# Expressives, Perspective and Presupposition

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**List of Symbols:** ‖·‖ (double brackets), α (Greek alpha), β (Greek beta), σ (Greek sigma), ε (Greek epsilon), φ (Greek phi), • (large dot)

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**Abstract:**

I compare Potts' use of a "judge" parameter in semantic interpretation with the use of a similar parameter in Lasersohn (2005). The latter technique portrays the content of expressives as constant across speakers, while Pott's technique does not. The idea that the content of expressives is a kind of presupposition is also briefly defended, and a technical problem in the "dynamics" of Pott's formalism is pointed out.

Chris Potts' very interesting paper makes use of a "judge" parameter in pragmatic contexts, in a way which is reminiscent of, but different in important ways from, the use made of a similar parameter in Lasersohn (2005). In these comments, I will review the differences, and suggest some reasons for preferring the system of Lasersohn (2005). Adopting this system eliminates Potts' explanation for why expressive content always seems to project; but I will argue contra Potts that the projection behavior of expressive content is compatible with treating expressive content as presupposed. I will also point out a significant technical problem in the "dynamics" of Potts' formalism.

In Lasersohn (2005), the "judge" parameter of pragmatic contexts was introduced to account for the intuition that the truth value of sentences like (1) and (2) is a matter or subjective judgment, rather than objective truth.

(1) Licorice is tasty.

(2) Roller coasters are fun.

The intuitive idea behind the analysis is that subjectivity is due to relativization of denotations and truth values to individuals, so that these sentences might be true relative to one person but false relative to another.

Perhaps the most obvious way of implementing this kind of relativization would be on the model of formal analyses of indexicality, such as that in Kaplan (1989). Kaplan relativized interpretation to contexts, and assumed each context $c$ would include an "agent" (or speaker/author) $c_A$. The first person pronoun could then be defined as always denoting the agent of its context, essentially as in (3).

(3) $\|\mathbf{me}\|^{w,t,c} = c_A$

In similar fashion, we might assume that each context includes a "judge" $c_J$, and let *fun* denote (in any given context $c$) the set of things which are fun for $c_J$:

(4) $\|\textbf{fun}\|^{w,t,c}$ = the set of things that are fun for $c_J$ in world $w$ at time $t$.

Potts briefly reviews one of the arguments Lasersohn (2005) gives against this approach, based on examples like (5):

(5) John thinks that roller coasters are fun, and Mary thinks that roller coasters are not fun.

The problem here is that in a theory like Kaplan's, all elements of a sentence must be interpreted relative to the same context. If the context fixes a value for the judge parameter, that value must

therefore be fixed for the entire sentence, and both subordinate clauses in (5) should be evaluated relative to the same judge. In this case sentence could mean that John believes that roller coasters are fun for John, and Mary believes they are not fun for John; or that John believes they are fun for Mary, and Mary believes they are not fun for Mary; but we do not expect a reading in which *roller coasters are fun* is an expression of John's taste, and *roller coasters are not fun* is an expression of Mary's taste — and this is actually the most prominent reading of the sentence.

Although this is my own argument, I will admit that it is not very strong, since it is based on considerations which are purely theory-internal to Kaplan's framework; and since (even in that framework) the prohibition on context-shifting operators is only a stipulation, and does not follow from the general architecture of the formalism at all. Moreover, one could easily interpret different parts of the same sentence relative to different "judges" without a

context shift, by allowing each context to contain a **sequence** of judges $c_{J1}$, $c_{J2}$, ..., just as each context may contain a sequence of "indicated objects" to serve as the referents of demonstratives.

But this was just one of a number of problems pointed out for a rule like (4) in Lasersohn (2005), and was far from the most central to the main line of argumentation of that article. A more important problem, in my view, is one that does not depend on issues of intrasentential context shift at all, but rather on the relation between context and content: Intuitively, if John asserts *Roller coasters are fun*, and Mary asserts *Roller coasters are not fun*, we regard them as disagreeing — even contradicting — each other; Mary's assertion expresses a content which is the negation of the content of John's assertion. But assuming (with Kaplan) that the content of an expression α uttered in context *c* is the function mapping each pair of a world *w* and time *t* onto $[\![\alpha]\!]^{w,t,c}$, it will follow from (4) that *fun* expresses different contents relative to different

contexts; and we are left with no guarantee (and no reason to expect) that Mary's assertion expresses the negation of the content of John's assertion.

Lasersohn (2005) solves this problem by introducing an individual index *i*, alongside the world and time indices, so that (4) can be replaced with (6):

(6) $\|\textbf{fun}\|^{w,t,i,c}$ = the set of things that are fun for individual *i* in world *w* at time *t*.

We now slightly modify the definition of content, so that the content of α in context *c* is the function mapping each triple of a world *w*, time *t* and individual *i* onto $[\![\alpha]\!]^{w,t,i,c}$. This gives the result that *fun* expresses the same content in all contexts, and we can easily derive the result that any two assertions of *Roller coasters are fun* and *Roller coasters are not fun* will contradict each other.

We can also account for examples like (5) without claiming that the subordinate clauses are interpreted relative to different contexts, since their contents do not even vary according to context; we understand roller coasters to appeal to John's tastes but not Mary's simply because these contents are the objects of John's and Mary's beliefs.

At the same time, we retain the idea that sentences like these can vary in truth value from context to context depending on the judge, by defining truth-in-context as in (7). It is this rule which relates the individual index on denotations to the judge parameter in pragmatic contexts:

(7) φ is true in $c$ iff the content of φ in $c$ maps $\langle c_W, c_T, c_J \rangle$ onto 1.

Because the perspective expressed by items like *damn* or

*bastard* is unaffected by embedding, Potts suggests we should interpret them on the model of (4) rather than (6). In effect, this treats expressives as involving indexical reference to the judge of the pragmatic context. While this does guarantee that the same perspective is reflected by all expressives in a sentence, no matter the level of embedding, it also produces what seems to me to be an undesirable side effect, namely that **expressives express different contents relative to different individuals**. In other words, if I call John a bastard and you do too, we are not really saying the same thing, despite appearances. The formalism of Lasersohn (2005) was developed specifically to avoid this sort of contextual variation in content in the case of predicates like *fun* and *tasty*; is it any better motivated with expressives?

The issue is complicated by the fact that, as Potts points out, expressives normally seem to express meaning independently of the propositional content of the sentences in which they appear.

Much of the motivation for wanting to avoid contextual variation in content in cases like *fun* and *tasty* came from intuitions about contradiction — a notion which depends directly on propositional content. The same arguments will therefore not carry over directly to Potts' examples.

However, it should be noted that many words which function as expressives can also be used in ways that do allow them to contribute to propositional content. If we allow that (8) expresses a proposition at all, for example, it would seem that *bastard* contributes to it, if not also *damn*:

(8) Bill is a damn bastard!

It is a matter of terminological choice whether to count these words as expressives in examples like (8), but it seems to me that their meanings in this example are not fundamentally different from their

meanings in the kinds of sentences that Potts discusses.

Now suppose that John says *Bill is a damn bastard!* and Mary says *No, he isn't*. Intuitively, their assertions contradict each other — a result which is expected if *damn* and *bastard* express the same content relative to both John and Mary, but unexpected if, as in Potts' analysis, they do not.

It might be argued that Potts' original examples do not produce the same intuition of contradiction when negated, and that therefore this complaint is misdirected. And certainly it is true (as Potts himself points out) that the contribution of *bastard* is immune from negation in examples like (9) (barring a metalinguistic reading for negation as in Horn 1985):

(9) That bastard Kresge isn't late for work. (#He's a good guy.)

But clearly non-expressive elements in the same position show the same pattern, so I do not see this as undermining the claim that the content of expressives does not vary with the choice of judge:

(10) Our employee Kresge isn't late for work. (#He doesn't work for us.)

Treating expressives on the model of (6) rather than (4), as I am suggesting, eliminates Potts' explanation why they seem not to show a shift in perspective under embedding — for what we might call their "shiftlessness." This apparent shiftlessness is Potts' primary argument against treating expressive content as presupposed; it always seems to project past presupposition "plugs" like *believe*.

However, I think it is not quite right to say that expressive

content always projects, and in particular if we look at certain presupposition "filters" rather than plugs, we find that this content behaves much more like an ordinary presupposition than Potts' discussion suggests. A classic example of a presupposition filter is *if*, which allows presuppositions to project from its consequent clause unless they are implied by the antecedent clause. For example, (11) does not presuppose that there is a king of France:

(11) If France is a monarchy, the king of France is bald.

But now consider (12):

(12) I consider John a saint. But if he ever screws me over, I'll crush the bastard like a bug!

A speaker of (12) might be accused of being volatile, but not incoherent. This discourse does not commit the speaker to the

position that John is a bastard; on the contrary, the speaker makes clear that he or she considers John to be a saint. The description of John as a bastard is conditionalized on the (unexpected) event of his "screwing over" the speaker, so that the expressive content does not project up to the sentence as a whole.

It is harder to construct examples in which expressive content fails to project past *believe* or other plugs, but I think it is not impossible. Consider (13), for example, in which, I would suggest, the noun *rant* acts as a plug on the expressive content of *bastard*:

(13) Can you believe how unfairly Mary reacted to John? He's a saint, really, but she practically exploded at him, and after he left, she went into this long rant about how she would kill the bastard.

Examples like (12) and (13) suggest that it may be possible to treat expressive content as presupposition after all.

Of course we still have to explain why the expressive content seems to project in examples like (14):

(14) Sue believes that that bastard Kresge should be fired.

I suspect that at least part of the answer to this lies in Karttunen's (1973) dictum "All plugs are leaky." Karttunen outlines specific circumstances under which plugs may leak, for example in sentences with a first person subject and performative verb; but the phenomenon seems more general than that. A speaker who uttered (15), for example, might very well be understood as committed to the idea that France has a king, unless it were clearly established in the prior discourse that this was not the case:

(15) John thinks the king of France is bald.

Likewise, a speaker of (14) would run the risk of being interpreted as agreeing with the description of Kresge as a bastard, unless the prior context clearly established otherwise. Indeed, the assertion that John is a saint in (12) and (13) is important to making a reading available in which the expressive content is plugged.

Because expressives are so emotionally charged, and because their use can carry a significant social risk, I suspect that speakers are especially cautious about using them in embedded contexts where there is a chance of their content "leaking" — except, of course, if the speaker does agree with the content of the expressive and is willing to make this agreement public. But if this caution means that speakers systematically refrain from using (14) unless they are willing to publicly agree with the description of Kresge as a bastard, (14) will come to imply a speaker commitment

to this description — in other words, the presupposition will project, despite the usual classification of *believe* as a plug. This, I suspect, is the correct explanation for why expressive content normally projects, rather than any theoretical distinction between presupposed and expressive content.

A separate, more technical concern with the analysis is with the '•' operator, which Potts defines as in (16) (= Potts' (46)), where α is of type ⟨σ, ε⟩ and β is of type σ:

(16) $$\|\alpha\|^{c} \bullet \|\beta\|^{c} = \|\beta\|^{|\alpha|^{\varepsilon}(\|\beta\|^{c})(c)}$$

Here, α is an expressive (for example *damn*), and β is the item it modifies (for example, *the dog*). The domain for type ε is the set of functions from contexts to contexts, the idea being that expressives have a dynamic effect on the context; as Potts puts it, "[t]he context

of interpretation changes after each expressive is encountered, and these changes can build through a sentence."

However, as I read it, nothing in (16) gives this effect. Applying $\|damn\|^c$ to $\|the\ dog\|^c$ gives us an update function $f$. What (16) tells us is that in a given context $c$, *the damn dog* will denote whatever *the dog* denotes in $f(c)$, the context one obtains by updating $c$ with $f$. It does not tell us to actually update $c$ with $f$. All it tells us is what *the damn dog* denotes in the original context $c$.

It is easily seen that if $\|the\ dog\|^c$ is of type $e$, then $\|damn\|^c \bullet \|the\ dog\|^c$ will also be of type $e$ — a non-dynamic type which does not effect any update. Unless *the dog* denotes a different individual in $f(c)$ than it does in $c$ — surely not what is intended — (16) will make *the damn dog* completely equivalent to *the dog*, and *damn* will make no contribution at all.

The fundamental problem here is that even though expressives are given dynamic denotations, larger expressions containing expressives are not. But presumably, a larger phrase or sentence containing an expressive may update the context no less than an expressive used by itself. To accomplish this, the entire compositional semantics must be "dynamicized," or else a general update rule must be given which will interact with ordinary static denotations to alter the context. It is quite hard to see how one could successfully treat a limited class of items as dynamic in what is otherwise a traditional static semantic architecture, as Potts attempts to do here.

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