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THE INEFFABLE CASE OF EXPRESSIVES**

Abstract

Expressive terms (*damn, fuck, bastard*) are said to convey speakers' attitudes and feelings. These can be positive or negative, depending on the context. In this paper, I focus on the property of expressives that I take to be of the most importance: descriptive ineffability. Descriptive ineffability is a property of expressive terms for which no suitable descriptive paraphrase can be found that captures the full meaning of the expressive. In the face of arguments that attempt to show either that descriptive terms also carry this feature or that expressives (at least in some instances) can be effable, I defend the idea that descriptive ineffability is unique to expressives. I end the paper by considering what descriptive ineffability can teach us about expressive terms.

Keywords: expressives, descriptives, descriptive ineffability

Expressive terms (e.g., *damn*, *fucking*, *bastard*) and descriptive terms (e.g., *chair*, *dog*, *rain*) seem to account for different areas of the linguistic space. Whilst expressive terms primarily function to convey the speaker's attitude towards some entity or situation, descriptive terms primarily function to describe how the world is. The goal of this paper is to thoroughly develop our understanding of one of the properties that make expressives distinctive from descriptives: *descriptive ineffability*. My aim is two-fold: first, I will provide a more precise formulation of descriptive ineffability concerning expressives

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than is currently available in the literature; second, I will defend the property of descriptive ineffability against some recent criticisms, thus cementing the claim that descriptive ineffability is a special feature of expressives. Particularly, I answer criticisms from those who claim that descriptive words can also be ineffable and those who claim that (some) expressive words are effable.

In section 1, I introduce expressives, discuss their function, and present a semantic sketch that highlights the difference between them and descriptive terms. In section 2, I explore what it means for something to be *descriptively* ineffable. The focus of section 3 is to consider arguments that try to deny that descriptive ineffability is a characteristic property of expressives. I demonstrate how these arguments are not persuasive. In the last section, 4, I draw some tentative conclusions about what descriptive ineffability can teach us more widely about expressives.

1. EXPRESSIVES

In the first part of this section, I explain what expressive and descriptive terms are and how they differ. The focus is on the different functions that such terms have as this will help to justify the descriptive ineffability of expressives, which is introduced more concretely in the next section. The second part of this section presents a (largely informal) semantics for expressive terms, as found in (Potts 2007). This will help to explicate the properties of expressive terms whilst explaining what it means for a term to have meanings across multiple dimensions.

1.1. Expressives, Descriptives, and Their Functions

The role of an expressive is to convey the attitude of the speaker, whether positive or negative. Consider the following:

(1)   (a) Jay is late.
             (b) Jay is fucking late.
             (c) Jay is late and I don't like her.

All of the variants in (1) communicate some descriptive content, namely *Jay is late*. (1b) and (1c) communicate something extra – some information about the speaker in relation to Jay. However, there are two different ways in which this is achieved. The speaker in (1c) is communicating their views about Jay in a descriptive manner; (1c) is only true if Jay is late and the speaker does

not like Jay. The matters are different in (1b) as the descriptive content communicated remains the same as in (1a) and the attitude is expressed *over and above* the descriptive content. The expressive – *fucking* – communicates the speaker's highly negative attitude in a way that (1c) does not. One can certainly infer various propositions from (1b), such as *the speaker does not like Jay*, but this proposition is not communicated by the utterance itself. As noted above, *fucking* does not seem to add anything to the truth-conditional content (i.e., (1b) will receive the same truth value regardless of whether *fucking* is there or not). Furthermore, the use of *fucking* very clearly portrays the speaker as being in a heightened emotional state; while (1c) communicates similar information of dislike towards Jay, the heightened emotional state is not present.

Some have observed that expressives have an "expressive punch" or are "emotionally charged" (Lasersohn 2017: 233; 2007: 288, respectively). Others have noted "there is no other way to say *fuck you* and convey the same level of contempt in polite language" (Jay and Janschewitz 2007: 215).[1] While discussion of expressives having a "punch" or being "emotionally charged" seems metaphorical, they do point to what expressives *do*: the function of an expressive is to express the speaker's attitude. This fits nicely with what we have established in the previous paragraph: since *fucking* does not communicate anything truth-conditional, we may say that its main function or purpose is to communicate the speaker's attitude. Importantly, note that descriptive information does not function in the same manner. There is no emotion attached to the words themselves.

To further explain the different functions of expressives and descriptives, I note Kaplan's definitions of these terms which highlight their functions:

> A **descriptive** is an expression which, roughly, describes something which either is or is not the case. So, a normal, declarative sentence is a descriptive. Let us call an expression an **expressive** if it expresses or displays something which either is or is not the case. (Kaplan 1999: 6)

I hope that the descriptive function is fairly uncontroversial and does not need much attention. In (1a), the speaker is simply describing a state of affairs; in (1c), the speaker is also simply describing something that is the case, namely that Jay is late and the speaker does not like Jay. The function of descriptive terms is to say how the world is. The expressive function might need more

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[1] Note that Jay and Janschewitz (2007: 218) comment against the property of descriptive ineffability. Particularly, they comment how speakers need not find it difficult to explain what they mean when they utter *I feel like shit*. Arguments along these lines will be addressed in section 3.

clarification, so a quote from Jakobson could be helpful:

> The so-called EMOTIVE or "expressive" function, focused on the ADDRESSER, aims at a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about. It tends to produce an impression of a certain emotion, whether true or feigned. (Jakobson 1960: 354)

In (1b), the speaker is describing something that is the case (i.e., Jay is late) *and* is clearly expressing or displaying something *over and above* the descriptive content – their negative attitude towards Jay / Jay being late. What is telling from this quote is that the expressive is used as a *direct* expression of the attitude. This perhaps explains why (1c) does not have the same effect as (1b). Although in (1c) the speaker is describing that they do not like Jay, their attitude is not displayed directly, so it does not have the emotional punch carried by (1b). In sum, the function of expressive terms is to directly communicate one's attitude, whilst the function of descriptive terms is to describe how things are.

1.2. Expressive Semantics

Now that we have elucidated the different functions of expressives and descriptives, we proceed by giving a (largely informal) semantics for expressives. I follow Christopher Potts' (2007) semantics. What I wish to highlight is that the attitude conveyed by an expressive is part of the conventional *meaning* of a term, even if this meaning is non-truth-conditional. Whilst an expressive does not contribute to the proposition, it does contribute to the overall content of the term. To justify this statement, we need to get comfortable with the idea that there is more than one dimension of meaning: a dimension that deals with descriptive truth-conditional meaning,[2] and a dimension that accounts for the expressive use-conditional meaning.

To justify the idea that expressives do in fact reside in a different dimension, take some properties shared by expressives that are not necessarily shared by descriptive terms. While my focus is on descriptive ineffability, I will consid-

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[2] The term "descriptive content" is perhaps a little confusing for there can be descriptive content that is not directly truth-conditional. Consider appositives, which are constructions where a noun phrase is used to refer to the noun in a sentence to describe, rename, identify, etc. that noun. For example, "Jay, **who is a philosopher**, was late again." Here, the appositive (in bold) has descriptive content; however, it does not contribute to the overall truth conditions of the sentence. As such, for the purposes of this article, I take descriptive content to simply mean content that is truth-conditional in the first instance (also called *at-issue* content).

er all the properties of expressives and explain how Potts' semantic system accounts for them. Potts (2007: 166–167) discusses six notable properties of expressive terms:[3]

(i)   *Independence*. Expressive content belongs to a different dimension than descriptive content. As is evident in (1b), the expressive *fucking* does not contribute to the truth-conditional content.

(ii)   *Perspective dependence*. The expressive content is always evaluated from *some* perspective. In (1b), *fucking* is evaluated from the perspective of the speaker of the utterance.

(iii)   *Nondisplaceability*. Expressives *always* say something about the *current* context of utterance. For example, if one is to utter *Jay was fucking late yesterday*, the expressive still communicates the speaker's annoyance in the current context of utterance.

(iv)   *Immediacy*. Expressives achieve their intended effect merely by being uttered. For example, in (1b), as soon as the speaker uses the word *fucking* we know that they have a negative attitude towards Jay or her lateness.

(v)   *Repeatability*. Repeating an expressive term increases the expressive effect. For example, multiple uses of *damn* strengthen the negative attitude of the speaker who utters "Damn, I left my damn keys in the damn car" (Potts 2007: 182).

(vi)   *Descriptive ineffability*. "Speakers are never fully satisfied when they paraphrase expressive content using descriptive, i.e., nonexpressive, terms" (Potts 2007: 166). For example, trying to paraphrase *fucking* as *a very negative intensifier* fails to capture the attitude expressed by *fucking*.[4]

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[3] These properties are not universally accepted. In particular, the status of independence has been widely challenged (see Geurts 2007, Gutzmann 2015, McCready 2010, Berškytė 2021, Berškytė and Stevens 2023). Since my goal in this paper is to explore descriptive ineffability, I will leave the credibility of other properties to one side.

[4] I will question the adequacy of this definition of descriptive ineffability in the next section.

To account for these properties, consider the following sketch of a semantic system. To start, take a set of non-empty contexts, each of which (C) contains a set of parameters, C = $\{c_w, c_t, c_l, c_a, c_\epsilon\}$; the world parameter ($c_w$) determines the world of the context of use; the time parameter (c_t) determines the time of the context of use; the location parameter (c_l) determines the location of the context of use; the agent parameter (c_a) determines the agent (i.e., the speaker) of the context of use; and the expressive setting parameter (c_ϵ) determines the expressive indices of the context of use, capturing the expressive information within the context.[5]

An expressive index is represented as a triple $\langle a\ \mathbf{I}\ b \rangle$, where a is the speaker of an utterance (determined by the c_a parameter), b is the target of a's attitude, and the interval $\mathbf{I} \sqsubseteq [-1,1]$ measures two things: the intensity of the attitude (the narrower the interval, the more intense the attitude), and the positive/negative feeling towards an entity (Potts 2007: 177). For example, if Bea utters (1b), then we know that Bea has a negative attitude towards Jay, and we can represent this as $\langle \llbracket Bea \rrbracket\ [\textbf{-1, 0}]\ \llbracket Jay \rrbracket \rangle$. If Bea has a positive attitude towards Jay and utters, *I bloody love Jay*, we can represent this as $\langle \llbracket Bea \rrbracket\ [\textbf{0, 1}]\ \llbracket Jay \rrbracket \rangle$. We noted in the introduction that the function of an expressive is to display or express attitudes held by speakers. On this proposal, the outcome of this function is represented by the expressive indices. As soon as an expressive is uttered, an expressive index is introduced into the context of utterance, thereby changing the context one is in, i.e., going from a context in which no attitudinal information is present to one in which negative attitudinal information is present. Notably, this is what accounts for the feeling that expressives have "punch" or that they are "emotionally charged" when they are uttered. The expressive index gives us an understanding of what it means for an expressive to display an attitude; this display of an attitude plays a crucial role in providing the full content of the expressive; the expressive content is just represented by the expressive index. The expressive index captures the conventional meaning of expressive terms; thus, even if the speaker did not hold a negative attitude towards Jay or her lateness merely by uttering (1b), they would be communicating a negative attitude.[6] With this in

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[5] Potts (2007: 173–174) includes another contextual parameter: a judge parameter (c_j), which determines the relevant judge. The reason for this is the possibility of the expressive being evaluated from a different perspective than the speaker's. The well-cited example "My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that bastard Webster" (Kratzer 1999: 6) appears to demonstrate that *bastard* attaches not to the speaker but to the speaker's father. Since I'm not considering such possibilities in this paper, I omit the judge parameter.

[6] Unless it was absolutely clear from the context that the speaker was using the expressive in a positive manner, such a context is considered by Potts, who considers a positive use of *bastard* in his example, "Here's To You, Ya Bastard!" (Potts 2007: 177, example 22a).

mind, we can see how this limited representation of Potts' semantics accounts for the six properties noted above:

(i)   Independence is captured because the attitude is wholly account-
           ed for by the expressive index; there is nothing in the truth-con-
           ditional dimension that deals with the negative/positive attitude.

(ii)   Perspective dependence is captured since expressives are always
           evaluated from *some* perspective. Namely, the '*a*' part of ⟨*a* **I** *b*⟩ is
           always filled in.

(iii)   Nondisplaceability is accounted for as the expressive index is in-
           troduced as soon as an expressive is uttered, namely the *current*
           context of use; thus, it says something about the *current* situation.

(iv)   Immediacy is captured since an utterance of an expressive intro-
           duces an expressive index right away.

(v)   Repeatability is explained because using the expressive more than
           once would strengthen the expressive index. Repeating a negative
           expressive would make the interval more negative and intense.

(vi)   Descriptive ineffability is accounted for by the fact that all atti-
           tudinal information is captured by the expressive index. There is
           nothing propositional (and thus descriptive) that an index con-
           tains, therefore it does not make sense for us to try to paraphrase
           the index. Potts (2007: 178) does note that we infer various things
           from expressive indices (e.g., from Bea's utterance of (1b) we
           can infer that Bea does not like Jay). However, this falls short of
           a suitable paraphrase for the expressives themselves.

In short, not only does Potts' semantics explain the six properties that seem to be pertinent to expressive terms, but it also highlights the difference between the descriptive and the expressive dimension. The descriptive dimension concerns itself with truth-conditional meaning, whilst the expressive dimension concerns itself with expressive (or use-conditional) meaning. The full content of an expressive can only be captured if we successfully convey all the information that we find in the expressive index. Words with different functions produce different outcomes: descriptives describe, while expressives express.

2. WHAT IS (DESCRIPTIVE) INEFFABILITY?

The notion of ineffability has been the focus of religious and aesthetic debates. Within the religious tradition of Apophaticism, for example, ineffability is conceived as the inability to describe or have concepts of God (Scott and Citron 2016: 25). Within aesthetics debates, expressive qualities in artworks are also ineffable in our descriptive language. John Spackman (2012: 204) notes that expressive qualities within artworks are ineffable, which is often taken together with the claim that these qualities cannot be grasped by concepts. Thus, we can infer that (at least in some cases) ineffability can follow from the fact that we do not have certain concepts to represent God or expressive qualities in art. Given that we *do* have the relevant concepts to capture expressives, this strong notion of ineffability is not quite what we need. To flesh out the notion of ineffability, I follow Sebastian Gäb's definition, which is what will be amended to deal with descriptive ineffability:[7]

(2)   *Ineffability*: A proposition p is . . . ineffable in a language L if and only if no sentence which expresses p is an element of L (Gäb 2020: 1830).

Ineffability, as defined, is the lack of words within our language to express certain concepts. These concepts do exist, but we do not have the semantic tools to express them. To motivate this explication of ineffability, consider two examples:

(3)   (a) Rudimentary mathematical language: Imagine a system that only contains natural numbers, addition, and subtraction. In such a language, we would not be able to express a proposition containing negative numbers, such as "5 - 7 = -2," since "-2" would be undefined in a rudimentary language like this (Gäb 2020: 1832).

            (b) Umami: The fifth basic taste of umami was discovered in the early 1900s by Kikunae Ikeda (Lindemann, Ogiwara, and Ninomiya 2002). Before a name was assigned to umami, people had the

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[7] Gäb (2020) makes the distinction between *weak* and *strong* versions of ineffability: weak ineffability is what is given in (2), while strong ineffability is defined as "A proposition p is strongly ineffable if and only if for any subject S: S can be in a mental state that p and cannot communicate that p" (Gäb 2020: 1832). In short, strong ineffability means that we do not have the relevant concepts to express something; it's the "ineffability of the mind" (Gäb 2020: 1835). This type of ineffability is perhaps what occurs in cases of trying to describe God or aesthetic properties.

concept of this flavor and perhaps even various descriptions, such as savory, meaty, long-lasting, brothy, etc. None of these terms by themselves fully described umami; thus, prior to the 1900s (arguably), our language did not contain a term to fully express the concept of umami.

There are some good reasons to believe that the users of both these language systems have the relevant concepts of the phenomena they cannot describe successfully. The users of (3a), for example, would know that they will owe the bank £100 if they spend £100 from their overdraft or credit card. Similarly, language users of (3b) would be able to grasp the concept of umami (perhaps demonstrated by the fact that they would be easily able to recognize it), even if they did not have a term for it. In sum, both linguistic communities are merely suffering from a lack of linguistic tools rather than concepts. As Gäb puts it, this type of ineffability is "language ineffability" (2020: 1835).[8] We will see that descriptive ineffability is largely influenced by the description in (2).

We saw in section 1.2 that Potts defines descriptive ineffability as "speakers are never fully satisfied when they paraphrase expressive content using descriptive, i.e., nonexpressive, terms" (2007: 166). However, Potts' explanation is not strong enough to capture ineffability. Whether a speaker is satisfied or dissatisfied by a paraphrase might not have any connection to the *meaning* of expressive terms. For example, take a child overhearing someone uttering *Jay is a bastard*. Now, a parent might simply be satisfied with saying either one (or both) of the following:[9]

(4)   (a) That naughty word means someone is a bad person.
            (b) That naughty word means that the person does not like Jay
            very much.

This does not mean, however, that (4) captures the full meaning of *bastard*; it

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[8] As a reviewer notes, it's not an uncontroversial claim in philosophy of mind that one can have concepts that one is not able to express. Perhaps the language users of (3a) really would not have the concepts of negative numbers and multiplication, or the language users of (3b) did not have a coherent notion of umami before the early 1900s. Since I find examples (3a) and (3b) convincing, my intuitions side with the opposite claim, but I will not provide an argument here. Instead, all I hope to make clear is that one can lack some linguistic tools to fully express oneself in a language because, as we'll see, descriptive ineffability will result in the statement that one does not have the right linguistic tools in the *descriptive* dimension of a language to successfully convey expressive terms. That is, language users have expressive terms within a language taken as a whole, but not in the descriptive dimension of a language.

[9] I would like to thank Dan Zeman (pers. comm.) for suggesting the example and for pointing out this shortfall with Potts' description of descriptive ineffability.

is just that the full meaning is not of concern in that context. Had the speaker uttered *fuckhead* or *asshole* instead of *bastard*, the parent could have uttered either one of (4) too. The parent's interests in this scenario are not about explicating to the child the precise meaning of *bastard* but simply explaining that it is a bad word. That is, the parent is not even attempting to fully capture what is represented by the expressive index. For the purposes of this paper, rather than focusing on a speaker being fully satisfied with a particular paraphrase in a context for some external reasons, we are interested in whether a descriptive paraphrase can fully capture the *meaning* of an expressive.

Going forward, we want to make sure we capture two notions: ineffability means that we cannot capture the full meaning of a term (note that this does not mean that we cannot say *anything* about the term); ineffability concerns the linguistic tools – not our conceptual apparatus.

The discussion of ineffability above considers what is ineffable *tout court*. Our interest is only in what is *descriptively* ineffable. Our language *does* contain the appropriate expressions for expressives; the reason why we can study expressives is *precisely* because our language contains them. In other words, our full semantic theory (i.e., one that incorporates both dimensions) will have a way of representing expressives. As such, we need to narrow down the definition of language L to include only the descriptive language $L_{descriptive}$; only by considering $L_{descriptive}$ can we ask what we mean when we say that expressives are descriptively ineffable.

Recall that in the section above we noted that expressives have an "expressive punch" or are "emotionally charged." We cashed this out as expressive terms having a different function than descriptive terms. The function of an expressive is to introduce an expressive index into the context of use which communicates the speaker's attitude. We noted how this expressive index plays a major role in accounting for the content of an expressive. A successful paraphrase requires descriptive content to communicate the content of the expressive index in a way that displays or expresses this information and not merely says that something is or is not the case. With this in mind, we're ready to give a full explication of what it means for an expressive term to be ineffable in a descriptive manner:

(5)   *Descriptive Ineffability*$_E$[10] A proposition p is descriptively ineffa-

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[10] The subscript E is supposed to signal descriptive ineffability regarding expressive terms. This is to differentiate from *Descriptive Ineffability*$_D$ (with subscript D), which we will encounter in the next section and concerns descriptive ineffability concerning descriptive terms. Also, note the inclusion of "purports" in the definition: I've included this, as per a reviewer's suggestion, so that it's clear that this is an attempt at a paraphrase rather than a successful expression of p.

ble in a language $L_{descriptive}$ if and only if no sentence which purports to express p in $L_{descriptive}$ can capture the expressive index of p.

Of course, the definition above relies on our adoption of Potts' account, but it does not have to. The expressive index merely represents the expressive content, regardless of how one wants to cash it out. Alternatively, we could adopt a proposal based on the *way* in which expressive content is represented. For example, Daniel Gutzmann suggests that

> the special "mode of expression" gets lost when you switch from expressive to descriptive language. . . . That is, even if one could find the perfect descriptive paraphrase to capture the information expressed by an expressive, it would still not be expressed in the same way. Conveying even the same information in descriptive and expressive language is just not the same thing. (Gutzmann 2016: 16)[11]

The special mode of expression of expressive terms is precisely what we have captured with the expressive function. The role of an expressive is to display or express an attitude of the speaker. The mode of expression for descriptive terms is to describe what is or is not the case. Gutzmann's point is that as soon as we paraphrase an expressive using descriptive terms, we lose the display of an attitude. Thus, if the reader is unhappy with the "expressive index" being included in the definition of (5), I invite them to substitute this with the less theoretically laden notion of "mode of expression." My preference for the "expressive index" lies in the fact that it better reflects the expressive *content* of a term and, in the end, I take this to be the key notion that a successful descriptive paraphrase should capture.

To put our definition to use, let us take our primary example repeated in (6) with the attempted paraphrases in (7):

(6) Jay is fucking late.
  (a) $\langle [\![Speaker]\!]$ **[-1, 0]** $[\![Jay]\!] \rangle$.

(7) (a) I have a highly negative attitude towards Jay.
  (b) I have a highly negative attitude towards Jay being late.

Neither (7a), nor (7b), nor their conjunction will be able to capture what is expressed with (6). There is something that these potential paraphrases get right: they certainly describe the relationship between the speaker and Jay, and they explain that the speaker is very unhappy with Jay. But such descriptions are

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[11] For further discussion along these lines, see also (Gutzmann 2013: 44).

not enough to fully capture the conventional meaning of the expressive represented by the index in (6a). The interval represents the intensity of the speaker's attitude as well as their heightened emotional state, which acts as a *punch*, and this information is not captured by (7). We might say that the function of the descriptive term fails to capture the required outcome of *fucking* – the outward display of the emotional state of the speaker.[12] This is precisely because we do not have the correct tools in our descriptive dimension to capture the function of expressive terms; in turn, this is because the descriptive dimension is simply not built for this purpose.

Note how this solves the problem with Potts' definition of descriptive ineffability, whereby ineffability was based on the speaker's lack of satisfaction. Instead of looking at instances of speakers being satisfied or dissatisfied with a paraphrase, we are only concerned with the paraphrase capturing what is communicated via the expressive index. In the parent example, we can say that the parent is satisfied with the paraphrase, but this does not mean that they have captured (or attempted to capture) the expressive index of *bastard* using descriptive language.

3. AGAINST EXPRESSIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE INEFFABILITY

In this section, I will consider arguments against the idea that descriptive ineffability is a distinctive feature of expressive terms. Two different arguments can be offered in favor of this: the first aims to demonstrate that descriptive terms are also ineffable; the second aims to show that expressive terms can be effable.

It's worth noting that although my definition of descriptive ineffability differs from Potts' original formulation and the authors that I am about to discuss are largely concerned with Potts' original notion of ineffability, this should not affect the dialectic in the debate. Whilst I have provided what I take to be a more precise notion of descriptive ineffability (i.e., one that's concerned with more than the speaker's satisfaction with a paraphrase), the formulation is still faithful to Potts' semantics. As discussed in section 1.2, Potts notes that it is the expressive indices that render expressives non-truth-conditional and afford them the status of being ineffable. However, if my formulation does not fall prey to the same criticism as Potts' "speaker satisfaction" formulation, then this demonstrates that my formulation has some merits and moves the dialec-

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[12] Note that even if the speaker is not in a heightened emotional state, their use of *fucking* will express that they are because the speaker's attitudinal information is part of the conventional meaning of *fucking*.

tic in a fruitful direction, resulting in a more precise formulation that avoids existing criticisms.[13]

3.1. Descriptive Ineffability in Descriptive Dimension

First, we will look at Bart Geurts (2007), who is not persuaded by the claim that descriptive ineffability is in any way a special feature of expressives. He argues that there are plenty of descriptive terms that are also ineffable as such, so there is no need to single out expressive terms as special.

> As a matter of fact, it [descriptive ineffability] is all over the lexicon, as witness such disparate items as *the*, *at*, *because*, *languid*, *green*, *pretty*, and so forth. Descriptive ineffability does not draw the line between descriptive and expressive language. (Geurts 2007: 210)

Anna Drożdżowicz (2016) has a similar argument. She aims to show that patterns of descriptive ineffability are not stable enough to distinguish between procedural/expressive and conceptual/descriptive meanings. We're already familiar with the expressive and descriptive distinction. Procedural meanings are more akin to conventional implicatures: they include words such as *but*, *however*, *so*, *the* and are "taken to guide the inferential comprehension process by imposing constraints on the contexts and cognitive effects that the hearer uses in constructing a particular interpretation" (Drożdżowicz 2016: 3). Conceptual meanings, on the other hand, encode concepts and are used to contribute to the content of propositions (affecting the truth conditions), for example, *tree*, *bark*, *chair*. Take the following examples:

(8)   (a) The dog was small and strong.
            (b) The dog was small but strong.

Both sentences in (8) will have the same truth-conditions and will be true if both conjuncts are true. However, only in (8b) will there be what Drożdżowicz (2016: 8) calls a *denial of expectation*. Using *but* gives something extra to the conversation by introducing the idea that one should expect small dogs to be weak.

Drożdżowicz considers more abstract terms such as *freedom*, *truth*, and *future* and argues that they are much more difficult to paraphrase than other concept words like *chair* or *run*. The argument is that although we have no

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[13] I thank a reviewer of this journal for pushing me on this point.

issue using these more abstract words, we struggle to paraphrase them suc-
cessfully.

> We have all experienced difficulty in paraphrasing abstract words when confront-
> ed with questions concerning truth, freedom, or the future. We have no problems
> in applying abstract words in particular contexts, and yet when asked about their
> meaning we are at a loss. (Drożdżowicz 2016: 9)

Both Geurts and Drożdżowicz make similar points. There's descriptive in-
effability in the descriptive dimension, therefore descriptive ineffability cannot
be seen as a notable feature of expressives. To respond to these claims, we
must first consider what descriptive ineffability means for descriptive terms.

As discussed, descriptive ineffability with respect to expressives means that
the expressive index of a term is not captured by the descriptive paraphrase.
This will not do for descriptive terms as there is no such thing as an expres-
sive index in the descriptive dimension. Instead, we can say that the meaning
of a term is not fully captured when paraphrased using descriptive content.
Amending our definition of descriptive ineffability with respect to descriptive
language, we get:

(9)   *Descriptive Ineffability*$_D$ A proposition p is descriptively ineffable
             in a language $L_{descriptive}$ if and only if no sentence which purports to
             express p in $L_{descriptive}$ can capture the meaning of p.

Taking this into account, we can think of a sentence as capturing the meaning
of p by giving the correct definition for p. If this is the case, then it appears that
some of the words mentioned (by both Geurts and Drożdżowicz) do seem to
have a pretty good descriptive paraphrase. For example, *because* as in 'a be-
cause b' may be defined as 'b is the reason a happened'; *green* may be defined
as a color that is between blue and yellow, or it could be given a more formal
definition in terms of wavelength intervals; *freedom* may be defined as the
ability to be able to do and say as one wishes; *future* may be defined as the pe-
riod of time occurring after the time of the utterance.[14]

Even if we accept the claim above, Drożdżowicz's and Geurts's points can
still stand as there isn't just *one* suitable paraphrase but rather multiple suit-
able paraphrases, depending on the context of use. Consequently, we should
refine our definition to include contexts:

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[14] I will not try to define all of the terms mentioned by Drożdżowicz and Geurts, but
I would approach them in the same manner. A similar argument that I present in this sub-
section, but only focusing on Geurts, has been made in (Berškytė 2021: 12525-12526).

(10)   *Descriptive Ineffability*$_{D*}$ A proposition *p* is descriptively ineffable in a language L$_{descriptive}$ if and only if no sentence which purports to express *p* in L$_{descriptive}$ can capture the meaning of *p* in a context.

Multiple suitable paraphrases can be explained either through these words being polysemous or them being semantically underdetermined. In both cases, the context should provide enough information to get the correct meaning of the word. For example, consider the well-known Travis case of Pia and the green plant:[15]

> A story. Pia's Japanese maple is full of russet leaves. Believing that green is the color of leaves, she paints them. Returning, she reports, "That's better. The leaves are green now." She speaks truth. A botanist friend then phones, seeking green leaves for a study of green-leaf chemistry. "The leaves (on my tree) are green," Pia says. "You can have those." But now Pia speaks falsehood. (Travis 1997: 89)

Here it seems we can have two paraphrases for *green*, one that means something like *green looking / looks like a typical plant in color* and the other meaning *naturally green / has x-type chemistry make-up*. Either way, we manage to understand and convey the full meaning of *green* in each context that it's uttered.[16] The point is that regardless of how one fills in the meaning, one will have access to it in a particular context. This is precisely what is not possible with expressive words, for there is no context where a full paraphrase, i.e., one that captures the expressive index, can be given. Further, considering the more abstract terms presented by Drożdżowicz, it also doesn't seem to me that we're at a loss when asked to give their meanings; however, what paraphrase to give will again be very context-dependent. For example, take the word *freedom*. Within the judicial system, *freedom* could mean not being incarcerated and having all the relevant rights. In a different context, say when you were a child, freedom could mean not being grounded and being able to make certain choices. In a philosophical context, freedom could mean something awfully technical. The point is that, regardless of whether these words are more abstract than *chair*, *run*, *bark*, they can still be paraphrased within a context.

The case is different with expressives because, no matter what context we are in, we cannot give a sufficient descriptive paraphrase for them. If we agree that *bastard* means something along the lines of the speaker having a negative

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[15] I thank a reviewer of this journal for pointing me to this case.

[16] For a thorough discussion of semantic-indeterminacy and its relation to propositions, see (Belleri 2014a, b).

attitude towards the subject at hand, we have failed to capture all the information that the expressive index carries. As such, neither Drożdżowicz nor Geurts have shown that the supposed descriptive ineffability in the descriptive dimension poses a threat to the idea that descriptive ineffability is a special feature of expressives.

3.2. The Effable Case of Expressives

The other way one might try to argue against the idea that expressives are ineffable is by showing that expressive terms are, in fact, effable. In the previous subsection, I tried to justify the idea that expressives are ineffable by showing how the full effect carried by the expressive index is missing once we try to communicate expressive content using descriptive words. But perhaps my argument is too quick. Surely, if we find cases where expressive terms can be given a suitable descriptive paraphrase, then this would demonstrate the weakness in my argument.

Drożdżowicz (2016) presents an argument along these lines. She shows that we can always give a suitable paraphrase for a given procedural term. She takes this argument to carry over to expressives as well since procedural and expressive meanings are grouped together. Consider Drożdżowicz's example:

> Take Frank in the movie "The Object of My Affections," who responds to his mother's description of a young woman, "She's an Italian girl but she's pretty," by objecting "What do you mean, but she's pretty, Ma? Why not '*and* she's pretty'?" . . . Such cases show that ordinary speakers can become conscious about and exploit the meaning or applicability of some function words. It is plausible that as an effect of such practice, especially if repeated, some ordinary speakers will gain some ability to paraphrase their meanings, e.g., "What do you mean, you seem to suggest that there is a contrast between being Italian and being pretty." (Drożdżowicz 2016: 9, original emphasis)

Although Drożdżowicz and I both agree about the paraphrasability of procedural words – since I too would argue that procedural terms are paraphrasable – we come to very different conclusions about what this means for the descriptive ineffability of expressives. For Drożdżowicz, the fact that procedural terms could become paraphrasable shows that descriptive ineffability is not a unique feature of procedural/expressives; for me, it shows that descriptive content (of procedural meanings) can be effable. I don't think that the argument she has provided would apply to expressives because, as I have already noted, what is missing from the paraphrase of an expressive (e.g., *fucking*) is

the highly negative attitude of the speaker. Simply describing whether or not one has a negative attitude towards someone is not the same as capturing the emotion that the expressive term carries. The point is that the expressive index cannot be captured by descriptive words in *any* context, no matter how hard the speaker attempts to provide a suitable paraphrase. The reason why this is not an issue for procedural meanings like *but*, *so*, *however* is that they do not seem to carry this expressive feature that cannot be given a paraphrase, i.e., they lack an expressive index. Drożdżowicz's aim was not to explore the semantics of expressives, so I presume that's why she only considers procedural terms in her argument. However, what applies to procedural terms does not automatically apply to expressives. As such, I'm happy to say that procedural terms can be effable, but I still maintain that descriptive ineffability is a special characteristic of expressives.

To give a stronger version of this argument, we ought to look at linguistic evidence from expressives, i.e., cases where expressive terms can be paraphrasable in a suitable manner in language $L_{descriptive}$. The examples I have used thus far all concern rather potent negative expressive terms, i.e., pejoratives. Perhaps this is a mistake. Carl David Mildenberger (2017) considers cases of expressive terms which are used in a positive manner, e.g., honorifics, polite speech, terms of endearment. He dubs these terms *majoratives* and argues that they lack the descriptive ineffability feature carried by pejoratives.

To be clear, Mildenberger is *not* arguing against the claim that the pejorative expressives discussed thus far (e.g., *bastard*) lack descriptive ineffability, only that majoratives lack it and thus should be given more consideration. I am merely using the idea that since majoratives are supposed to be part of the expressive domain, then they provide a stronger argument against this paper than the procedural terms discussed by Drożdżowicz if they lack descriptive ineffability.

Mildenberger discusses various majoratives,[17] of which I will mention only two. The first concerns an instance of *polite speech*, where the speaker chooses their words carefully in order "to make one's speech sound 'milder'" (Mildenberger 2017: 10); the second instance is of *terms of endearment*:

(11)   (a) Tom died last night.
            (b) Tom passed away last night.

(12)   Thank you, sweetheart. (Mildenberger 2017: 10–11)

Mildenberger's intuition with (11) is that the hearer of (11b) "might be less emo-

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[17] See especially (Mildenberger 2017: 9–12).

tionally aroused" (Mildenberger 2017: 10) than the hearer of (11a). The reason for this is that (11b) suggests a peaceful, perhaps painless, death. The speaker of (11b) is being considerate in their choice of words, and by being considerate they are being polite. Example (12) is interesting for it seems to be a positive counterpart to pejoratives like *bastard* as it expresses positive feelings towards an agent. Mildenberger's point is that both (11b) and (12) can receive suitable descriptive paraphrases:

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

(14)   Thank you. You're a loveable person and I have feelings of affec-
             tion for you. (Mildenberger 2017: 11)

Mildenberger argues that nothing is lost when we paraphrase (11b) to (13) or (12) to (14), which means that all the expressive content that both *passed away* and *sweetheart* might carry is appropriately captured using purely descriptive terms. If we accept these claims, then – looking back to our definition of *Descriptive Ineffability*$_E$ presented in section 2 – the paraphrases in (13) and (14) successfully capture the expressive index of these majoratives.

In response to Mildenberger's majoratives, I could take two options. The first, less preferable, option is to simply agree that majoratives can be given descriptive paraphrases and acknowledge that phrases like *passed away* or words like *sweetheart* behave differently from the pejorative expressives we have considered thus far. Perhaps Mildenberger is correct that pejoratives and majoratives should be given different semantic treatments. In other words, we could concede that some seemingly expressive terms can receive a suitable descriptive paraphrase, and the considerations given in this paper only apply to pejorative expressive terms.

My preferred option, however, is to claim that we must be careful in assigning expressive status to words (like with *passed away*), and we must carefully consider whether a satisfactory paraphrase is given (like with *sweetheart*) where the expressive status is granted. I will elaborate on the former point first. In the case of (11b), it does not seem that the use of polite speech expresses a positive attitude. The phrase itself seems metaphorical and the choice of polite speech could be caused by what is appropriate to say in a given context, i.e., the register of the context. For example, should the speaker utter *died* instead of *passed away*, the hearer might be offended, but not because of the lack of a positive attitude from the speaker. Rather, the less polite language might upset the hearer of Tom's demise more. This is not a matter of an expressive

index that needs to be captured; it is a matter of the appropriateness of the language used in a context for reasons other than expressing an attitude.

Regarding the expressive status of *sweetheart*, I agree that the paraphrase seems more suited than our paraphrases of *bastard* or *fuckhead*, but I am not convinced that all the relevant information that the expressive index would carry has been captured. For me, the paraphrase in (14) is missing that slight expressive component that *sweetheart* has. Mildenberger comments on why apparent expressive effability occurs with majoratives:

> When using majoratives, we are interested not 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. (Mildenberger 2017: 12)

Although I agree with Mildenberger that majoratives carry less of a potent attitude or a weaker expressive punch, and I find the reasons for why this might be the case quite convincing, I do not agree that the loss of expressive punch "plays no or only a negligible role for majoratives." If we accept that words like *sweetheart* carry expressive punch displayed by the expressive index (regardless of how negligible) and this is not captured by the paraphrase, then the paraphrase has not successfully captured the full meaning of that term. Of course, one might want to argue that words like *sweetheart* do not carry any expressive information, but then we would not be talking about expressives anymore.

I hope that the arguments presented above demonstrate that descriptive ineffability is a special feature of expressive terms. I have shown that although descriptive terms might suffer from something that, *prima facie*, looks like descriptive ineffability, they in fact can receive a paraphrase that captures a term's full meaning within a context. This, as we have seen, is impossible for the expressives we've considered. I then went on to demonstrate how the apparent effability of expressive terms also does not stand up to scrutiny. Because of this, I take seriously the claim that expressive terms exhibit descriptive ineffability.

4. WHAT CAN DESCRIPTIVE INEFFABILITY TEACH US?

In this last section, I consider the benefit of including descriptive ineffability in future discussions of expressive language and very tentatively propose some consequences for theories that attempt to capture more than individual pejoratives, such as slurs.

Recognizing that expressives are ineffable can help to understand the relationship between all different kinds of expressive terms. In this paper, I have only touched upon a few examples of pejoratives. I have said nothing about interjections, e.g., *Ouch!*, *Oops*, *Fuck!* These are instances of expressive language that appear to have plenty of expressive content but no descriptive content. Interjections are used as tools to convey one's attitude and nothing else, e.g., to convey one's annoyance, surprise, or feeling of discomfort. I have not addressed slurs (e.g., *honky*), which do seem to have descriptive content, but it is different to that of individual pejorative terms like *bastard*. Slurs derogate individuals based on their group membership, but they share something in common with individual pejoratives in that they express the speaker's attitude. I have also not said anything about non-verbal expressive communication (e.g., mimicking, gesturing, and facial expressions, for a discussion, see DiFranco 2017).

If we take descriptive ineffability seriously, then we can explain what all of the above examples have in common: they are types of communicative actions that have meaning across an expressive dimension, however construed. This provides a straightforward way of explaining their relationship to one another. It alleviates the feeling that even though these terms are quite different from one another, there is something in common that they share.[18]

As a tentative suggestion, the above consideration could mean that all these terms would require an explanation that cannot be given merely by the descriptive dimension. Although a full argument is beyond the scope of this paper, consider slurs. If an account wishes to explain the semantics of slurs, then it cannot merely take the descriptive route because, as we have noted, such expressive meaning would reside along two dimensions.[19] Take the following example:

(15)   Jay is a honky.

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[18] Note that I am not claiming that descriptive ineffability is the *only* special feature of expressives. If I were to expand this project just a little bit, I would argue that perspective dependence is a necessary property of expressives; if I were to expand this project by a lot, I would argue that all of the properties *besides independence* are special properties of expressives.

[19] See (Hom and May 2018), (Hom 2008), (Scott and Stevens 2019) for descriptive accounts of slurs.

To attempt to capture the meaning of (15) as *Jay is a white person and I have a very negative attitude towards white people* is to face the charge of not fully capturing the meaning of the slur. The paraphrase would fail to capture the expressive index that *honky* carries. This gives an invitation to explain how descriptive ineffability features in the accounts of proponents of paraphrases or how (if at all) it can be explained away. Note that the expressive index can contain attitudes that are not merely positive or negative but *derogatory*,[20] therefore the type of attitude that a slur expresses is much more serious than the one given by mere pejoratives. As such, a theory of slurs should incorporate some way of capturing the expressive meaning of slurs. In this paper, I have phrased the meaning of slurs in a semantic manner, but, of course, one could also capture the attitude pragmatically. Regardless of one's preferred methodology, one should have a story to tell about the ineffable expressive component that slurs carry.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that there is a construal of descriptive ineffability that is special to expressive terms. I have defended the notion of descriptive ineffability by focusing on the function and content of expressive terms. We have seen that arguments which show that non-expressive terms seem to possess descriptive ineffability do not seem to point to the same issue. We've also seen that expressives cannot be captured in any context, whereas descriptive terms can. I've shown that apparent cases of paraphrasable procedural and majorative terms do not pose an issue for the main thesis of this paper as they're either not expressive in the right manner, or the expressive component remains uncaptured. Finally, we've considered why descriptive ineffability might be useful more widely in debates beyond pejoratives.

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[20] See (Jeshion 2013), (McCready 2010), and (Potts 2007: 179).

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