

# Commitments *de lingua* and assertoric commitments: the case of expressives

This paper presents the results of a series of studies concerning the availability of “shifted”, i.e. non-speaker-oriented interpretations of expressives (e.g., *bastard*). Potts (2005) claimed that the content of expressives is always speaker-oriented, unless the expressive is part of overt quotation. This claim was soon falsified by examples like (1) (Amaral et al., 2007):

- (1) [Monty’s father:] Well, in fact Monty said to me this very morning that he hates to mow the friggin’ lawn.

A non-speaker-oriented reading of *friggin’* in (1) is at least possible, if not preferred. To see if such readings are restricted to speech and attitude reports, Harris and Potts (2009) conducted an experiment with vignettes like (2):

- (2) My friend Mike said that his housemate threw a horrible party last weekend. The cretin always invites a lot of people.

Participants were asked to indicate if they attributed the content of the expressive to the speaker or to the subject of the first sentence (i.e., Mike in the example).

Harris and Potts’ results showed that non-speaker-oriented readings were systematically available: as for (2), almost 30% selected Mike as the one who thought that the housemate is a cretin (see also Kaiser, 2015). This led Harris and Potts to propose a pragmatic mechanism to account for the apparent possibility of “shifted” expressives outside of direct or indirect reports.

This account relies on the assumption that in examples like (2) the expressive is not construed as covertly embedded in a report, even when its content is attributed to the subject, and not the speaker; i.e., it assumes that the attribution of the content of the expressive is largely independent from the attribution of the content of the clause in which it occurs. This assumption goes against configurational approaches that as-

sume semantic binding by attitude predicates (Schlenker, 2007; Sauerland, 2007).

Hess (2018) develops the pragmatic account, arguing that the content of an expressive is attributed as commitment *de lingua* (cf. Harris 2016: a commitment to the appropriateness of a certain expression in a given context), which is independent of assertoric commitments (i.e., ones concerning the main propositional content of a clause).

An alternative account implicitly shares the same assumption: Anand (2007) proposes that “shifted” expressives are covertly quoted. While this is not a fully developed account, quotation is typically entirely flexible in scope, so it should be possible to interpret the expressive as non-speaker-oriented without attributing the rest of the clause to the subject.

We hypothesized that this assumption of independence is wrong and that subject-oriented readings of expressives are typically accompanied by the attribution of the content of the whole clause to the subject, as in a covert (continued) report. That is, we assume that commitment *de lingua* attribution is not independent from assertoric commitment attribution. This hypothesis is inspired by prior research on appositives—another typically speaker-oriented category—by Koev (2014), who found that shifted appositives are usually understood as uttered in a secondary (i.e., reported) speech context. We tested our hypothesis in a series of experiments.

**Experiments** All experiments were in English. For each experiment, we recruited 50 native English speakers on Prolific. Data were acquired online through PCIbex Farm. In each experiment, participants saw 20 short stories similar to (2) in randomized order. All experiments had additional control items to check that participants seriously engaged with the task.

**Exp1** replicated Harris and Potts’ experiment with minor changes and formed the baseline for this study. Participants read

short stories containing an expressive, like (2). They were asked to indicate whether they attributed the content of the expressive to the speaker or to the subject of the first sentence by marking a value on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (= clearly the speaker) to 5 (= clearly the subject) (cf. Fig. 1)

There was a slight preference for speaker-oriented interpretations of the expressive; 43% of the responses were speaker-oriented (i.e., 1 or 2). However, subject-oriented interpretations were also systematically available; 38% of the responses were subject-oriented (i.e., 4 or 5).

**Exp2** had the same materials and procedure as Exp1, except that participants were asked to indicate whether they attributed the content of the second sentence as a whole to the speaker or to the subject of the first sentence (cf. Fig. 2).

Comparing the results with Exp1, participants were slightly more likely to attribute the content of the sentence to the subject compared to the content of the expressive (mean rating: 3.4 vs. 2.9,  $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $Z = 4.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Crucially, there was a robust correlation between sentence and expressive attributions ( $r = .63$ ,  $p < .01$ ), as illustrated in Fig. 3a.

**Exp3** again had the same materials and procedure as Exp1, except now participants had to indicate both to whom they attributed the content of the expressive (as in Exp1) and to whom they attributed the content of the whole sentence (as in Exp2).

The correlation between the answers to the two questions was extremely high ( $r = .92$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (cf. Fig. 3b). Correspondingly, participants' responses to the expressive question were strongly predicted by their responses to the sentence question ( $\beta = 6.2$ ,  $SE = 0.3$ ,  $Z = 19.6$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Exp4** had the same materials and procedure as Exp2, except that the expressive in the second sentence was replaced by a pronoun. Participants had to indicate whether they attributed the content of the second sentence to the speaker or to the subject of the first sentence.

Participants were significantly more likely to attribute the content of the sentence to the subject compared to Exp2, which shows that the presence of an expressive facilitates a speaker-oriented interpretation of the sentence (mean rating: 3.8 vs. 3.4,  $\beta = -0.46$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ,  $Z = -2.4$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Moreover, the mean ratings for each story strongly correlated with the mean ratings from Exp2 ( $r = .77$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Discussion** We corroborated the systematic availability of non-speaker-oriented readings of expressives observed by Harris and Potts. At the same time, we confirmed the hypothesis that the assumption of the pragmatic shift account is wrong: non-speaker-oriented interpretations of expressives are typically accompanied by non-speaker-oriented interpretations of the whole clause in which they occur, i.e. commitments *de lingua* tend to be attributed in concert with assertoric commitments.

We propose two constraints operative in the interpretation of expressives: the strong bias towards speaker-oriented readings (C1) and the tendency for commitments to be attributed jointly (C2). The contrast between Exp2 and Exp4 shows C1 and C2 operating together: according to C1 the expressive is more often interpreted as speaker-oriented, which following C2 increases the salience of speaker-oriented readings of the whole sentence as well. On the other hand, in Exp3, we see C2 can overrule C1: sometimes the assertoric commitment is attributed to the subject and the *de lingua* one follows.

Our results also speak against Anand's (2007) covert-quotational analysis, which fails to explain the codependence of *de lingua* and assertoric commitments, as quotation in principle allows isolating any subclausal part of content.

This finding contrasts with results reported by Kaiser (2015) who found that the use of an expressive can boost non-speaker-oriented readings in contexts plausibly interpreted as free indirect discourse. Exp4 shows that this effect is absent in more direct, non-literary communication.

My secretary Cheryl said that her husband made a complete mess of the basement renovation. The oaf spent a lot of money buying equipment.

*Who is calling Cheryl's husband an oaf?*

Clearly me ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Clearly Cheryl

Figure 1: Example trial from **Exp1**

My secretary Cheryl said that her husband made a complete mess of the basement renovation. The oaf spent a lot of money buying equipment.

*Who is claiming that Cheryl's husband spent a lot of money buying equipment?*

Clearly me ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Clearly Cheryl

Figure 2: Example trial from **Exp2**

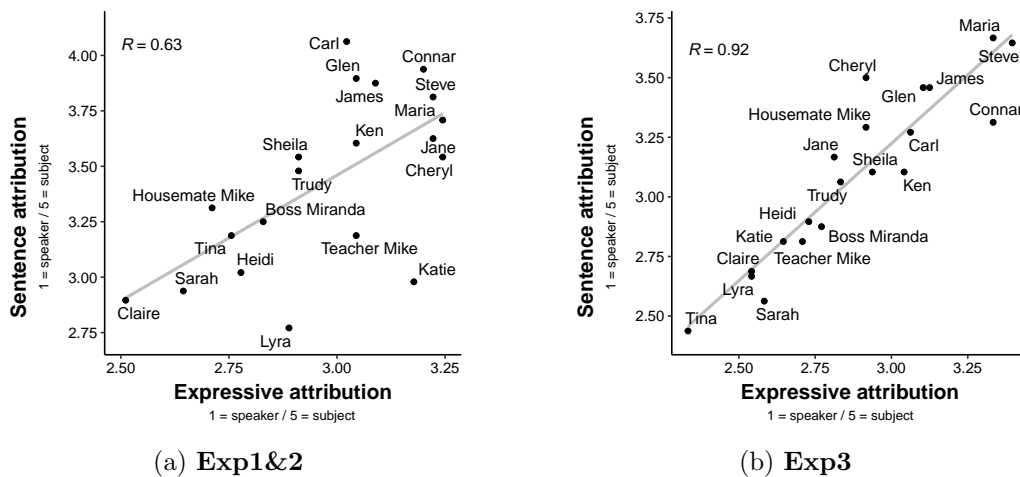


Figure 3: Scatterplots showing, for each vignette, the avg. rating for the expressive against the avg. rating for the whole sentence (1 = speaker-oriented, 5 = subject-oriented).

## References

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