

Semantics Midterm
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I. Gricean Reasoning (Pragmatics)

A: Do you have a Siamese?

B: I have a cat.

B': No, I don't.

The final implicature which A would arrive at after hearing B's utterance is that **B has a cat that is not a Siamese**. We can arrive at this implicature through Gricean reasoning and Grice's maxims of cooperative conversations. The Gricean maxims are that of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. In particular, B's response strikes the balance between the maxims of quantity and of relation. I will explain shortly why this is the case.

Good

First of all, we assume that the exchange takes place in a context wherein both A and B are speaking of Siamese *cats*. Certainly one can think of instances in space and time where they may in fact be speaking of Siamese (co-joined) twins or people from Siam (Thailand). However, in our current society a "Siamese" refers almost always to a specific breed of cat.

We (and A) assume that B is responding directly to A's question and fulfilling the maxim of relation. Thus he would only say things that are pertinent and relevant to the conversation at hand. A's question is very straightforwardly about whether or not B owns a Siamese cat. Therefore, B's utterance "I have a cat" is directly in response to A's question.

Good

Speaker A would reason that if B had a Siamese, he would simply say yes. If B did in fact own a Siamese, "yes" would be the most informative thing that he could say, in accordance with the maxim of quantity. This is because ownership of a Siamese is more specific than ownership of a cat. All Siamese are cats but not vice versa; that is, Siamese is a subset of cats. Since B spoke of owning a cat, yet did not answer "yes" to the question, B must not own a Siamese. B's at-issue statement places him in ownership in the category of cats and the implicature precludes him from ownership in the category of Siamese. Thus A infers that B has a cat that is not a Siamese.

15/15

Good

By the maxims of quality and manner, we assume that B is not intending to mislead or obscure. That is, he would not sidestep the question and merely say "I have a cat" when in fact he has a Siamese after all. This would be inappropriately taking advantage of Gricean reasoning and leading to a false implicature without directly uttering a falsehood.

B would choose to respond this way instead of directly saying no because he is balancing the Gricean maxims of relation and quantity. **B's response provides additional relevant information**. A is interested in whether or not B owns a Siamese cat – whatever B responds with needs to be relevant. Implicating that he has a cat which is not in fact a Siamese is still relevant to A's question, as all Siamese are cats anyway. It also provides additional information, but not too much, in accordance with the maxim of quantity. If B simply said "no", there is no room for added information. By responding the way that he did, B successfully implicates that although he does not have a Siamese, he still has a cat.

Good

15/15

I must give mention to an alternative, which is that B may not be aware of the breed of cat which he owns. In this case, he may use the maxim of quality and say the most honest thing that he can, which is not “yes” or “no”, but rather the simple statement that he owns a cat. Then the implicature in response to A’s question is “I don’t know if I have a Siamese or not, but I know that I have a cat”. This is the less likely implicature because the maxim of manner should prompt speaker B to say in the first place “I don’t know”, rather than obliquely saying “I have a cat”.

Good, but should also show a cancellation test to show that this is an implicature and not an entailment ~~0/1~~ 0/3

2. Possessives & More (Compositional Semantics)

Answer in lambda notebook file (Possessives_YZhu.ipynb)

Exchanged ideas with Frempongma Wadee

3. Expressive Adjectives (Semantics & Pragmatics)

Exchanged ideas with Frempongma Wadee

[a]

An expressive epithet is primarily used to update information about the utterer’s state of mind. Almost always, an epithet is used to convey strongly negative emotions. Exceptions occur when the word following the epithet is positive, such as “I’m so fucking happy” or “Alfonso is a Good fucking genius.” When neutral words follow an epithet, the phrase is meant to convey frustration. Good

An expressive epithet’s secondary purpose may be to appoint an object or entity as a possible reason / source for the utterer’s negative state of mind, such as “My fucking code won’t compile.” However, the source of frustration may not be the object that the adjectival epithet is directly modifying. For example, in “Alfonso broke the fucking computer,” the source of 11/11 frustration is actually Alfonso and not the computer. Maybe? Useful to compare sentences like "fucking alfonso broke the computer" or "alfonso fucking broke the computer"

Expressive epithets may be used as part of standard expressive utterances as a whole, such as “fucking hell” or “damn” on its own. Even though they are used in a slightly different syntactic way, they still convey more or less the same information about the speaker’s state of mind. Furthermore, the epithets may be used on entities rather than objects of type $\langle e, t \rangle$. For example, we can say “that damn Alfonso”. We can also use them in both the subject and the object of a sentence. They can also be used to modify verbs, such as “I’m going to fucking kill Alfonso.” Why? “Fucking Alfonso fucking broke the fucking computer.” We will try to capture all of these in our formal denotation in part [c].

[b]

In order to determine whether expressive epithets are conversational implicatures, at-issue entailments, or presuppositions, we must examine them in different embedded contexts. As an

example, we will work with the sentence: “Alfonso broke the fucking computer”. The use of the epithet appears to tell us “the speaker is upset”. Does this update to the utterer’s state of mind still occur in different embeddings? Based on the data, I will propose that epithets are not implicatures, entailments, nor presuppositions. They are in fact something else entirely.

Good

At-issue entailments do not project from embeddings such as negation and conditionals. For example, let us leave the epithet out for now and consider “Alfonso broke the computer”. The at-issue entailment is simply as stated – Alfonso broke the computer. If we place the sentence in a negation embedding and say “Alfonso didn’t break the computer”, then the at-issue entailment no longer holds. Yet when we negate “Alfonso broke the fucking computer” with “Alfonso didn’t break the fucking computer,” we still get the sense that the speaker is upset. We might even think Alfonso did something wrong by not breaking the computer.

Under other embeddings, we see that it also projects. Under questioning the agitation of the speaker remains, such as: “Did Alfonso break the fucking computer?” It is also there in the imperative form: “Alfonso, break the fucking computer!” and in the retelling: “I said that Alfonso broke the fucking computer.” In conditional phrases, we have: “If Alfonso broke the fucking computer, then...” and “If..., then Alfonso broke the fucking computer.” Once again, the speaker’s frustration remains clear.

It seems that the sentiment carried by the epithet is so strong that it projects through all embedded contexts. For this reason, it does not appear to be an at-issue entailment. Yet it would seem that the speaker’s intention when using the epithet is very clear, almost on the level of being something he or she wishes to make at-issue. By choosing to utter an epithet, the speaker makes it clearly known that “I am upset”.

Then we must consider presuppositions, which project through presupposition holes like negation, questions, imperatives, and antecedent conditionals. We see that epithets work this way in projecting through all of these embeddings.

Like at-issue entailments, presuppositions are not generally cancellable. “Alfonso broke the fucking computer” presupposes that there exists such a computer. Saying “Alfonso broke the fucking computer and there is no computer” is not felicitous (HWAM test). Saying “Alfonso broke the fucking computer and I’m not upset” seems strange, but not as infelicitous as explicitly cancelling a presupposition. It does not infringe on the realm of improbability. This seems to be most similar to implicatures, which are cancellable. Yet implicatures generally do not project from embeddings. We have already seen that expletive epithets do not work this way. [Show a cancellation test](#)

10/11

Based on this evidence, I propose that expletive epithets are something else. Their sole function appears to update our understanding of the speaker’s state of mind, which seems to be outside semantic touch. In terms of behavior, they project like presuppositions and they are cancelable like implicatures. Perhaps we can propose that expletive epithets are most similar to implicatures, but that they are a rare form which always projects. Because also like implicatures, their meaning depends on conventions and Gricean cooperativity principles. For expletives, we understand that they are used by convention to express strong emotions. It is by this convention that we can therefore infer the speaker’s state of mind.

But exactly which submaxims would come into play here?

[c]

Just like we do not yet have formal tools to properly capture the implicatures in a statement, we also do not have all the tools needed to capture the meaning contributed by an epithet. Please see the lambda notebook file for my attempt to define terms and perform a composition of “the fucking computer” using what tools we currently possess. I have included some # comments in the notebook (Possessives_YZhu.ipynb) and also some descriptions below.

Based on our discussion so far, it appears that whatever type epithets take in, it will return an object of that same type. In the semantic context of “fucking computer”, we can give a denotation in which the epithet maps from $\langle e, t \rangle$ to $\langle e, t \rangle$. It can also map from $\langle e \rangle$ to $\langle e \rangle$ or even $\langle e, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ to $\langle e, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ (such as in the case of “Joanna’s fucking mother” or transitive verbs like “I fucking hate Joanna”) and many more complicated types in complex sentences. Whatever type the function takes is what it returns. Ideally, our denotation for an epithet would take as an argument an untyped function and return that function.

Nice

A slightly trickier part comes in that expressive adjectives can be used on their own in a sentence. For example, we could easily say “Damn.” This a fully felicitous statement in its own right. In such a case, I propose that they do not take in anything at all. They are simply a truth value unto themselves. And like all other instances of their use, they update the attitude of the speaker. We do not need to worry about this for the particular adjective “fucking”, because it does not seem to stand alone as a sentence.

Expressive epithets do not function like normal adjectives in narrowing down categories or placing us in an intersection of qualities. A “grey computer” moves us from the set of computers to a smaller set that is also grey (or which intersects with the set of grey things). But in speaking of a “fucking computer”, it’s not as if we moved from the set of “computers” to the subset of “fucking computers” – such a subset does not exist autonomously in the world. When we use an expressive adjective, nothing about the physical quality of the object or action described has in fact changed, nor is it a different distinct entity. However, like adjectives, we can propose that the epithet is actually being used as a conjunction. That is, it would be returning whatever it receives in conjunction with the knowledge that the speaker is upset.

Good

11/11

This is the crucial part of the epithet’s denotation. An epithet updates our information about the context in which it was uttered. Specifically, the context C is updated to a new context C in which we gain new information about the state of mind of the utterer as described in part [a]. The way I denoted this in the lambda notebook is by using a term ‘state’ for the emotional state of the ‘speaker’. Additionally, we have a conventionalized ‘state_fucking’ for ‘fucking’, or ‘state_expressiveadjective’ for whichever expressive adjective we are using. However, we need to use the adjective in conjunction with the rest of the context, so we also have ‘state_context’. Then the lambda expression takes in an untyped function and returns that function in conjunction with ‘state(speaker) = state_fucking ^ state_context’.

the final solution in the commented part of your code is actually the best

[d: extra credit]

I propose that expressive adjectives can be arranged on a scale. Humans possess a range of emotions from strongly positive to strongly negative. Different expressive adjectives would update the context so that the attitude of the speaker falls at a certain location on the scale. So while “the fucking computer” puts us at the strongly negative end of the spectrum, “the darn computer” is not so negative. Moving further in the positive direction, we have “the wonderful computer” and “the brilliant computer”.

Expressive adjectives can be used in similar syntactic ways. For example, we can use each of the words on its own in a sentence and it would make sense: “Fuck.” “Brilliant.” “Goddamn.” “Marvelous.” They can also be used to modify entities like Joanne or objects like books. Yet there are differences. For example, it is interesting to note that “damn” and “fuck” are both verbs, but we more commonly use “fucking” as the expressive adjective rather than “fuck”, which is just an expletive on its own. However, we seem to use “damn” as an adjective on its own and less commonly in its second form “damning”.

Conventionally negative adjectives can be used more fluidly to modify verbs. One wouldn’t say “I marvelous love her,” but one could certainly say “I goddamn hate her,” or “I fucking hate her.” Also, conventionally negative adjectives can actually be used to express strongly positive emotions. For example: “I fucking love her” places one very far on the positive end of the attitude spectrum. Yet the positive adjectives do not have the same effect – they cannot be appropriated for strongly negative emotions.

Additionally, what I said previously about “fucking” not acting like a conventional adjective does not apply to the positive adjectives. Whereas “Alfonso broke the fucking computer” does not necessarily place us in a more specific set of computers, the phrase “Alfonso broke the brilliant computer” might. We may guess that the computer was in fact an extraordinary piece of engineering. In any case, using positive adjectives more directly picks out the reason for the positive attitude. Like I mentioned previously, “Alfonso broke the fucking computer” doesn’t mean that the computer itself is causing the speaker’s bad mood (in fact it’s probably Alfonso). However, “the brilliant computer” almost always means that the computer is the reason for the speaker’s positive attitude.

Good

These are quibbles, but the primary function of all expressive adjectives is to give us new information about the attitude of the speaker. We could say that “fucking” updates C to state_neg100 and that “brilliant” updates C to state_pos80. For example, by saying “They went to the fucking party”, we achieve the meaning: “They went to the party and the speaker is probably at state_neg100.” By saying “They went to the brilliant party”, we achieve the meaning: “They went to the party and the speaker is probably at state_pos80.” Another less enumerative possibility, which extends my denotation for “fucking” in part [c], is to place the speaker on the emotional scale based on whatever the term is. So that the presence of the expressive adjective in a sentence adds the condition state(speaker) = state_expressiveadjective. Then “they went to the fucking party” gives us: “They went to the party and the speaker’s state is at state_fucking.”

+3