

That *damn* CP-layer. Notes on the syntax of expressivity

Fabian Bross

University of Stuttgart

Keplerstr. 17, 70174 Stuttgart, Germany

fabian.bross@ling.uni-stuttgart.de

Abstract In this short manuscript I discuss some issues concerning the syntax of expressives (mainly by looking at expressive adjectives). I argue that there are good reasons to believe that expressivity is encoded in the CP.

Keywords: expressivity, expressive adjectives, syntax, CP-layer

1 Introduction

Expressive adjectives convey a speaker-oriented, typically negative, meaning. As they are expressives they do not contribute to the truth conditions (in the following I will use the term not-at-issue meaning to refer to the property of not contributing to the truth conditions; cf. [Simons et al. 2010](#); [Tonhauser et al. 2013](#)). Additionally, they exhibit some strange distributional properties. They can, for example, be used attributively, but not predicatively, as illustrated for German in (1).

- (1) a. die verfickte/verdamnte Katze
 the fucking/damn cat
 b. * die Katze ist verfickt/verdammt
 the cat is fucking/damn

That there are classes of adjectives which cannot be used predicatively is not uncommon. There are, however, more surprising properties of expressive adjectives. As noted by [Potts \(2005\)](#), [Frazier, Dillon & Clifton \(2015\)](#), and [Gutzmann \(2019\)](#), an expressive adjective modifying a DP can receive (at least) three different interpretations. On one interpretation it is the referent of the modified DP which is negatively evaluated (called “local interpretation”), on another—rather surprising—interpretation it is the referent of another

DP which is negatively evaluated (called “hopping interpretation”),¹ and on yet another interpretation it is the whole situation described in the clause containing the *damn* DP which is negatively evaluated. Gutzmann (2019) uses an easy-to-capture smiley notation to depict these facts:

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| (2) | The cat ate the damn sausage. | |
| a. | ☹ (the sausage) | Local reading |
| b. | ☹ (the cat) | Argument hopping |
| c. | ☹ (the cat ate the sausage) | Sentence-level reading |

Some authors have argued that the interpretation an expressive adjective receives is driven by pragmatic factors (most prominently Frazier, Dillon & Clifton 2015) while others have claimed that it is syntactic factors which underlie their interpretation (Gutzmann 2019). More precisely, Gutzmann (2019) has argued for an upward-looking Agree model based on ideas developed in Zeijlstra (2012). On Gutzmann’s account, hopping interpretations can only arise if the sentence-level reading is also available. While I have argued (Bross 2021) that this model is probably not on the right track this does not mean that syntax is not involved in the interpretation of expressives. To the contrary, I believe that there needs to be a CP-function behind the interpretation of expressive adjectives. In the following, I will briefly sketch some reasons why I make this assumption.

2 Nondisplaceability and the CP-domain

The speaker-oriented part of the meaning of expressive adjectives and expressives in general takes extremely high scope. This meaning is not only tied to the speaker but is also tied to utterance time. In German, the nouns *Hund* and *Köter*, for example, both mean ‘dog’, but *Köter* is an expressive (a mixed expressive, to be more precise; see McCready 2010; Gutzmann 2011) conveying a negative speaker evaluation. Zimmerman (1991) shows, by using the examples in (3), that embedding *Köter* under a propositional attitude verb like *glauben* ‘believe’ does not allow the hearer to attribute the negative attitude towards the dog to the subject of the matrix clause. Instead the evaluation is an evaluation of the speaker.

¹ The hopping interpretation is only available for expressive adjectives and seems not to be available for other expressive modifiers like prefixoids. Additionally, a hopping interpretation is only available if the modified noun is a descriptive. If an expressive adjective modifies a mixed expressive an expressive concord interpretation arises and hopping is not available.

- (3) a. Hermann glaubt, dass Hella's Hund gestorben ist.
 Hermann believes that Hella's dog dead is
 'Herman believes that Hella's dog is dead.'
- b. Hermann glaubt, dass Hella's Köter gestorben ist.
 Hermann believes that Hella's damn-dog dead is
 'Herman believes that Hella's damn dog is dead.'

This fits in well with the observation that expressives generally outscope tense as expressive meaning “is valid only for the utterer, at the time and place of utterance” (Cruse 1986: 272). Potts (2007) illustrates this by using the example in (4).

- (4) That bastard Kresge was late for work yesterday. #But he's no bastard today, because today he was on time.

This is similar with the German expressive adjective *verdammmt* ‘damn’ as shown in (5). Although the matrix clause is in the past tense and the embedded clause containing *verdammmt* is future tense, the negative evaluation carried by *verdammmt* is interpreted as being an evaluation at utterance time.

- (5) Paul dachte, dass der verdammte Hund morgen wieder kommen
 Paul thought that the damn dog tomorrow again come
 wird.
 will
 ‘Paul thought that the damn dog will come back tomorrow.’

That speaker-oriented categories tend to scope above tense is not a new observation (see, for example, Cinque 1999 on adverbs). If expressives take scope above tense then they belong to the CP-layer, i.e., to the same layer where speech acts are encoded. Interestingly, this connection has been seen before: Frazier, Dillon & Clifton (2015: 299) characterize expressive adjectives like *damn* as performing speech-acts “separate from the speech-act of the at-issue content conveyed by the rest of the sentence”.

We can conclude that if we wanted to locate expressivity in a syntactic tree we need to locate it above tense, i.e., in the CP-layer (note that I will assume a cartographic model in the following, but other implementations are possible as well). This fits in well with the intuition that expressives convey some sort of speech act. As mentioned, Gutzmann (2019) claimed that argument hopping interpretations are only possible in cases in which the sentence-level interpretation is active. Gutzmann (2019) uses examples starting with positive evaluations as testing environments for his hypothesis; examples like the one in (6).

- (6) Luckily, the cat didn't drink the damn wine.

Leaving aside the question which interpretations such sentences allow, their well-formedness shows that the negative evaluation brought about by *damn* is not located in what Cinque (1999) labels EvalP, because this position is occupied by the sentential adverb *luckily* in (6) contributing the exact opposite evaluation, namely a positive one.

From a cartographic perspective it would be plausible to assume an ExpressiveP located high up in the CP-structure. One problem, as correctly pointed out by Gutzmann (2019), is that we do need an answer to the question of how it is possible that a structurally higher feature communicates with the structurally lower target of the evaluation and why the lexical item expressing the evaluation can be displaced from its target. If the idea that there is an expressivity projection in the CP is on the right track, one could furthermore ask whether there are languages marking both, i.e., whether there are languages with left-peripheral expressivity features and more deeply embedded markers indicating which expression is to be evaluated. Indeed, expressive adjectives in German (and English) can fulfill this job:

- (7) Verdammt, die Katze hat das verdammt Sofa zerkratzt!
 damn the cat has the damn sofa scratched
 'Damn, the cat scratched the damn sofa!'

The example in (7) would thus be analyzed as a case of expressive concord with the first instance of *verdammt* 'damn' being located in the CP-layer communicating with the lower instance of *verdammt*. Of course, this analysis would have to be worked out in more detail, but roughly one would argue that the CP-projection is responsible for a negative speaker evaluation and lower instances specify the target of the evaluation.² The most serious challenge for this kind of analysis is that it is not clear whether the first instance of *verdammt* indeed belongs to the rest of the clause or whether we are dealing with a separate speech act hosted in its own CP.

Additional support for the idea that expressives trigger a CP-projection comes from general considerations about the distribution of at-issue and not-at-issue meanings in the syntax as discussed next.

² The assumption of an expressive projection in the CP, of course, does not explain why hopping interpretations exist. However, spelling out two instances of *verdammt* seems to block a hopping interpretation in (7). This intuition, however, needs empirical confirmation.

3 The at-issue/not-at-issue hierarchy

Bross & Hole (2017) and Bross (2020b) have argued for a (not-)at-issue hierarchy. To be more precise, they claimed that the categories encoded in the CP-layer always contribute not-at-issue meaning, while categories encoded in the TP/IP-layer contribute at-issue information. This assumption rests on the observation that the meaning contribution of CP-categories cannot be dissented with, while the same is not true for the TP/IP-categories. This is shown in (8) for a random sample of CP- and TP/IP-categories, adapted from Bross & Hole (2017). Speech-act indicating operators, the evaluation as good or bad, and epistemic modality are all encoded in the CP (see Rizzi 1997 and Cinque 1999).³ The other categories are all hosted in the TP/IP-domain.

- (8)
- a. Speech-act-indicating operators
A: Is Paula at home?
B: #That's not true. You're not asking a question.
 - b. Evaluation as good or bad
A: Luckily, Paula is at home.
B: That's not true. #It's unfortunate that she is at home.
 - c. Epistemic modality
A: The light is on. Paul ought to be at home.
B: That's not true. #You have first-hand knowledge that he is at home!
 - d. Volition
A: Paul wants to learn sign language.
B: That's not true. They force him to learn it.
 - e. Deontic modality_{MUST/CAN}
A: Paula must tidy up.
B: That's not true. Her parents explicitly said they would do it. She simply wanted to do it.
 - f. Root modality_{MUST/CAN}
A: Paula must cough every ten seconds.
B: That's not true. If she relaxed a little bit, the tickle in her throat would go away.

³ Note that what is not-at-issue with epistemic modality is only the modal flavor, but not the modal force:

- (1) A: The light is on. Paul must be at home.
B: That's not true. He may be at home.

Expressives would fit in well with this pattern: they scope above tense and contribute not-at-issue meaning. Additionally, this might also be a hint as to why it is not possible to use expressive adjectives predicatively. A predicative use forces us to interpret the adjective low down in the structure (where no connection to the CP can be established). Thus, everything which is expressed predicatively becomes at-issue. Note that this is different with mixed expressives which can be used predicatively, but then lose their expressiveness, i.e., they become at-issue (see [Potts 2007](#) and [Zimmermann 2007](#)). If this line of thinking is correct we arrive at the following generalization: Lexical items only expressing not-at-issue meaning (like expressive adjectives) can never be used in a predicative position, while mixed lexical items, i.e., lexical items expressing both at-issue and not-at-issue meaning can be used in a predicative position, but in this case the not-at-issue part goes away.

4 Expressive meaning in sign languages

Additionally, [Bross & Hole \(2017\)](#) and [Bross \(2020b\)](#) argue that the syntactic split between at-issue and not-at-issue categories is iconically mirrored in sign languages and the way these visual languages express these categories. While CP-categories always trigger (suprasegmental) non-manual markers of the face, TP/IP-categories are expressed by (concatenated) manual signs. This does not generally preclude the use of manual markers for expressing CP-functions, but according to their Bodily Mapping Hypothesis (see also [Bross 2020a](#) for more details) facial non-manuals need to be involved. CP-functions that are expressed non-manually with the (upper) face in German Sign Language are, for example, sentence-type markings, epistemic modality, mirativity, sentential evaluation, contrastive focus, or topic marking. Functions encoded in areas within the TP/IP, in contrast, do not receive obligatory non-manuals (and when non-manual markers accompany TP/IP material express higher speaker evaluations).

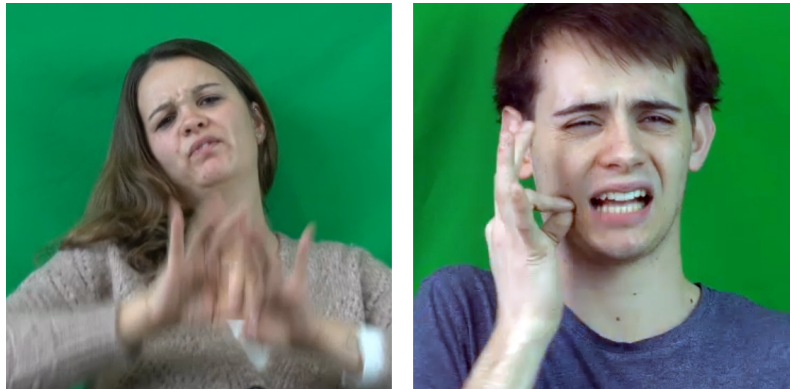


Figure 1: Expressive meaning is marked by a nose scrunch/drawing the eyebrows together in German Sign Language.

Although Bross & Hole (2017) and Bross (2020b;a) do not discuss expressives their account fits in well with what is known about expressives (i.e., that they scope above tense and contribute not-at-issue meaning) and how they are expressed, for example, in German Sign Language. In fact, German Sign Language seems to lack expressives like *damn* meaning that there is no manual sign being equivalent to *damn* (maybe with the exception of the manual marker FUCKING described below). Instead, expressive meaning is expressed by a a nose scrunch/drawing the eyebrows together, as shown in Figure 1. Note that the resulting facial expression strongly resembles the general human expression of disgust irrespective of language (see, for example, Rozin, Lowery & Ebert 1994).

The top row of Figure 2 shows the translational equivalent of the sentence *The damn dog ate the sausage*. The non-manuals are strongest on the sign DOG indicating that the speaker has a negative attitude towards the dog. If these non-manuals are left out the sentence loses its expressive meaning. The second example in the figure shows a sentence including the adjective STUPID, but the same non-manual markers (STUPID is probably a mixed expressive with the at-issue meaning ‘of low intelligence’ and an additional not-at-issue evaluation). Although there is no direct equivalent of *damn* colloquial DGS seems to have a similar marker, namely a sign which can be translated as *fucking*, unsurprisingly expressed by an extended middle finger which can be included in a sentence. The use of this sign is shown in the third row in Figure 2. Note that the utterance is still accompanied by the same upper-face non-manual marker. Although I only have preliminary data on expressives in German Sign Language my impression is that this use of FUCKING is rather uncommon and the strategy to use non-manuals only seems to be the preferred one. One additional problem

is that the sign **FUCKING** makes use of a handshape that is not part of the phonological inventory of German Sign Language. One option would thus be to analyze it as a gesture and not as a sign. An argument against this view is that the sign can also be used as a noun in predicative position, shown in Figure 3. This predicative use does not necessarily trigger the upper-face non-manual markers discussed above.



Figure 2: Three examples of expressive meaning in German Sign Language. The first example shows the main strategy only involving the eyebrows. The second example also involves the eyebrows, but the use of an additional non-expressive adjective. The third examples show what can be analyzed as a manual expressive adjective (but the example also involves eyebrow markings).



PAUL

ASSHOLE

‘Paul is an asshole.’

Figure 3: The sign ASSHOLE used predicatively.

More examples of German Sign Language expressives are given in Figure 4. The examples illustrate that the use of expressives often triggers the use of gestures expressing that the speaker is bugged. Nevertheless, the upper-face non-manuals described above always appear: In the first example, the expressive non-manuals only accompany CAT, in the second example, the non-manuals only accompany the verb sign, in the third example, the non-manuals are strongest on the first sign and then diminish, and in the fourth example, they only accompany SHIT. On the one hand, the examples show that the nose-wrinkle and the eyebrows are the main markers of expressives in German Sign Language, on the other hand, the examples show that the exact position of this non-manual marker varies. In sum, I have argued that expressive meaning is encoded in the CP-layer and that sign languages express CP-categories via eyebrow movements—and indeed expressive meaning is expressed by the eyebrows in German Sign Language.

5 Conclusions

In this short manuscript I have presented several arguments in favor of the idea that expressive meaning is encoded in the CP-layer. However, the situation seems not to be that simple. On the one hand, expressive meaning can not only

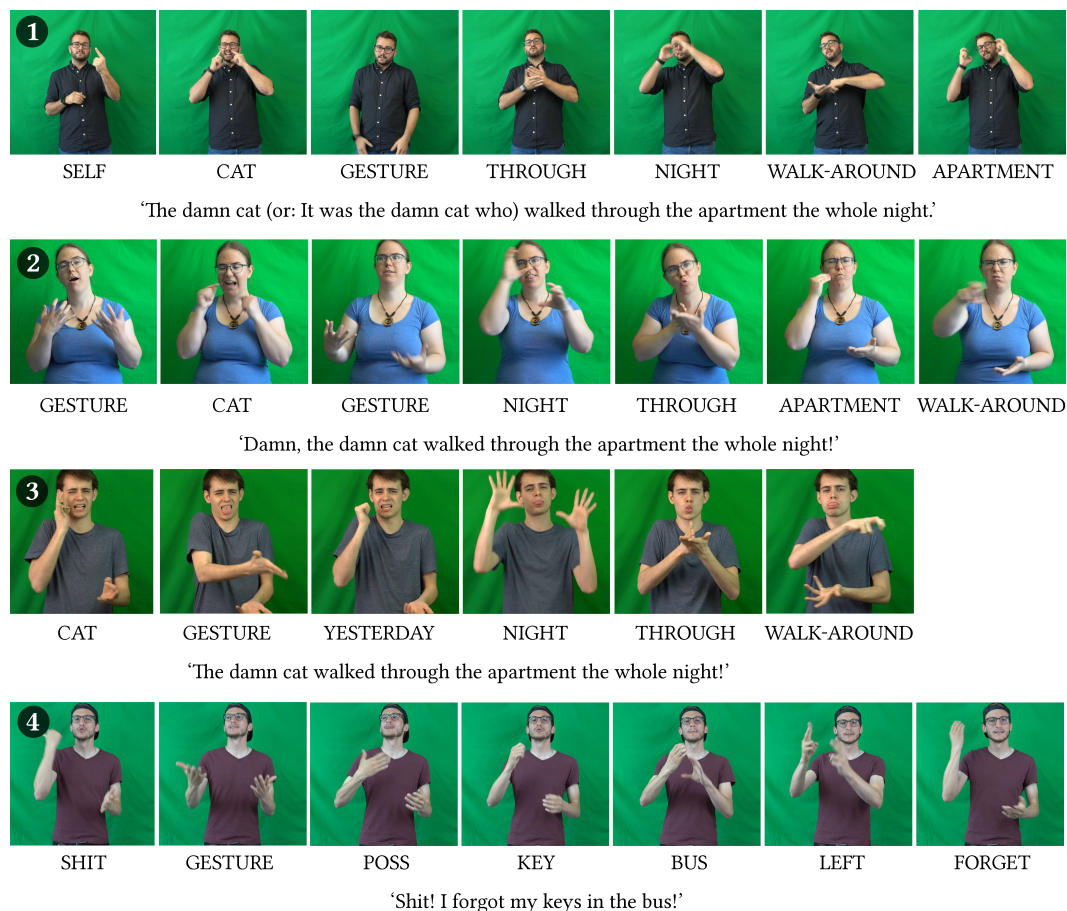


Figure 4: More examples of expressive meanings in German Sign Language.

target specific situations, but also specific referents. On the other hand, we are dealing with a subjective and signer-/speaker-oriented category. Expressives thus take “double scope”. Take the example in (9).

- (9) Luckily, the cat scratched the damn sofa.

Here, the speaker expresses that she/he has a negative attitude towards the sofa and the expressive adjective takes narrow scope. However, expressive meaning at the same time expresses an evaluation at speech-time: As a speaker-/signer-oriented category expressive meaning, thus, also always takes wide scope above tense. The term “double scope” might sound like a contradiction at first sight. But what this term simply means is that there is a structurally high position in the clausal architecture which is able to communicate with structurally lower material.

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