The Pragmatics of All-Purpose Pejoratives

Victor Carranza

École Normale Supérieure
rcarranza@pucp.pe

Abstract This paper argues that all-purpose pejoratives such as 'jerk' or 'bastard' are just plain vanilla descriptions of personality traits that are generally seen as impairing for the self and for interpersonal relationships across different contexts. Thus, all-purpose pejoratives derogate their referents through generalized conversational implicatures: it is common knowledge that those who use these terms accept certain kind of (negative) evaluations and that uses of those terms express such evaluations. One of the main advantages of this approach is that it can be extended to more 'thick' pejoratives such as 'wimp' or 'chicken', which, as Kaplan (1998) himself suggested, are 'purely descriptive' of personality traits that are generally seen as 'personal failings'. Before defending this theory, I criticize i) the standard assumption that all-purpose pejoratives are expressive and ii) the alternative semantic view that all-purpose pejoratives are conventionally associated with a judge parameter.

Keywords: Expressives, parameters, pejoratives, semantics.

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the semantics of all-purpose pejoratives (also called 'epithets'), that is, highly colloquial terms such as 'bastard', 'jerk' or 'asshole'. It is standardly assumed that all-purpose pejoratives are expressive (Kaplan 1998, Potts 2005, Gutzmann 2013). Expressives are a class of terms whose main function is to display some kind of emotion, mostly of the speaker. Typical examples of expressives are thus expletive adjectives (1a) and all-purpose pejoratives (1b):

1) a. The **fucking** dog is on the couch.
    b. That **bastard** Kaplan was promoted.

Expressives display a set of specific properties. First, the information conveyed by expressives is independent, that is, irrelevant to the descriptive content of the utterances in which they occur. As (2a-b) illustrates, expletive adjectives and all-purpose pejoratives can be omitted without altering the sentence's truth-conditions. Second, the information conveyed by expressives is projective. As (2a-b) also illustrates, an inference about the speaker's feelings is triggered even though the relevant item occurs under the syntactic scope of an if-clause:

2) a. If the **fucking** dog is on the couch, John will be upset.
= If the dog is on the couch, John will be upset.   (*truth-conditional vacuity*)
→The speaker feels negatively about the dog.   (*projective inference*)
b. If that **bastard** Kaplan was promoted, then the regents acted foolishly.
= If Kaplan was promoted, then the regents acted foolishly.
→The speaker feels negatively about Kaplan.

Yet, it has been observed that this characterization is problematic in the case of all-purpose pejoratives (Schlenker 2007, Beller 2013, Stojanovic 2020). In atomic sentences, all-purpose pejoratives convey information that contributes to the utterance's truth-conditions and that remains in the scope of truth-conditional operators (e.g. if-clauses). In (3), 'bastard' does not seem to trigger an inference about the speaker's emotions:

3) If Kaplan is a **bastard**, then he will be promoted.

It may be suggested that all-purpose pejoratives are ambiguous between expressive and non-expressive readings according to whether they occur as modifiers in definite descriptions or as simple predicates. However, appealing to syntactic ambiguities doesn't seem promising. Even though pejorative modifiers are assumed to manifest an exclusive preference for non-restrictive interpretations (i.e. for readings in which they are truth-conditionally irrelevant), they can give rise to restrictive interpretations in certain contexts. In particular, restrictive readings arise in contexts where the pejorative modifier directly addresses a QUD (4a), or else when its content has an additional explanatory function (4b) (Martin 2014, Esipova 2020):

4) a. Anne: Which one of Alex's ex-boyfriends did you see?
    Kyle: The **bastard** one.
b. Alex eliminated all her **asshole** contacts from Facebook.
→ Alex eliminated those contacts *because* they were assholes.

In the next section I present and criticize the alternative view that all-purpose pejoratives are semantically evaluative. That is, that the denotation of all-purpose pejoratives includes a judge parameter.

2. A semantic evaluative account

In view of the problems that emerge in expressive accounts, Beller (2013) argues that all-purpose pejoratives are better categorized as evaluative predicates such as 'fun' or 'tasty'. Evidence that all-purpose pejoratives are evaluative is that they give rise to 'faultless' disagreements (Kölbel 2004). As the exchange in (5) illustrates, in discussions about whether someone is a bastard or not neither participant has

necessarily made a mistake (is at fault). Therefore, following Lasersohn's (2005) theory of predicates of personal taste, Beller (2013) proposes to capture the evaluative character of all-purpose pejoratives such as 'bastard' by incorporating a judge parameter on their denotation.

5) Anne: John is a bastard.
   Kyle: No, he is not.

The first problem with this kind of approach, that is, with appealing to a judge parameter, concerns thick pejoratives such as 'wimp'.[1] In contrast to all-purpose pejoratives such as 'asshole', which seem too lean to indicate the dimension along which the target is derogated, thick pejoratives such as 'wimp', 'chicken', 'wuss' or 'fink' are those that specify a descriptive basis for the disparagement (Jeshion 2020). Using Saka's (2007) terminology, all-purpose and thick pejoratives can be grouped together as 'particularistic insults', distinguished from insults that derogate on the basis of membership to a group, such as slurs. Now, in categorizing someone as a wimp or a chicken, the speaker is not just saying something about how individuals appear to them, but also about some observable behavior of the targeted individuals themselves. Thus, relativisation in the case of thick pejoratives doesn't capture the way these terms, which are otherwise semantically similar to all-purpose pejoratives, are commonly used.

Second, this approach assumes that all-purpose pejoratives such as 'asshole' don't encode anything descriptive. That is, that all-purpose pejoratives are 'descriptively ineffable' (Potts 2005) and therefore that categorizing someone as an asshole just amounts to saying something about how one feels about such individual. This assumption is incorrect. In a behavioral study, Hyatt et al. (2019) investigated the psychological traits associated with people categorized as assholes, dicks and bitches (the most frequently used insults in the U.S.). This study assumes the 'Big Five' model, a psychology framework that distinguishes five 'super' personality traits, believed to account for most of the differences in people's personalities: agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, extraversion and neuroticism. It emerged from this study that participants shared a conception about the kind of individual these insults refer to. Prototypical assholes, dicks and bitches are those that score low on agreeableness, that is, that are arrogant, distrustful, selfish and that manipulate others in order to satisfy their personal needs. Therefore, even relativisation to a judge parameter in the case of all-purpose insults seems to go against evidence that these are descriptive of observable personality traits, and not just indicative of the speaker's emotions.
Third, the advantages of incorporating a judge parameter to the denotation of all-purpose pejoratives are not clear. One of the main reasons to add a judge parameter is

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[1] The following criticism is intended to apply both to contextualist and relativist theories, which share the intuition that subjectivity should be incorporated in the semantic apparatus. The differences between the two amount to how they incorporate such subjectivity: whereas contextualist specify it as a judge in the content of the utterances containing evaluative predicates, relativist consider it a value of a parameter in the circumstances of evaluation with respect to which the evaluative utterance is interpreted.

to account for faultless disagreements. However, as Sundell (2016) points out, descriptive terms can also give rise to faultless disagreements, so judge parameters are not required for an explanation of how these arise. As (6) illustrates, when disagreeing over whether John is bald or not, many things may happen: Anne might have mistakenly thought it was John who is bald, when in fact it was his twin brother. More interestingly, Anne and Kyle might agree on the facts but disagree on the application of bald to such situation: Anne might think that loosing hair at the temples is sufficient for qualifying someone as bald, whereas Kyle might consider that loosing hair at the crown of the head should also be taken into account. Moreover, they might agree that loosing hair at the temples and the crown are both necessary, but still disagree on the amount of hair a person should loose in order to qualify as bold, etc.

6)   Anne: John is bald.
     Kyle: No, he is not.

In view of these observations, in the next section I propose a pragmatic account for the linguistic behavior of both all-purpose and thick pejoratives based on the idea that evaluative interpretations of these terms arise as default pragmatic inferences.

3.   A pragmatic evaluative account

The last section concluded that, appearances notwithstanding, 'all-purpose' pejoratives actually have a more specific purpose: to describe those whose behavior is antagonistic, that is, distrustful, selfish, contentious, etc., and not just to express the speaker's emotions about the individuals targeted by those terms. But then, if all purpose pejoratives are descriptive, how evaluative inferences arise? All-purpose pejoratives refer to personality traits that are commonly believed to be undesirable and impairing for the self and for interpersonal relationships. Thus, uses of terms such as 'jerk' or 'bastard' will be typically linked to negative evaluations. This is not different from what happens with non-colloquial, descriptive terms: a term such as 'painful' is descriptive of bodily and psychological responses to stimuli that are evaluated as undesirable, so saying that something is painful will pragmatically trigger the inference that the speaker hold a negative attitude towards the object of the predication.[2]

Thus, the most important part of this theory is that it comes with a pragmatic, 'quasi-expressivist' component (using Finlay's 2014 terminology). The basic intuition is that saying that someone is a jerk amount to saying that such person is close enough to the 'jerk-prototype', that is, that such person is distrustful, selfish, etc. In that sense, evaluative content arises as a 'generalized' conversational implicature (Levinson 2000): it is common knowledge that such personality traits are evaluated negatively

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[2] This approach shares similar motivations to those present in Väyrynen (2013) treatment of thick ethical predicates, Sundell (2016) treatment of personal taste predicates, and Finlay (2014) treatment of normative predicates. Yet, here I remain neutral about the virtues of those pragmatic accounts.

across different contexts and that utterances that include such terms reflect those negative evaluations, so saying that someone is a jerk or bastard will typically express the speaker's own emotions about the individuals targeted.

One advantage of this approach is that it is parsimonious. In contrast to the semantic account, it can be extended to thick pejoratives such as 'wimp'. As Kaplan (1998) himself suggested, thick pejoratives such as 'wimp' are 'purely descriptive' of behaviors that are commonly considered 'personal failings'. Thus, we can also consider thick pejoratives to trigger evaluative inferences pragmatically. This point becomes more relevant when we notice that many particularistic insults are not easily categorizable as all-purpose or thick. As observed in Section 2, the difference between all-purpose and thick pejoratives concerns whether they specify a descriptive basis for the disparagement. Yet, the evaluative effect of many insults is originally based on the metaphoric association of individuals to things that are negatively connoted, such as body-parts ('asshole', 'dick'), animals ('rat', 'cockroach') or objects ('trash', 'shit'). However, the extent to which these non-literal associations can be retrieved depends on the purposes of a conversation: 'rat' may be used interchangeably with 'asshole' or 'bastard' when the purpose is simply to derogate but can also have more specific uses when the speaker intends to indicate that the target is snitchy, a behavior that for some reason came to be commonly associated with rats.

Coming back to our initial examples, this theory explains why, when all-purpose pejoratives occur as modifiers in definite descriptions, they trigger emotional inferences. Modifiers typically project out of if-clauses, and entailment-cancelling operators in general, independently of whether they are neutral (7a) or pejorative (7b). Therefore, given that an utterance like (7b) commits the speaker to the not-at-issue proposition that John is a bastard, i.e. that John's behavior is close to the bastard-stereotype, it will be pragmatically inferred from this that the speaker feels negatively about John.

7) a. If my **sick** mother is in the hospital, I will visit her.
   → My mother is sick.
   b. If that **bastard** Kaplan was promoted, then the regents acted foolishly.
   → John is a bastard.

It might be argued that this pragmatic approach doesn't capture the distinctive kind of derogation inherent to the use of all-purpose pejoratives, which typically serve as an outlet for the speaker's most immediate emotions and not just to indicate that some individual is distrustful, selfish, etc. However, in our pragmatic theory such expressive 'flavor' can be considered a consequence of the highly colloquial status of these terms. The idea is that a token of 'jerk' not only refers to distrustful or selfish behaviors, but also constitutes a breach of politeness standards. This transgression itself indicates that the intensity of the negative evaluation is higher than normal. This may explains why, as mentioned in Section 1, all-purpose pejoratives have been standardly classified alongside profanities such as 'fucking' or 'damn' in the literature, despite their enormous linguistic differences: both constitute a breach of politeness standards that pragmatically implicates that the speaker intends to express an intense emotion.

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