Expressives, Majoratives, and Ineffability

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to argue that not all instances of expressive language suffer alike from the problem of descriptive ineffability. Descriptive ineffability refers to the problem that speakers are never fully satisfied when they are asked to paraphrase sentences containing expressive terms such as 'damn' using only descriptive terms. It is commonly assumed that descriptive ineffability is an important feature of all kinds of expressive language – derogatory language just as commendatory or valorizing language. However, I find that *majoratives*, i.e. the positive counterpart to negative expressives (*pejoratives*), do not exhibit the characteristic of descriptive ineffability. This finding is important both to clarify what kind of data competing theories of expressives have to explain and to shed further light on the wider phenomenon of ineffability.

Keywords: *expressive language, pejoratives, descriptive ineffability, commendatory language, majoratives*

Swear words, insults, and slurs are instances of expressive language. The main function of expressives (which come, for example, as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, or exclamations) is to convey emotional content ([12, pp.182-3], [7, p.164]). This emotional content reflects the attitudes of the speaker. The expressive 'fucking', for instance, may inform us about the distinctively negative feelings the speaker has about his car when he tells us that 'the fucking car does not start'.

Expressives have peculiar features. Notably, they are said to suffer from *descriptive ineffability* ([1],[7],[12]). That is, we are seemingly unable to satisfactorily paraphrase the meaning of sentences containing expressives in descriptive terms. While expressives manage to express their intended content, i.e. while they are not strictly speaking ineffable, some of their content is ineffable in 'neutral' or descriptive language. The

purpose of this essay is to argue that – contrary to the common assumption that all expressives suffer from descriptive ineffability ([7],[11],[12]) – *majoratives*, i.e. the positive counterpart to negative expressives (*pejoratives*) like 'fucking', actually do not exhibit it.

Examining whether majoratives are descriptively ineffable is interesting for at least three reasons. First, in contrast to pejoratives, majoratives are notably understudied [7]. There might be good reasons for prioritizing pejoratives. For example, we might worry first of all about those expressives which are *destructively* performative. But ultimately this imbalance is unjustified. Especially since it is known that some expressives may act as amplifiers for the expression of *either* positive *or* negative attitudes. Expressives may assume a double role as highlighted by (1) and (2).

(1) John is a fucking bad lawyer.

(2) John is a fucking good lawyer.

Even though not all expressives are able to figure in negative and positive amplifications alike (e.g. 'shitty'), there is a real issue here which calls for a closer look on pejoratives used positively and genuine majoratives [7, p.165, fn.3].

Second, since expressives are a relatively recent field of study, and since there at least six main theories which compete to explain them [7, p. 170], it is important to get the data, i.e. the *explanandum*, straight. In order to complement the data any adequate theory of expressives needs to explain, and to know which competing theory best explains it, it is important to know whether indeed all expressives are descriptively ineffable. As some theories are less well suited to account for descriptive ineffability, *ceteris paribus* it would be grist to the mills of those accounts if descriptive ineffability is found to be less pervasive a characteristic of expressives (in the sense of eliminating an important objection to them).[1]

Finally, descriptive ineffability does not seem to be limited to expressives. Geurts [3, p. 210] argues that it pervades the whole language, since words like 'the', 'at', or 'green' are likewise descriptively ineffable. Yet, not all instances of descriptive ineffability seem to be of the same kind. Blakemore argues that the descriptive ineffability of expressives differs from that of words like 'the' [1, p. 3538]. To this effect, it is worthwhile to closely examine the alleged descriptive ineffability of majoratives to broaden the picture.

I will proceed by outlining the descriptive ineffability problem in some detail before briefly discussing Potts's influential account for *why* expres-

sives are descriptively ineffable (§1). I will then argue that majoratives do not suffer from descriptive ineffability (§2).

1   The descriptive ineffability problem

As Potts puts it, the descriptive ineffability problem is that 'speakers are never fully satisfied when they paraphrase expressive content using descriptive, i.e., nonexpressive, terms' [12, p.166]. Notably, there simply seems to be no non-evaluative way of expressing the exact same meaning that we express using pejoratives. Some examples will help to clarify the issue.

(3)   John is a damn bad lawyer.

(4)   John is a very bad lawyer.

The meaning of the pejorative 'damn' in (3) is only inadequately captured by its paraphrase 'very' in (4). In much the same way (5) is not synonymous to (6).

(5)   John, you son of a bitch!

(6)   John, you son of a promiscuous woman!

The descriptive ineffability of the pejoratives used in (3) and (5) seems to be due to at least two different aspects. Even if it is commonly agreed that pejoratives can act as amplifiers in the way 'very' does, i.e. that they can fulfil the same function, it does not seem entirely plausible that 'damn' and 'very' express the same meaning [7, p.165]. Thus, firstly, paraphrasing (3) in the descriptive terms of (4) is *not fully accurate.* Secondly, pejoratives seem to have *more than one* slightly inaccurate paraphrase [7, p.165]. Consider for example (7) and (8) as alternative descriptive paraphrases of (5).

(7)   John, you son of a malicious woman!

(8)   John, you despicable person!

(6) – (8) all seem to capture the meaning of (5) somewhat accurately yet differ in meaning among each other.

   As paraphrases (6) and (8) show particularly well, the descriptive ineffability problem does not refer to the problem to paraphrase expressives in strictly neutral terms. 'Promiscuous' and 'despicable' certainly

have negative connotations, i.e. are value-laden in some sense. The problem goes deeper than that. Even if we use mainly descriptive terms with negative connotations in our paraphrases we cannot express the full force of pejoratives.[2] This *loss of derogatory force* plays a central role for the diagnosed inaccuracy of descriptive paraphrases. It is particularly obvious with respect to racial/nationalistic slurs.

(9) Hans is a Kraut.

(10) Hans is German and despicable because of that.

The loss of force is obvious here, because most people agree that racial slurs lack an objective basis. If we paraphrase (9) with (10), what used to be an extremely offensive utterance suddenly mainly is a false one. The paraphrase might still count as offensive, but less so than the slur, because the paraphrase reveals the lack of an objective basis. This becomes even more obvious with the alternative paraphrase (11).

(11) Hans is German and therefore all he eats is cabbage.[3]

Whereas some people might believe (10) to be true, nobody seriously upholds the belief that all Germans only eat cabbage. What used to be extremely offensive turns out ridiculous after the paraphrasing – with the ridiculousness pushing whatever offensiveness is left to the background. Building on Kaplan [8], Hom [7, p.167] develops yet another way of capturing the descriptive ineffability problem: it is hard to arrive at valid conclusions featuring expressives, if we start out from purely descriptive premises.

(12) 'John got promoted.
 I dislike John.
 Therefore, that *damn* John got promoted.' [7, p.167]

Notice that the strategy is one of reverse-engineering. In order to end up with the correct meaning of the conclusion in (12), we are trying to capture all of its meaningful parts in separate, purely descriptive premises. Then we form a conjunction of them to get us back to the conclusion. From the standpoint of logic there is nothing wrong here. But the conclusion drawn in (12) seems invalid. Hom concludes that 'no attempt to paraphrase the derogatory component into the second premiss plausibly allows for the valid deduction of the pejorative conclusion' [7, p.167].

In spite of these examples and observations, there are critics of the idea of expressives' descriptive ineffability. Geurts, for one, argues that

'"descriptive ineffability" is not the prerogative of expressives' [3, pp. 210-11], as words like 'the', 'at', or 'green' likewise seem to possess this characteristic. He also highlights that the lack of a fully accurate and unique descriptive paraphrase is rather common among polysemous words, i.e. words with several related senses. And proponents of *thick semantic externalism* like Hom [6] argue that paraphrases which are comparably richer, more substantial and extensive than (10) or (11) – and notably paraphrases which allude to social prejudices that are inherently derogatory – can be descriptively adequate paraphrases of (9).

However, I think that both criticisms of descriptive ineffability fail to fully acknowledge the loss of force when paraphrasing expressives, which plays an important role for the dissatisfaction of speakers when paraphrasing expressives in descriptive terms. More specifically, Geurts remains silent on the point that expressives seem to be descriptively ineffable in a very particular way. Expressives are not descriptively ineffable in the same way that 'the' is, and not only because they are polysemous, but because of their expressive force [1]. Expressives express a speaker's attitudes in an expressive, i.e. forceful or 'punchy' way.[4] This is widely acknowledged to be an essential part of their expressive meaning ([7],[12]). 'The' does not likewise feature expressive force that could be lost in paraphrases. This problem also troubles thick semantic externalism. We need to consider that the richer and more substantial paraphrases become, the less forceful they seem. While we may spit out (9), uttering (13) is not nearly as forceful.

(13) Hans is German, and should be shunned and regarded untrustworthy, because he is prone to cruelty and uncivilized conduct, all because of being German.[5]

Richer paraphrases like (13) have an inherent risk of becoming tedious or tiresome. (9) and (13) certainly are not conversationally equivalent in that we would be indifferent between uttering (9) and (13) if we wanted to insult Hans. We would not be fully satisfied with using (13) rather than (9), precisely because of a loss of force. Basically, a richer paraphrase turns an expressive less expressive in the sense of less punchy. The blow we deal by uttering (13) has less punch.

This effect of richer paraphrases being tedious rather than punchy or forceful becomes particularly clear if we consider cases of repeated expressives. Potts notes that 'for expressives, the basic observation is that repetition leads to strengthening rather than redundancy' [12, p. 180]. That is Potts plausibly holds that (15) possesses a stronger expressive force than (14).

(14) Damn, I left my keys in the car.

(15) Damn, I left my damn keys in the damn car.

Imagine what would happen to (15) if we came up with a rich and substantial paraphrase trying to capture the precise descriptive meaning of every occurrence of 'damn'. The loss of force due to redundancy and tediousness would be dramatic.

Now Potts, whose formulation of the descriptive ineffability problem is the canonical one and serves as the point of reference for the entire debate, also provides us with a particularly 'ingenious and elegant' [3, p. 209] as well as influential explanation for *why* expressives are descriptively ineffable. Potts argues that we cannot satisfactorily paraphrase a given expressive in descriptive terms, because part of an expressive's meaning – namely, its *expressive meaning* strictly speaking in contrast to its *descriptive meaning* – 'contributes a dimension of meaning that is separate from the regular descriptive content' [12, p.166]. Potts argues that this expressive meaning resides at the level of a Gricean conventional implicature. It is descriptively ineffable because it is not propositional in nature, but rather a function that shifts the expressive level of the conversational context [12, p.181].[6] Namely, expressives update the conversational context by updating the *expressive level* which is a part of each conversational context [12, p. 178].

Following Potts, the expressive level of a certain conversational context basically contains information about the emotive relationship between the speaker and the person or object he addresses or talks about [12, p. 176]. Formally, an expressive level **I** contains two pieces of information. First, the valence of the speaker's feeling; i.e. whether his attitude towards the person or object is *positive* or *negative*. Second, whether his feeling is *distinct* or *vague*; i.e. whether the speaker can clearly say that he likes/dislikes the person or object or whether he does not really know how he feels about the person or object.

Potts encodes these two pieces of information into **I** by defining **I** as a subinterval of [-1, 1] [12, p. 176]. The *size* of the subinterval indicates whether the speaker's feeling is distinct or vague. The bigger the interval the vaguer the feeling. For example, a feeling of the expressive level [-1, -0.2] is vaguer than a feeling of the expressive level [-1, -0.8]. The *position* of the subinterval with respect to the total interval [-1, 1] indicates whether the speaker feels positively or negatively towards the person or object he talks about. For instance, a feeling of the expressive level [-0.8, -0.6], i.e. a subinterval located in the negative region of [-1,
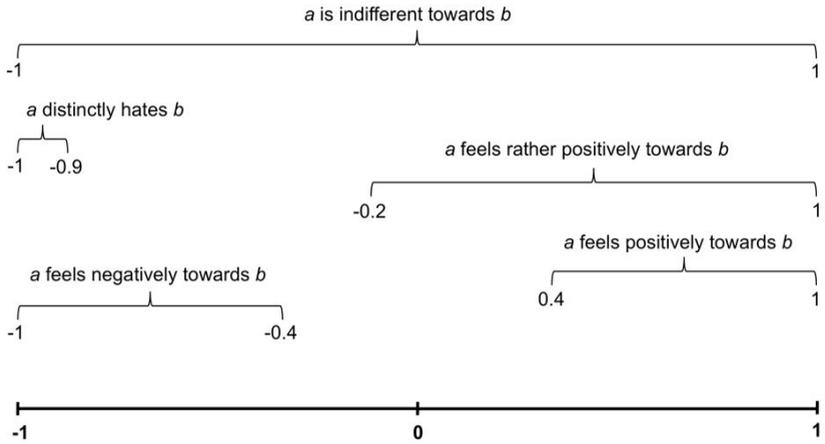
Figure 1: Some expressive levels **I** and their translation into feelings (curly brackets symbolize different **I**s)

1], expresses a negative attitude. The expressive level [0.5, 0.9] indicates a positive attitude. Figure 1 gives some additional examples that should further clarify the mechanics.

When a speaker utters an expressive, the expressive level of the conversational context is updated accordingly. For instance, when the speaker utters (9) we learn that he feels negatively about Hans and will henceforth interpret his utterances against this background. Importantly, every conversational context features at most one expressive level for every salient pair of entities a and b [12, p. 178]. That is, within one conversational context, a cannot use a pejorative indicating a negative feeling towards b and a majorative indicating a positive feeling towards b.

Now, these explanations of why expressives are descriptively ineffable leave Potts's account open to the following natural rejoinder [3]. Why cannot we descriptively paraphrase, say, (9) with a conjunction of (i) its literal content and (ii) the explicit addition that the speaker now feels negatively to the degree [-1, -0.6] towards Hans? Asking this question, Geurts [3] basically objects that Potts's expressive levels really are just formalized propositions about the speaker's feelings. Thus, if we included them in the descriptive paraphrase, we should be able to fully capture an

expressive's meaning. Potts denies this. He argues that while expressive levels like [-1, -0.6] 'have propositional implications' [12, p. 177] – i.e. while we can infer from such indices that the speaker feels negatively towards Hans – they are not themselves propositional in nature. For Potts, expressive levels are 'just entities ... [which] means a demand for a paraphrase of ... [them] is nonsensical – conceptually equivalent to asking for a paraphrase of *Chris Potts*.' [12, p. 177]. However, since Potts does not go into more detail on this issue, this reply seems a bit strained. That is, one might feel like on Potts's account expressives eventually turn out not to be descriptively ineffable after all.

Yet, I think there actually is a way to defend the idea of expressives' descriptive ineffability which fits naturally into Potts overall account. If we consider an inference like (16), then it still seems wrong to conclude that (16) features a valid deduction.

(16) Hans is German and despicable because of that.
      I now feel negatively towards Hans to the degree [-1, -0.6].
      Therefore, Hans is a Kraut.

(This impression does not change if we replace the first premiss with (13).) What keeps us from validly deducting (9) in both cases is, again, that some of the expressive force of uttering (9) is not captured in either premiss; namely, its punch. Note that Potts's account captures some of the expressive force of a given expressive in terms of the size and the position of the expressive level it brings about. His idea is that expressives which render the expressive level narrower and more extremely positioned are relatively speaking more forceful. But while Potts thus captures, so to speak, the end result of uttering an expressive (i.e. the expressive level the conversational context is updated to), his account does not capture *how* this narrow and extremely positioned expressive level is reached. But the 'force-with-which' an expressive expresses an expressive level likewise is a part of an expressive's force and its meaning. This aspect is lost in paraphrasing. Descriptive ineffability persists.

Note that in order to overcome descriptive ineffability in a Pottsian way, it would not be an option to further develop Potts's account in the direction of *multidimensional* expressive levels, as he himself suggests. 'We can generalize the theory of expressive indices to allow for this: the real intervals can be multidimensional' [12, p. 177]. Theoretically speaking we could add another dimension of an expressive's force to its expressive level besides valence and distinctness. But making expressive levels multidimensional would be but another decomposition added, and as such insufficient for overcoming the problem of the expressive force

lost due to decomposition. The problem is the same as that faced by thick semantic externalism as outlined above.

2 Majoratives and descriptive ineffability

With a clearer idea of descriptive ineffability and its reasons, we can now turn to majoratives. Many authors explicitly or implicitly hold that majoratives – like pejoratives – are descriptively ineffable. Potts, for one, directly states that 'expressives in general manifest descriptive ineffability' [12, p. 175]. In criticizing Potts, Zimmerman states that he does not believe in (conceptually possible) lukewarm expressives, e.g. with an expressive level of [-0.2, 0.2], because expressives are either decidedly negative or distinctly positive in nature [14, p. 251]. But he does not question the role Potts ascribes to expressive levels with respect to descriptive ineffability. Hom [7, p. 178] holds that it is good if a theory equally allows for capturing pejoratives' and majoratives' descriptive ineffability. Thus, while the distinction between the descriptive ineffability of expressives and words like 'the' or 'at' is acknowledged ([1],[3],[12]), no distinction is made between pejoratives and majoratives in this regard. I think this is a mistake as majoratives do not seem to suffer from descriptive ineffability.

One of the problems in showing that majoratives do not exhibit descriptive ineffability is that there is no coherent theoretical corpus concerning essential characteristics and particularities of majoratives like there is for pejoratives [7]. But for a start, we might look at those two species of majorative language which seem to be generally accepted: *honorification* [11, pp.179-85] and *polite speech* [10]. Both are so far mostly studied in Asian languages like Japanese or Korean. Honorification is the phenomenon that one can signal one's respect to other people by using certain terms [11, p.180]. For instance, use of honorifics may express the fact that one is inferior in social rank to the addressee. A good example of a honorific in English seems to be the use of 'godfather' in Francis Ford Coppola's movie *The Godfather*. Consider for example proposition (17).

(17) I appreciate your help, godfather.

What is crucial as regards the example of 'godfather' as a honorific is that the term expresses a certain 'upward-lookingness' of the speaker. By uttering (17), the speaker indicates his inferior position with respect to the addressee in the relevant hierarchy. The soldier's 'sir' is very

similar in this respect, just like the practice of addressing judges as 'Your Honor' and ambassadors as 'Your Excellency'. More colloquial terms like 'dude' or 'homie' do not share this dimension of social inferiority, but it seems they are also used to signal one's respect in certain conversational contexts.

As for polite speech, there is the well-known example of the tu/vous-distinction in French or the du/sie-distinction in German, respectively [2]. Harada [5, p.507] circumscribes another phenomenon, saying that one may use some terms 'in order to talk "politely" to the addressee, to make one's speech sound "milder"'. I think that good examples in English can be found among different terms for dying. Compare (18) and (19).

(18) Tom died last night.

(19) Tom passed away last night.

The addressee might be less emotionally aroused by (19) in contrast to (18), as the latter utterance seems to suggest a peaceful death while the former allows for many different interpretations and indeed for some violent kinds of death. The sense in which (19) is polite is that it is considerate. In uttering (19) instead of (18), my intention is not to emotionally arouse you. In uttering (19), I want to soothe you, I want to break the news of Tom's death to you gently; for example, because I fear that the news and the uncertainty of how it happened would distress you (you might faint), or because you belong to a class of persons for whom politeness demands that one generally should practice high standards of consideration. Even if Tom's death was in fact protracted and painful, I may utter (19) in order to be polite by being considerate.

I think that *terms of endearment* (darling, sweetheart, . . .) might constitute a third fairly uncontroversial species of majoratives, and I will include them in the following. Notably, it seems reasonable that terms of endearment are the positive counterparts of pejoratives like 'bastard', since they show a similar distribution ('That bastard/sweetheart Bill removed the ivy from my front garden'). Finally, Potts gives the adjective 'brilliant' as a stand-alone example of a positive expressive [11, p.187].

Now that we have at least a tentative understanding of some classes of majoratives, let us tackle the question of descriptive ineffability. Let us start off by considering honorifics and polite speech. In my opinion, (20) and (21) are *satisfying* descriptive paraphrases of (17) and (19) respectively.

(20) I appreciate your help. I'm indebted to you and I will follow your command.

(21) Tom died in a peaceful and dignified way last night.

I do not see any expressive content not appropriately captured here. Notably, I do not feel that any expressive force is lost. Remember that paraphrasing pejoratives was said to turn for example racial slurs from offensive utterances into mere false beliefs. I do not see the same thing happening here. (20) and (21) certainly are more cumbersome than (17) and (19), but they seem just as respectful/polite as the original utterances.

In using 'command' in (20), for instance, I am not merely saying that the godfather has done me a favor and that I will oblige him in the future, if he asks a favor in return. I am not merely saying that I will do what he says, or that I will follow his instructions. Instead, by using 'command' I paraphrase the 'upward-lookingness' which is characteristic for 'godfather', as commands are given by persons who are clearly superior in the relevant social hierarchy. Because commands, unlike orders or instructions, necessarily are backed up by a social hierarchy, the commander does not have to insist that whatever is commanded must by all means be done. He can be gentle in phrasing the command, for the socially inferior addressee's suitable reply is 'Your wish is my command.'.

Even Kaplan's deduction puzzle seems to disappear for the case of majoratives. Consider (22).

(22) Tom died last night.
He did so in a peaceful and dignified way.
Therefore, Tom passed away last night.

The conclusion drawn in (22) is perfectly valid. Note how (23) can follow (18), but cannot follow (19) or (21).

(23) Unfortunately, his death was protracted and painful.

This shows that the expressive content of (19) is transferred to (21).[7] Some further evidence pointing in the same direction can be gathered for terms of endearment or if we consider adjectives ('brilliant') instead of nouns ('godfather') or verbs ('to pass away'). Consider sentences (24) and (26) as well as their suggested paraphrases (25) and (27).

(24) Thank you, sweetheart.

(25) Thank you. You're a loveable person and I have feelings of affection for you.

(26) That is a brilliant idea.

(27) That is a very good idea. You have to be very smart to come up with something like this.

I take (25) and (27) to indeed be satisfying descriptive paraphrases of (24) and (26) respectively. For instance, the following inference seems to work just fine.

(28) It is time for dinner.
You are a loveable person and I have feelings of affection for you.
Therefore, it is time for dinner, sweetheart.

Note how 'sweetheart' is not used in situations in which we are mad at somebody. We do not say 'It's time for dinner, sweetheart' when in anger. This aspect is precisely what is captured by the second half of (25). Unless I am currently experiencing positive feelings for the addressee, I do not address her/him as 'sweetheart'.

On a more general level, while paraphrasing 'Hans is a Kraut' by saying 'Hans is German and therefore all he eats is cabbage' turned the utterance ridiculous and less forceful, no such thing is to be witnessed for majoratives. The valorization typical of majorative language does not seem to be affected by the paraphrasing process in the same way that the derogation of pejoratives is. This *lack of a loss of expressive force* when paraphrasing majoratives seems to come down to the lower role the 'force-with-which', i.e. an expressive's punch, plays for majoratives. We do not spit out majoratives in the same way we do pejoratives. When using majoratives, we are not interested in dealing a blow in the first place, but in caressing. Therefore, the loss of punch we strongly feel when decomposing and descriptively paraphrasing pejoratives – and which we identified as a reason for pejoratives' descriptive ineffability – plays no or only a negligible role for majoratives. Put differently, the commendatory or valorizing expressive force of majoratives is not as biting, cutting, or acute as the derogatory force of pejoratives. So nothing seems to be lost in descriptively paraphrasing them.

It is difficult to draw a general conclusion based on so little cases and without a more sophisticated theory of what majoratives actually are. Unfortunately, there just is no unified theory or precise definition of majoratives in the literature; and I cannot develop it here. A concluding remark seems to be indicated nevertheless. I hope to have shown by the evidence given that the assumption that positive expressives, just as negative expressives, exhibit descriptive ineffability seems to be wrong.

Given that there is no canonical account of majoratives, this initial insight might illustrate the need for one. *Ceteris paribus*, this finding strengthens all those general theories of expressives currently on offer which have particular trouble with explaining the characteristic of descriptive ineffability. The more descriptive ineffability turns out to be a special case of some clearly defined group of expressives, e.g. of slurs, the less important the question of how a theory of expressives deals with it becomes for evaluating its overall validity.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 In an overview of the logical space of theories of expressives, Hom [7, pp. 170-82] finds that for example contextualism [9], presupposition [13], and propositional conventional implicature [11] are less well suited to deal with this characteristic; e.g. in contrast to Potts's [12] account of non-propositional conventional implicature.

2 Compare Hom: '[W]ords like "felon" [and] "dirty" carry negative connotations in almost all contexts . . . , but their primary function is not to convey their connotations above and beyond their normal, truth-conditional content' [7, p.164, fn.1].

3 The alleged general German fondness for cabbage (in German: 'Kraut') gave rise to the slur 'Kraut'.

4 The German term of 'Kraftausdruck' (literally: force-expression) for an expressive makes this explicit.

5 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this paraphrase.

6 Hom classifies Potts's approach as one relying on non-propositional conventional implicature in contrast to traditional accounts putting forward the idea 'that pejorative words contribute negatively valenced propositional content at the level of conventional implicature' [7, p.177; my emphasis]. Generally speaking, Gricean conventional implicatures allow for communicating content which is separate from the literal truth conditions of what is said [4, p.173]. The transcription of 'son of a bitch' as 'son of a promiscuous woman' might have the same truth conditions yet does not possess the same expressive meaning because the former carries a conventional implicature which conveys some expressive content over and above the literal meaning [11].

7 In cases in which we do not use 'to pass away' as a majorative, i.e. not as an instance of 'polite speech' to make our words sound 'milder', I think that (19)

can follow (15) or (17), as the literal meaning of 'to pass away' is not 'to die peacefully'.

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