentence in this context.

The results of the experiments were rather mixed. First, participants allowed hopping interpretations in roughly 50 % of the root clauses. Second, the matrix-subject interpretation was judged to be possible in roughly 30 % of the cases and the matrix-clause interpretation was judged to be possible in approximately 60 % of the cases. Note that the vast majority of participants allowed these readings for at least one stimulus. While these are not clear-cut results they indicate that there seem to be no strict syntactic mechanisms at play structurally ruling out certain readings. Bross (2021a) concludes that this speaks against Gutzmann's upward looking agreement model.

6 Syntax or pragmatics: open issues

As an interim summary, it can be concluded that there are two competing analyses of what governs the interpretation of expressive adjectives. While Frazier, Dillon & Clifton (2015) present a purely pragmatic account, Gutzmann (2019) presents an account which is mainly driven by syntactic considerations which, however, also leaves room for pragmatic inferences. While Bross' (2021a) results indicate that a strict syntactic implementation seems not to be on the right track, he also leaves room for other syntactic analyses. But how could such an account look like?

One simple proposal could be that to assume an expressivity feature generally located in the CP. In the following, I will briefly discuss arguments in favor of such a view and then discuss some additional arguments which point into the direction of a pragmatically oriented view. As will become clear there are extremely good reasons to believe that pragmatics plays a major role in the exact interpretation of expressive adjectives, but this does not necessarily contradict a syntactic account.

6.1 *In favor of a syntactic account*

The motivation to assume that the interpretation of expressive adjectives is connected to the CP is that their meaning contribution outscopes tense, as discussed above. This class of adjectives is similar to other speaker-oriented categories which were also argued to be located above T like sentential adverbs (see Cinque 1999).¹⁷ Additionally, this fits in well with the intuitions that the meaning contribution of expressive adjectives resembles a speech act, as the

¹⁷ While Cinque (1999) is concerned with the structure of the TP/IP some of his categories are located above tense, i.e., in the CP layer.

CP is exactly that portion of the clausal spine responsible for encoding speech acts (e.g., Rizzi 1997 or Speas & Tenny 2003).

Besides the fact that CP-level categories outscope tense, they have another commonality: their meaning contribution is not-at-issue as claimed by the (not-)at-issue hierarchy by Bross & Hole (2017) and Bross (2020). Some examples of categories taking scope above tense are shown in (53) (examples based on Bross & Hole 2017). All these categories are not-at-issue as illustrated by the fact that they cannot be dissented with. The dialogue in (53a) shows that speech acts cannot be disputed and the examples from (53b) to (53e) show that the same is true for topics, mirativity, evaluation, and epistemic modality.¹⁸

- (54) a. **Speech-acts**
 A: Is Paula at home?
 B: #That's not true. You're not asking a question.
- b. **Aboutness topics**
 A: Beer, Paul bought.
 B: That's not true. #We're not talking about beer.
- c. **Mirativity**
 A: Surprisingly, Lorenz is at home.
 B: That's not true. #You're not surprised.
- d. **Evaluation**
 A: Luckily, Paula is at home.
 B: That's not true. #It's unfortunate that she is at home.
- e. **Epistemic modality**
 A: The light is on. Paul ought to be at home.
 B: That's not true. #You have first-hand knowledge that he is at home!

Categories taking scope below T, in contrast, contribute truth-conditional meaning, as exemplified below:

- (55) a. **Volition**
 A: Paul wants to learn sign language.
 B: That's not true. They force him to learn it.

¹⁸ Note that what is not-at-issue with epistemic modality is only the modal flavor, but not the modal force:

- (1) A: The light is on. Paul must be at home.
 B: That's not true. He may be at home.

b. **Deontic modality**

A: Paula must tidy up.

B: That's not true. Her parents explicitly said they would do it.
She simply wanted to do it.c. **Dynamic modality**

A: Paula must cough every ten seconds.

B: That's not true. If she relaxed a little bit, the tickle in her
throat would go away.

While this does not present direct empirical evidence that expressive adjectives are somehow connected to the CP, they clearly fit in well with this pattern. Additionally, the CP hypothesis makes some interesting predictions. First, one would predict that it is not possible to merge a CP element in a predicative position, which is true for expressive adjectives, as shown above. Second, when an expressive adjective is located in an embedded clause one would predict that the meaning contribution of the expressive can either be anchored to the speaker or to the subject of the matrix clause. As shown in example (8) above, repeated here for convenience, such examples indeed exist, usually with *verba dicendi*:

- (56) My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that damn Webster.

The reasoning behind this is as follows. In embedded cases like (55), there are two CPs. The CP of the matrix clause is tied to the utterance situation which means that subjective evaluations are tied to the speaker. The CP of the embedded clause is tied to the matrix clause. Thus, an evaluation sitting in the embedded clause can target two CPs, namely the matrix CP (in which case we get a speaker evaluation) or the embedded evaluation gets linked to the matrix subject. Note that the CP hypothesis additionally predicts that in a case like (55) the evaluation can not only be linked to the matrix subject, but also that if this interpretation arises it should also be tied to the matrix tense and neither to the tense of the embedded clause nor to speaking time. The example in (56) shows that this prediction is borne out as the father's negative attitude towards Webster is an attitude during his screaming (which was in the past) and is neither linked to speaking time nor to the future tense encoded in the embedded clause.

- (57) My father screamed that he will never invite that damn Webster again.

Third, Bross & Hole (2017) and Bross (2020) argue that the not-at-issue CP-categories are expressed via facial non-manuals in sign languages. While there

is nearly no research on expressive adjectives in sign languages (but see EXPRESSIVITY AND SIGN LANGUAGES, this volume), at least in German Sign Language expressive adjectives do indeed trigger upper-face non-manuals (Bross 2021b). To be more precise, expressive adjectives are expressed manually with additional upper-face non-manuals. In fact, the role played by expressive adjectives in languages like English or German often seems to be taken over completely by non-manual markers, but this topic clearly needs more attention in the future.

Finally, one can compare the behavior of expressive adjectives to clear cases of CP evaluations, especially to items which are ambiguous between a CP interpretation and a structurally lower reading as the very same is often true for expressive adjectives (remember that German *verdammmt* either receives an expressive interpretation meaning ‘damn’ or a literal interpretation meaning ‘condemned’; according to the CP hypothesis, the expressive reading is connected to the CP while the literal meaning is not). Several such cases exist: It is well-known that modal verbs are ambiguous between an epistemic reading taking scope above tense and lower root readings taking scope below tense (e.g., Wurmbrand 2001). The German modal verbs *müssen* ‘must’ and *können* ‘can’ can either be interpreted epistemically or have a root reading. *Müssen*, for example, can be interpreted deontically and *können* can receive an ability reading (‘being able to’). When nominalized, only the root readings survive. Thus, *das Müssen* (literally ‘the must’) means ‘the obligation’ and *das Können* (literally ‘the can’) means ‘the ability’. A similar asymmetry is found with the German scalar modifier *mindestens* ‘at least’, which can be used epistemically. In this case, some guessing at speech time is involved (*Paul hat mindestens fünf Kinder* ‘Paul has at least five children’). Additionally, *mindestens* ‘at least’ can be used in a more literal sense just meaning ‘ x or more’ (*Paul soll mindestens fünf Bier kaufen* ‘Paul should at least buy five beer’) (cf. Geurts & Nouwen 2007 and Gast 2013). Again, when nominalized the epistemic reading disappears. *Das Mindeste* ‘the least’ cannot be used to indicate that there was some guessing at speech time involved. When nominalizing German *verdammmt* ‘damn/condemned’ the same asymmetry can be observed: *der Verdammte* can only mean ‘the condemned’ and the expressive meaning disappears.

Taken together, there are several arguments in favor of the idea that expressive adjectives (and maybe expressives in general) are somehow connected to the CP layer, although they are not overtly located in the left periphery. As discussed next, there are, however, more very good reasons to assume that the valence and the target of the evaluation are determined based on pragmatic factors.

6.2 *In favor of a pragmatic account*

While there are, thus, at least some indications that syntax plays a role in the interpretation of expressive adjectives, there are also good reasons to believe that finding the target of the evaluation brought about by expressive adjectives is driven pragmatically. The research presented so far assumed that expressive adjectives “convey a negative attitude” (Frazier, Dillon & Clifton 2015: 291). However, as already stated in the introduction, the exact emotional value (negative or positive) in fact solely depends on context. For this reason, the introduction stated that their meaning contribution simply is to indicate that the speaker (or the subject of a matrix clause if there is no speaker-linking) is in an emotionally affected state (see Cuonzo 2021 for a similar argument).

In fact, it is unclear whether expressive adjectives necessarily trigger a positive or negative evaluation or whether neutral readings exist which simply express that the speaker is in an emotionally affected state. An example of a possible candidate of a neutral use of an expressive adjective is shown in (57).¹⁹

(58) Mary knew every damn screw in her car.

It is possible to use the sentence in (57) not conveying a negative or positive evaluation. Instead, it seems possible to use the sentence to convey a mirative-like evaluation of the fact that Mary knew every screw in her car. This means that it is not only the target of the evaluation which seems to vary, but also the exact nature of the evaluation which does not need to be a binary choice between positive and negative attitudes.

This extreme context dependency of the exact meaning contribution is, however, not the only reason to believe that the meaning contribution of expressive adjectives is a case for pragmatics. In addition, the literature so far mainly concentrated on examples in which the target of the evaluation was encoded in the sentence the expressive is embedded in. However, sometimes the target of the evaluation is not expressed linguistically, but has to be derived completely from context. Imagine the following situation: A teacher asks her students to determine to which lexical class the word *cat* in the sentence *The cat drank my beer* belongs. After nobody gives an answer she utters:

(59) It’s a damn noun!

The problem with this sentence is that it probably does not convey that the teacher has a negative (or positive) attitude towards the noun or to the fact

¹⁹ As noted by an anonymous reviewer it is interesting that this example only works with a universal, but not with an existential quantifier.

that *cat* is a noun. Nevertheless, the sentence can convey a negative attitude. However, the target of this negative evaluation is not encoded in the sentence, but has to be recovered from the context. A plausible candidate of the evaluation is the fact that the students did not answer her question which made the teacher angry. Unless one wanted to claim that the context is represented in the CP, this observation points into the direction of the idea that pragmatics plays a key role in the interpretation of expressive adjectives. A similar point is made by [Guercio & Orlando \(2022\)](#) who argue that expressive adjectives can target conversational implicatures and presuppositions (see also EXPRESSIVITY AND PRESUPPOSITIONS, this volume). This finding is extremely strong support for the idea that the exact evaluation target depends on pragmatic factors. The example in (59a) shows an example of a negative evaluation of a conversational implicature and (59b) is an example of the negative evaluation of a presupposition, both taken from [Guercio & Orlando \(2022\)](#).

- (60) a. Scenario: the speaker went to the bank to try to get a credit for his business. His business partner waited for him in the car.
 A: Did we get the money?
 B: Start the damn car.
 a. + > The bank did not grant us the money.
 b. ☹ (The bank did not grant us the money)/#☹ (the car)
- b. Luckily, it was not John who stole the damn money.
 a. Asserted content: John did not steal the money.
 b. Presupposed content: Someone stole the money.
 c. #☹ (the money)/#☹ (John)#☹ (John did not steal the money)
 d. ☹ (Someone stole the money)

Taken together, besides the exact nature of the evaluation, the sheer variety of evaluation targets which in some examples need not even be encoded linguistically suggests that pragmatics plays a major role in the interpretation of expressive adjectives. That is, the evidence strongly indicates that the valence (positive/negative/neutral) and the determination of the evaluation target are driven by pragmatics. It still deserves mention that this does not contradict the idea of an expressivity feature encoded in the CP as “the pragmatic layer” in syntax.

7 Conclusions

Expressive adjectives are a special class of adjectives conveying that the speaker (or the subject of a matrix clause) is in an emotionally affected state. The

most puzzling characteristic of expressive adjectives is that their surface position is not the position in which they are interpreted in. The most obvious of these cases is when an expressive adjective is overtly located inside a DP, but takes scope above that DP. In addition, other interpretations are possible, but it is still not entirely clear which of these interpretations are actually driven by linguistic structure and which of these are pragmatic inferences. However, the evidence available clearly suggests that the exact valence and target of the evaluation brought about by expressive adjectives is driven by pragmatic factor. Still, more experimental research employing fine-grained manipulations of contexts is needed to fully understand which readings are possible under which circumstances. Such work needs to be careful in not only looking at different expressive adjectives, but also at different languages with the ultimate goal to understand which properties of expressive adjectives are language specific and which ones are shared by languages exhibiting such adjectives. In addition, much more work is needed on mixed-expressive adjectives.

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