

Multidimensionality of natural language semantics: the return of the myth of conventional implicature

Summary: Natural language semantics is known to be multidimensional in the sense that linguistic utterances may convey different types of information at the same time, e.g. assertive meaning (aka at-issue meaning), presupposition, conversational implicature, and more recently, conventional implicature (hereafter CI). Although the term CI was introduced by Grice (1975/1989), its recent use should be distinguished from Grice's original use, referring to the revindication of the term by Potts (2005), for whom CIs are a projective type of meaning whose truth is independent from that of the at-issue meaning. Potts (2005) identified two classes of CIs, expressives and supplements, and devised a custom multidimensional compositional semantic framework (cf. Karttunen & Peters 1979). Subsequently, revisions were proposed to the framework by McCready (2010) in order to account for what she calls 'mixed expressives', and by Gutzmann (2015) who used the term 'use-conditional items' (hereafter UCIs) as a cover term for the kind of meaning that is ontologically distinct from extant categories of meaning. On the other hand, Potts (2007) revised his original compositional semantic theory, according to the idea that expressive meaning is non-propositional. Contrary to these previous studies, we argue that expressives—which are most prototypical items analysed in terms of CIs/UCIs and are taken to give empirical motivation for extended compositional semantic theories—do not in fact require a special compositional semantic treatment of the kind that the authors cited above have put forward, either as CIs or UCIs. Instead, we claim that they are analysable in terms of at-issue meaning, presupposition, and a non-compositional kind of meaning, which we call 'associative meaning' (cf. Leech 1981). As a result, we express serious doubts about the necessity of CI (assuming alternative explanations of supplements also) as well as UCI (given the lack of cohesion of the category) in linguistic theory, and defend a more conservative view without an additional dimension of meaning in the compositional semantic theory beyond assertive meaning and presupposition (see Karttunen & Peters 1979 for a related idea).

The Debate: Expressives are kind of expressions whose use conveys the speaker's attitude towards certain things or people. A variety of expressions have been analysed as expressives, most garden-variety cases being slurs, curse words such as *fuck* and *damn*, and honorifics (Potts 2005, 2007). The main debate in the literature about expressives is whether they are some distinct kind of meaning (i.e. CIs/UCIs) or could be analysed in terms of presuppositions (Lasersohn 2007, Potts 2007, Sauerland 2007, Schlenker 2007). Potts gives several arguments for distinguishing expressives and presuppositions, the most convincing of which is that unlike presuppositions, they project more robustly and are non-displaceable. For instance, a use of *tu* in French necessarily ascribes the speaker an informal attitude towards the hearer, no matter what the grammatical context it appears in. However, Lasersohn (2007), among others, argues that they can be 'filtered', just like presuppositions unlike what one would expect from meaning belonging to a completely independent dimension of meaning. More concretely, *the bastard* in the following example (Lasersohn 2007: 12) does not seem to convey the speaker's negative attitude towards its referent, John, at the time of the utterance.

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

Schlenker (2007) proposes to reconcile these seemingly conflicting observations in terms of 'indexical presuppositions', which are presuppositions that rigidly refer to the context of

utterance. However, Thommen (2017) claims that something still projects out even if one controls for indexicality.

Proposal: Against this theoretical backdrop, we propose a new way of accounting for the core observations, according to which expressives have ordinary (non-indexical) presuppositions, but endowed with a distinct kind of meaning, which itself is use-conditional (Kaplan 1999), indexical (i.e. represented as a set of contexts) and compositionally irrelevant (Predelli 2013); we call this meaning ‘associative meaning’ (Leech 1981). The ambivalent behaviour of expressives is explained in terms of non-displaceability of the associative meaning and filterability of presupposition. Specifically, we analyze *the bastard* as having a presupposition that the referent is not nice, and an associative meaning that the speaker is angry at the referent at the time and world of the context of utterance. In (1), the presupposition of *the bastard* can be conditionalized (when read *de dicto*), as per other presuppositions in the consequent of a conditional, while its associative meaning that the speaker is angry at this very moment projects out, i.e. the speaker is actually upset now about the hypothetical possibility. This explains the ‘filtered’ interpretation of expressives. Now, consider (2).

(2) John believes that that bastard Kresge is rich.

Here, it is most natural to understand the associative meaning that the speaker is angry at the referent under the *de re* reading of *the bastard*, because if the presupposition is read *de dicto* (i.e. according to John’s beliefs), it is hard to explain why the speaker is angry at the referent. This explains Potts’s original point about strict projectivity. Thus, our proposal can account for the seemingly ambivalent behaviour of expressives as caused by the cohabitation in the same lexical item of different kinds of meaning, i.e. presuppositional and associative, while keeping the compositional semantics lean, as it assumes ordinary presuppositions plus a kind of meaning which lies outside the compositional mechanism (which can be represented as a set of contexts).

General theoretical implications: Recall that Potts (2005) devised his multidimensional compositional system for expressives and supplements. If our analysis is successful, expressives do not give credence to such a special compositional system. If supplements are also to be accounted for by some other way, Potts’s original empirical motivation for a multidimensional theory will no longer be valid. In fact, Schlenker (2010) claims that supplements show more syntactic and semantic integrity with the rest of the sentence than available under the Pottian multidimensional theory, and pursues a non-CI-based account of supplements. When our account of expressives and Schlenker’s account of supplements are combined, the category of CIs can be made dispensable.

Moreover, assuming our account of expressives, Gutzmann’s (2015) framework for so-called UCIs loses its most prominent member. Furthermore, we think his framework is rife with issues that are independent of our analysis of expressives, e.g. (i) lack of restrictiveness, which allows for anything to be analysable as a UCI; (ii) its unduly aligned treatment of the fundamentally different notions of truth and use; (iii) enduring vulnerability to the ‘Binding Problem’, a problem of co-reference across dimensions (cf. Karttunen & Peters 1979, Beaver 2001). These considerations lead us to conclude that the term UCI is not justified and should be disposed of as well.