

## Expressive ‘dimension’? Towards a redefinition of lexical expressives

MIREIA CABANES - CALABUIG  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

**ABSTRACT** Defining the term ‘expressives’ poses a terminological challenge. Several studies have attempted to provide a definition of these linguistic items. Some focused their approach on dimensions of meaning and defining characteristics (Potts 2007), while others centred their discussions on types of meaning (Löbner 2013), types of uses (Gutzmann 2013) or prototypicality (Hom 2012, Hess 2018). In this paper, I argue that none of these attempts captures the multi-faceted nature of the phenomenon and delimit in in very different ways. Instead, I present a holistic approach to the definition and classification of expressives. I depart from a basic definition of expressives as items that carry expressive meaning. From there, I seek to elaborate the definition and build a typology of expressives by looking at regularities between items according to their behaviour in sentences. To this aim, I report the results of a corpus study, in which I identify four lexico-syntactic categories and ten subcategories in which expressives’ behaviour can be classified. I conclude by proposing a starting point for a novel definition and typology of expressives and suggest two other parameters for future research that can complement and inform my proposal.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The term ‘expressive’ is difficult to delimit not only because it could capture either expressions themselves or only their function, but also, broadly, with regards to which phenomena can be included under this umbrella term. Phenomena that have been labelled as ‘expressive’ range from purely linguistic phenomena such as lexical expletives (e.g., *bastard*, *shit*, *damn*, *idiot*) and expressive adjectives (e.g., *bloody*) and diminutives (e.g., *kitty*), to borderline linguistic phenomena such as interjections (e.g., *wow*, *oops*, *ouch*) and prosodic features, as well as non-linguistic phenomena such as gestures or facial expressions (Blakemore 2011: 3537). In this paper, I am going to focus on lexical expressives.

There have been various attempts to define and delimit lexical ‘expressives’ in the literature. However, they often tend to focus on a specific group of items rather than looking at the general picture, which leads to incomplete definitions and limited approaches to the study of lexical expressives. This paper will explore the main definitions and classifications of lexical expressives in the literature, including both a presentation and a critical evaluation of each of them. After identifying the problems and limitations that arise from the different approaches, I will present an improved

definition and classification of lexical expressives according to their lexico-syntactic dimension (i.e., to do with the general attributive/predicative/referential distinction), supported by a corpus study. This is part of a larger classificatory project, still in progress, yet to be complemented by an investigation into two more parameters, together with the abovementioned lexico-syntactic parameter: information structure (i.e., related to at-issueness) and functional role (i.e., concerning speech acts/pragmatic role).

In the course of the following paper, different uses of the term ‘expressive’ are going to be investigated. To avoid confusion, and as an introduction to the terminological clutter surrounding the study of expressives, the term ‘expressive’ will be accompanied by a subscript indicating the sense in which it is used in each case. The four subscripts are: expressive<sub>L</sub> (lexeme), expressive<sub>D</sub> (dimension<sup>1</sup>), expressive<sub>M</sub> (meaning) and expressive<sub>P</sub> (expressives in the Pottsian sense, Potts 2007; see section 2.1). Since the most common use for ‘expressive’ in the current paper is expressives as lexemes<sup>2</sup> (i.e., expressive<sub>L</sub>), the default use of the term without a specified subscript will henceforth always refer to expressive<sub>L</sub>. Any other senses of the term will always be indicated by a subscript.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, I present the main approaches to the study of expressives hitherto, attending to and evaluating the limitations posed by each of them. I start with a brief assessment of Potts’ (2007) influential *expressive dimension* approach. Next, I move to assess four later approaches by Hom (2012), Gutzmann (2013), Löbner (2013) and Hess (2018). In section 3, I take a preliminary stand on the definition of expressives and propose a three-parameter approach to provide a holistic view of expressives. The first parameter, concerning the lexico-syntactic dimension of expressives and their regularities and/or divergences, is addressed and presented in a corpus study. I conclude the section by highlighting two main trends that emerge from the corpus study and outlining the next steps to be followed to complete this proposal. Section 4 concludes with further thoughts on the proposal I argue for in the current paper and outlines the path for upcoming research on the open issues of this proposal.

## 2 ATTEMPTS AT DEFINING ‘EXPRESSIVES’: OVERVIEW AND ASSESSMENT

### 2.1 *Expressives as a dimension: Potts’ approach*

Lexical expressives appear in a variety of roles and contexts in utterances, as illustrated in (1). The questions of what constitutes an expressive and how to classify them still generate discussions and do not have a conclusive answer.

---

<sup>1</sup> To prevent confusion between expressive dimension (expressive<sub>D</sub>) and expressives in the Pottsian sense (expressive<sub>P</sub>), I want to state from the start that expressive<sub>D</sub> refers to the dimension of meaning concerned with expressive content (that is, the expression of subjective attitudes and emotions), whereas expressive<sub>P</sub> alludes to Potts’ definition of expressives with its own characteristics, exclusively contributing to a separate dimension of meaning (that is, expressive<sub>D</sub>).

<sup>2</sup> To clarify, the terms ‘lexeme’ and ‘word’ are used interchangeably throughout the paper.

- (1) a. That *bastard* Kresge was promoted. (adapted from Kaplan 1999)  
 b. This *idiot* needs to calm down.  
 c. *Damn*, that's not right.  
 d. The *bloody* dog is on the couch. (adapted from Potts 2005)

In his influential theory of expressives, Christopher Potts identified six characteristics that he considers to be distinctive of expressive content and that he uses to delimit which terms count as an expressive:

- (a) Independence: expressive content and descriptive content contribute to different dimensions of meanings. Therefore, it is possible to change or remove expressives (and, consequently, their expressive content) from a sentence with its descriptive content being unaffected.
- (b) Nondisplaceability: expressives predicate something about the utterance situation. In other words, expressives cannot report content in the past or future, nor express possibilities or conditions, outside of quotations.
- (c) Perspective dependence: expressive content is evaluated from a particular perspective. Generally, this perspective is that of the speaker's, even though the perspective can be shifted to another person under certain contextual circumstances.
- (d) Descriptive ineffability: speakers are unable to satisfactorily paraphrase the content of an expressive using descriptive terms.
- (e) Immediacy: expressives are like performatives in the sense that, in both cases, the act of uttering them is enough for not just conveying, but also 'inflicting' their content.
- (f) Repeatability: a speaker can use an expressive repeatedly and the resulting effect is a strengthening of its expressive content, rather than one of redundancy (see Potts 2007: 166–179).

From these properties, Potts developed a (formal) theory of expressives that could capture all of them and offer a unified account for the treatment of expressive items. There are two central components in Potts' theory of expressives: (i) a new semantic type  $\varepsilon$ , and (ii) two key context elements, the judge and a set of expressive indices.

To the semantic types  $e$  and  $t$ , familiar from Montagovian semantics, Potts adds a third type  $\varepsilon$ . The difference between them is that the former are descriptive types, whereas the latter is an expressive type. By the same token, if, say,  $\sigma$  and  $\iota$  are descriptive types, then  $\langle \sigma, \iota \rangle$  is a descriptive type, while if  $\sigma$  is a descriptive type, then  $\langle \sigma, \varepsilon \rangle$  is an expressive type (Potts 2007: 183). This reflects the assumption that whereas descriptive types can be possible inputs and possible outputs, the expressive type  $\varepsilon$  is only an output type. This new type for expressive content is able to capture characteristics (a), (b), (c), and (e).

In order to account for properties (d) and (f), Potts introduced two more elements into his theory: *contextual judge* (borrowed from Lasersohn 2005) and *expressive indices*. Expressive indices refer to the entities involved in the expressivity. Expressive indices take the form of  $\langle a \mathbf{I} b \rangle$ , where  $a$  is the entity who experiences the emotion – or expressivity – towards someone or something, and  $b$  is the entity towards whom expressivity is directed.  $\mathbf{I}$  is a subinterval of  $[-1, 1]$ . A subinterval close to 1 will indicate positive expressivity, while one close to -1 will indicate negative expressivity (Potts 2007: 177), which accounts for all bands of the expressivity spectrum (i.e., positive, negative and neutral) in a non-propositional way, hence supporting descriptive ineffability. In turn, expressive indices are part of a context  $c = \langle c_A, c_T, c_W, c_J, c_E \rangle$ , where  $c_A$  is the agent (speaker) of  $c$ ,  $c_T$  is the time of  $c$ ,  $c_W$  is the world of  $c$ ,  $c_J$  is the judge of  $c$ , and  $c_E$  is a set of expressive indices (Potts 2007: 184). A second important element emerging from this definition of context is the contextual judge ( $c_J$ ), which corresponds to the first entity (i.e.,  $a$ ) in the expressive index tuple  $\langle a \mathbf{I} b \rangle$  and which reinforces the perspective-dependence property.

Putting Potts' theory into practice, example (2) would be analysed as follows. The uttering of *damn* would create an expressive context  $c_{(S)}$  with a set of expressive indices  $c_E$ , in which  $a$  would be the speaker of the utterance (the contextual judge,  $c_J$ ) that directs an expressive feeling  $\mathbf{I}$  towards  $b$ , who would be the dog. Assuming the utterer is negatively evaluating the dog in this context,  $\mathbf{I}$  would be a subinterval on the negative part (i.e., -1). This expressive context would only explain the (expressive) role played by *damn* in the utterance, which is taken as separate from the descriptive items in (2) (i.e., *the dog is on the couch*).

(2) The *damn* dog is on the couch.

Potts' theory of expressives treats the expressive domain as a separate dimension of meaning with its own characteristics, its own formal representation, and separated from and not interacting with descriptive meaning. In other words, following Potts' perspective, expressives are not looked at as individual lexemes, but as items that have to fit in a set of characteristics in order to be labelled as 'expressives' and, consequently, belong to the expressive domain. For Potts, expressives are (semantic) types that belong to a separate dimension, not lexemes (i.e., a lexical unit with different uses).

Potts's proposal is not without faults. The first controversy that stands up from the fact that his expressive type  $\epsilon$  is only an output type. This means that the expressive<sub>P</sub> cannot work by itself as an independent entity but needs to go with an argument, that is, be in the attributive position. However, this does not account for predicate uses of expressives, such as (3). In fact, these uses are not even considered in Potts' theory. This is due to the fact that he founds his division on the at-issue/not-at-issue<sup>3</sup> distinction. In his 2005 work, Potts claims that expressive content is used 'essentially the same way' (Potts 2005: 8) as conventionally implicated (CI) content.

<sup>3</sup> To clarify, when discussing expressives<sub>P</sub> and expressive content, Potts does not use the term 'not-at-issue'. Instead, he discusses it using the label for a type of not-at-issue content, that is, conventionally-implicated content (or CI-content).

His definition and classification of expressives in 2007 draws from his own previous ideas. Hence, he delimits expressives in a way that is congruent with his previous argument of expressive content as CI (hence, not-at-issue) content, which results in the overlooking of other lexical items with expressive content that do not fit in his ‘expressive content as CI content’ approach.

(3) Kresge is a *bastard*.

Moreover, predicate uses challenge the assumption that expressives<sub>P</sub> only carry expressive meaning. If ‘bastard’ were deleted from the sentence, its meaning would be left incomplete and incomprehensible for the reader/hearer. Therefore, ‘bastard’ appears to carry at least some descriptive meaning that contributes to the truth-conditions of the sentence and/or its expressive and descriptive meaning must, in a way, interact. This possibility is depicted in (4).

(4) Kresge is a *bastard*.

Descriptive meaning: Kresge is a dislikeable man.

Expressive meaning: The speaker holds a negative attitude towards Kresge.

This debate also puts into question independency and non-displaceability as defining characteristics of expressives. Following Potts’ definition of expressives<sub>P</sub>, ‘all predicates that appear in copular position must necessarily fail to be expressive’ (Potts 2007: 194). Nonetheless, this argument restricts the definition of expressive to attributive positions and does not provide an explanation of why potential expressives like ‘bastard’, when working as predicates, contribute to both expressive (conveying attitude) and descriptive dimensions (contributing to the truth conditions).<sup>4</sup>

Zimmermann (2007: 248-249), in an attempt to maintain the expressive<sub>M</sub> content independent from the descriptive content in predicate cases, toys with the idea that these items are ‘lexically ambiguous between a descriptive and an expressive.’ Nonetheless, Zimmermann himself rejects this line of reasoning on the basis of the observation that it still does not account for the fact that the different ‘readings’ are determined by the syntactic position of the items.

In addition, predicate uses of expressives allow for displaceable readings, which contradicts characteristic (b). In other words, they can refer to past, possible and conditional scenarios, not necessarily as part of quotations. This is illustrated in (5). More specifically, in sentence (5a), *bastard* is moved to a past situation with respect to the time of the utterance, as shown by the contrastive *but*. Similarly, sentence (5b) does not address a present situation, but a possibility that might or might not happen. Both cases show instances of expressives<sub>W</sub> displaced from the present time of the utterance.

<sup>4</sup> In his later 2012 work, Potts acknowledges that CI and expressives ‘differ markedly’ (Potts 2012: 2528), and treats expressive content as no longer necessarily included within CI content. Furthermore, he allows for an interaction between expressive content and descriptive (at-issue) content to a certain extent by claiming that the two dimensions ‘shape each other’: expressives imbues at-issue content with new meaning, and at-issue content clarifies the meaning of the expressive (Potts 2012: 2532). Nonetheless, he does not further elaborate on this new ‘relationship’ nor has later papers on this topic.

- (5) a. Yesterday, Kresge was a *bastard*. But today I like him again.  
b. If Kresge is a *bastard*, I will send him home.  
(adapted from Zimmermann 2007: 248)

Independence property is further contested in cases in which expressives<sub>W</sub> are used as degree adverbs, similar to the uses of adverbs like *very*, *totally* or *utterly*, among others. In examples in (6), if the expressives<sub>W</sub> (and, consequently, their content) *damn* or *fucking* are removed from the sentence, the descriptive content of the sentences is affected since the information about the degree to which Kresge is brilliant or annoying is lost, which, again, contradicts the independence property.

- (6) a. Kresge is *damn* brilliant.  
b. Kresge is *fucking* annoying. (adapted from Geurts 2007: 211)

These examples indicate that expressive<sub>M</sub> content and descriptive content do interact to a certain extent and, therefore, there might not exist a clear-cut division between them. This, together with the fact that Potts' expressives<sub>P</sub>' characteristics do not seem to apply to all expressives (that is, my expressives<sub>L</sub>), nor do they seem to exclude them outright, questions whether expressives are really a completely distinct class of items. In other words, classifying by function (or 'dimension', in Potts' terms) superimposes a division that muddies the category of expressions for a theory-internal reason, to do with his formal theory of expressives (see section 3 in Potts 2007). Geurts (2007) further elaborates on this argument by wondering, if the Pottsian properties of expressives are accurate and there is a strict separation between expressive<sub>D</sub> and descriptive dimensions, why expressives<sub>W</sub> words are used at all rather than being replaced by grunts (i.e., vocal sounds) or facial gestures. He further illustrates the problems with Potts' division between expressive and descriptive dimension with the example in (7). Following Pottsian argumentation, A's use of *bastard* is expressive<sub>D</sub>, whereas B's is descriptive. Nonetheless, if A's use is expressive<sub>D</sub> and only adds the expression of an emotion that is completely independent from the truth-conditions of sentence A, how does B contradict A?

- (7) A: That *bastard* Schmidt is playing Schubert again.  
B: Schmidt is not a *bastard*. (Geurts 2007: 209)

Geurts' (2007: 2010) answer points out that there is more to the semantics of expressives that has not been looked at in Potts' theory. In his view, expressives are not a separate class close to grunts or gestures and which can be easily taken aside when analysing an utterance. Instead, expressives are 'perfectly ordinary lexemes,' but 'special in certain ways' (Geurts 2007: 209). The way in which expressives are special is left unresearched in Geurts' discussion.

Another point arising from the discussion so far is that expressives are not a uniform phenomenon. The different examples above show that there is substantial variation in the characteristics and behaviour among expressive items (that is, expressives<sub>L</sub>). This reinforces the idea that expressives are not a distinct, uniform

class of items which share a set of properties, and suggests that a more fine-grained theory is needed to approach the study of expressives. Particularly, [Sauerland \(2007\)](#) considers, but does not elaborate further, a theory that combines semantic with pragmatic principles and goes beyond a strict division of the lexicon into expressive<sub>M</sub> vs. descriptive.

In brief, Potts' theory of expressives, despite being influential, makes some rather questionable moves and assumptions and leaves many questions unanswered. However, as I have indicated here, and discuss in the next section, it is not necessary to subscribe to his proposal of expressives as a (separate) dimension; instead, other researchers bring light to aspect that unite such items when used in different syntactic position and with different role in information structure – an aspect that Potts chose not to engage with – with the aim of providing more exhaustive approaches to the study of expressives as a lexical category. In [section 2.2](#) I present and assess some approaches to the study of expressives that emerged after [Potts' \(2007\)](#) theory and which were influenced by it, as well as alternative, independent accounts of expressives.

## 2.2 *Alternative proposals for a definition and/or classification of expressives*

In the next subsection, I will present four alternative approaches to a definition and/or classification of (lexical) expressives. The accounts presented can be divided into two groups regarding their links with Potts' proposal presented in [section 2.1](#). [Hom's \(2010, 2012\)](#), [Gutzmann's \(2013\)](#) and [Hess' \(2018\)](#) accounts can be seen as reactions to [Potts' \(2007\)](#) theory of expressives. Their proposals essentially adopt Potts' assumptions with respect to what should be considered an 'expressive' and present their own views based on them. In this sense, these accounts could be dubbed 'post-Pottsonian'. On the other hand, [Löbner's \(2013\)](#) proposal emerges independently from Potts' views. Instead, he relies on his previous work from 2002 and further develops his views on expressives aside from Potts' premises. Therefore, Löbner's account can be seen as an independent, alternative proposal.

### 2.2.1 *Hom (2010, 2012)*

[Hom's \(2010, 2012\)](#) proposal draws from the idea that expressives<sup>5</sup> are words that convey emotions and bases his classification on the contribution they make to the sentence. If an expressive does not make any contributions to the truth-conditions of the sentence in which it occurs and merely conveys an emotion, attitude or feeling, it falls under the label of 'orthodox'. This includes expressive adjectives (see [8](#)) and expressive adverbs (see [9](#)), grouped together and labelled as EA.

(8) The *fucking* managing partner fired John. ([Hom 2012: 384](#))

<sup>5</sup> [Hom \(2010, 2012\)](#) uses the label 'pejorative' to refer to these expressions. However, despite using a different label, he is alluding to the phenomenon of expressives, as well as drawing and elaborating on [Potts' \(2005, 2007\)](#) analysis of expressives. Based on this, the label 'pejorative' was changed to 'expressive' in the present article for the sake of terminological consistency.

- (9) The managing partner *fucking* fired John. (Hom 2012: 384)

Contrary to orthodox expressives, non-orthodox expressives not only convey emotions and attitude, but also make truth-conditional contributions to sentences in which they occur. Instances of this category of expressives, according to Hom, are expressive nouns (ENs; see 10) and expressive verbs (EVs; see 11).

- (10) The *bastard* won't get severance pay. (Hom 2012: 387)

- (11) John *fucked* the managing partner's daughter, and was fired for it. (Hom 2012: 387)

Even though Hom's classification includes uses disregarded by Potts, it is still not an accurate classification. Firstly, his label 'pejorative' can mislead to the wrong assumption that these words only convey negative attitudes, in spite of Hom's acknowledgments that they can act as 'amplifiers for the expression of either positive and negative uses' (Hom 2010: 165) contingent on context (Hom 2012: 392). Secondly, his terminological choice of 'orthodox' vs 'non-orthodox' implies that certain items are closer to a prototype of expressive that, judging from Hom's definitions, is close to Potts' idea of  $\text{expressives}_P$  as a type. Finally, Hom does not provide further insights into the meaning contribution of orthodox expressives to the sentence beyond the fact that it is not-truth-conditional meaning. All in all, the approach leaves many open questions and loose ends.

### 2.2.2 Löbner (2013)

Löbner's (2002, 2013) approach to expressives revolves around the definition of expressive meaning as a type of meaning that conveys 'subjective sensations, emotions, affections, evaluations or attitudes' (Löbner 2013: 33). With this definition in mind, Löbner takes an elemental definition of 'expressives' as 'expressions with expressive meaning' (Löbner 2013: 33). When it comes to the rules of usage of expressives, Löbner acknowledges that, because of the nature of expressives as items or expressions that serve to convey personal feelings, attitudes or sensations, their correct use cannot be evaluated based on correspondences between the world and the linguistic expression. Instead, Löbner argues that expressives' correct, or true, is 'a matter of personal judgment' (Löbner 2013: 34). Thus, and in a similar vein to Kaplan's (1999) view, an expressive usage will be correct in a given context of utterance when the expression conveyed corresponds to the actual emotion felt by the speaker.

Linguistic expressions that fall under Löbner's definition of expressives are interjections (e.g., *ouch*, *wow*), exclamations (e.g. *oh my God!*), and swear words (e.g., *bloody*, *fucking*, *idiot*). Since the focus of this paper is on lexical expressives, I will centre on the latter instances. Illustrating the correct usage of expressives mentioned above with the examples given, the expressive *fucking* would be correctly used in a context of the utterance (12) if and only if (henceforth, iff) the emotion felt by



the speaker is one of anger. Within the lexical expressives, Löbner claims some expressives, such as *fucking* or *bloody*, do not make additions to the propositional content of the sentence, whereas other expressives, such as *idiot* or *bastard* do have some propositional content coming from a shared ‘unspecific descriptive meaning’ (e.g., ‘person’ in the two instances given) (Löbner 2013: 35).

(12) My eyes are *fucking* wide open.

Löbner’s account offers an interesting starting point since it offers a definition as a point of departure. Moreover, in this account, Löbner also discusses dimensions of meaning in general and the dimension of expressive meaning, among other descriptive and social, in particular. For him, expressive<sub>D</sub> is a dimension of meaning that can interact with others, which moves away from Potts’ idea of expressive<sub>D</sub> as a separate, non-interacting dimension to which expressives<sub>P</sub> exclusively belong. In fact, Löbner affirms that there are two kinds of expressions with expressive meaning and, in accordance, calls ‘expressives’: those who have only expressive meaning and others which have both descriptive and expressive meaning (Löbner 2013: 33). However, even though it can be helpful as a departure point, it does not provide an in-depth classification nor further explores differences identified between the different expressions he groups under the label ‘expressives’. Once again, many loose ends and unanswered questions.

### 2.2.3 Gutzmann (2013)

Gutzmann (2013, 2015) frames his classification under the concept of *use-conditional content*. Use-conditional content refers to the meaning that is part of the conventional meaning of expressions but that does not make any contributions to the truth-conditions of sentences, in contrast with truth-conditional content. In the same vein, he refers to items that convey use-conditional content (i.e., expressions and constructions that are non-truth-conditional; in other words, items in which what Potts labels as ‘expressives<sub>P</sub>’ and Hom refers to as ‘orthodox pejoratives’ would be included) as *use-conditional items* (henceforth, UCIs).

Gutzmann’s umbrella ‘UCIs’ includes expressions at word level (e.g., what he calls ‘expressives in the narrow sense’ – that is, expressions expressions that convey an emotion, an evaluation or an attitude – particles and pronouns) as well as beyond word level (e.g., intonation features, syntactic constructions, morphological elements). Within his ‘expressives in the narrow sense’, Gutzmann distinguishes two categories. The first category corresponds to what he calls ‘expressives in the narrow sense’, that is, expressions that convey an emotion, an evaluation or an attitude. This category is subdivided into expletive UCIs and isolated UCIs. The former includes examples like epithets (*that bastard Kresge*) and attributive adjectives (*your damn dog*). The latter covers instances of interjections, such as *ouch* or *oops*. The difference between them lies in their type of interaction with the truth-conditional content: whereas isolated UCIs do not seem to interact with the truth-conditional content of the sentence in which they are included, expletive UCIs

seem to need a truth-conditional argument in the sentence to occur, despite not adding anything to the truth-conditions (Gutzmann 2013: 3–6).

The second category encompasses expressions that both make a contribution to the truth-conditions of their sentence and display an attitude or emotion –or use-conditional content, in Gutzmann’s terminology. These expressions are labelled as ‘mixed UCIs’ and include instances like expressively coloured expressions (*cur*, as opposed to *dog*), slurs (*boche*) and expressive adjectives working as modifiers (fucking *tall*, bloody *amazing*) (Gutzmann 2013: 7–10).<sup>6</sup>

Gutzmann offers a more fine-grained distinction and classification of expressives that can serve as an alternative route for a more complete, holistic study of expressives. Nonetheless, the label ‘use-conditional’ to refer to the expressive lexical items can be problematic. Gutzmann borrows this term from Kaplan (1999) and Recanati (2004) since he is interested in a range of phenomena (listed above), hence other terms such as ‘expressive meaning’ were too restrictive (Gutzmann 2013: 3). In fact, when talking about UCIs, Gutzmann’s aim is not to focus on a ‘natural class of expressions’ but in a ‘class of meaning’ (Gutzmann 2013: 32). In other words, use-conditional content and use-conditional items are labels that apply to a range of phenomena among which expressives might be included. However, this label does not account for the whole range of lexical expressives (for instance, Gutzmann does not discuss predicate uses of ‘expressives in the narrow sense’, such as *bastard* in 3) and assuming so can lead to (wrong) assumptions about the type of contributions<sup>7</sup> these items make to the utterance meaning.

In sum, Gutzmann’s initial classification raises interesting points to be considered when developing a classification and typology of expressives. Nonetheless, it needs to be called to attention that his aim was to give an account of use-conditional meaning, not of the expressive items. Therefore, the label UCIs cannot be generalised or transferred as applicable to gather all lexical expressives.

#### 2.2.4 Hess (2018)

Hess (2018) bases his categorization of expressive items on their syntactic role. His classification divides examples depending on whether they are used attributively or in the predicate. He considers the former cases as ‘prototypical’, as, for instance, epithets (*that bastard Kaplan got promoted*) and expressive adjectives (*the damn computer doesn’t work!*). The latter cases are named as ‘non-prototypical’ and include examples such as epithets (*He is a bastard*), slurs (*He is a kr\*ut*) and expressive adjectives used as modifiers (*He is damn good*) (Hess 2018: 13–14). According to his classification, the same expressive item can be classified both as prototypical and as non-prototypical depending on the role they perform in each sentence, as it is the case with *bastard* above. Just as in the case of Hom (2012), his terminology is highly

<sup>6</sup> Gutzmann offers another classification of UCIs at word level that has not been included in the present paper for succinctness since the classification of ‘expressives in the narrow sense’ already addresses the items that concern me for this paper. If the reader is interested in further detail on this further classification, see Gutzmann (2013).

<sup>7</sup> This question will be explored in later stages of the thesis in which the project proposal presented in this paper will be included.

influenced by Potts' delimitation of expressives. Hess' account also suffers from the same problem: he does not further explore the distinction between prototypical and non-prototypical beyond the fact that they occur in different parts of the sentence, which leaves open questions such as how the meaning and behaviour of the same item changes depending on their role.

### 3 TOWARDS A NOVEL DEFINITION AND TYPOLOGY OF EXPRESSIVES

#### 3.1 *Setting the basis for a terminological disentanglement*

In [section 2](#), I explored and evaluated previous approaches to the meaning of expressives (to reiterate, understood here as  $\text{expressives}_L$ ). It has been shown that the focus on expressives has traditionally been on those tokens that have expressive content and that occur in attributive positions. Despite recognising their uses with mixed contents and/or occurring in non-attributive positions, these uses have at best been relegated to secondary positions in the classification and treated as 'non-prototypical'. Unavoidably, such imbalanced analyses affect how expressives as lexical items are approached, leading to the implication of a higher importance of the former over the latter. A different approach to expressives is needed, starting with terminological disentanglement, in order to provide a holistic account and move towards a complete typology of expressives that considers the heterogeneity of the items included under this linguistic phenomenon. My proposal is motivated by this aim. In this section, I will take the discussion further by stating the definition that will constitute my point of departure and by arguing for this holistic proposal driven by three different parameters: (i) the role(s) of the items in the sentence (lexico-syntactic dimension), (ii) their type of information content (at-issue/not-at-issue), and (iii) the type of speech act they fit in (functional role). A holistic approach is preferable considering that it looks at expressive lexical items over the board, which will lead to an overarching typology that does not focus the attention on one kind of expressives over others but helps identify patterns of behaviours at different levels, which will be taken as the main informants for the classification.

My position in relation to expressive meaning is more in line with that of Löbner. I take his definition of expressive meaning (and as such delimiting  $\text{expressive}_M$ ) as a kind of meaning that conveys subjective feelings, attitudes, affections and evaluations, as opposed to descriptive meaning, which provides factual information about referents in the world (Löbner 2013: 23, 33). From this perspective, expressive meanings and descriptive meanings can be combined in one lexical item, or just occur independently. Thus, it should not be automatically assumed that expressions that carry expressive meaning do not contribute any kind of content to the truth-conditions of the sentence in which they occur,<sup>8</sup> as in the case of Gutzmann's mixed UCIs or Hom's non-orthodox occurrences.

<sup>8</sup> A disclaimer is in order at this point to clarify that, following the views of the accounts presented in this paper, I am only talking here about truth conditions of *sentences*. Nevertheless, it is recognised that, strictly speaking, even if they carry only expressive meaning, that meaning can also be regarded as contributing to truth conditions – truth conditions of an *utterance* – in a suitably radical contextualist approach.

Juxtaposing this stance with the different views examined here, it becomes clear that Potts' definition of expressives offers a preferential treatment of some uses of the relevant lexical items, making them into a category of their own right. For him, expressives<sub>P</sub> are a type defined and delimited by the characteristics presented above. In my approach, an **expressive** is any lexical item that has expressive meaning, either as the only meaning it carries or combined with descriptive meaning. Hence, the driving factor in my delimitation is *whether expressive meaning is carried at all*, regardless of whether it is the only meaning carried.

Expressive meaning might be non-truth-conditional, but this does not mean that all the lexical items containing expressive meaning are non-truth-conditional. Delimiting the study of expressives to items whose contribution is only non-truth-conditional leaves aside many items which also contain expressive meaning but which behave differently with regards to their truth-conditional contributions. This brings the discussion to a controverted point. For this reason, I propose a three-parameter analysis of expressive items, as further explained above. Since this proposal is part of a bigger research project still in progress, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the preliminary results of the exploration of the first, presented in the form of a corpus study in the next subsection. The other two parameters will be discussed in [section 4](#) as upcoming research.

## 3.2 Corpus study

### 3.2.1 Rationale, items selected for the study and hypothesis

The main rationale of the corpus study was to gain some insights into how expressives behave in different syntactic roles/grammatical positions, and find similarities and/or divergencies between their behaviours in these various syntactic/grammatical contexts. As presented in [section 2](#), the main trend in the study of expressives focused only on their attributive uses, which does not give a full picture of how these lexical items are used. Moreover, the alternative proposals of [Hom \(2012\)](#), [Löbner \(2013\)](#), [Gutzmann \(2013\)](#) and [Hess \(2018\)](#) are based on theoretical argumentation and conceptual analysis but do not provide empirical evidence for their classifications. The present study was aimed not only at exploring the behaviour of expressives, but also at providing an empirical base for a typology of expressives. As a reminder for the reader, the overall aim is to develop a holistic account based on three parameters. The first parameter – lexico-syntactic – is presented in this study. The next two parameters – information structure and functional role – are left for a separate study in progress (cf. [section 4](#)).

To this aim, twelve lexical expressives were selected. As emphasised by the debate permeating the current paper, defining 'expressives' is not a straightforward task. A principled selection of lexical items for an empirical analysis is not an easy task either. However, my inclusive definition of expressives allowed a broad brushstroke based on commonality. Their different roles and positions, as well as patterns in behaviours in those different roles, were precisely what guided my interest to this paper. Hence, the more 'unprincipled' the choice in the syntactic/semantic/pragmatic

sense, the better and disclosing for my study. Three steps were taken in the selection of expressive terms for the present corpus study. The first selection cut yielded expressive words that have been traditionally looked at in the literature: *bastard*, *bloody*, *damn* and *fucking* (e.g. Potts 2007, Hom 2010, 2012, Gutzmann 2013, Hess 2018). A second group of expressives considered and included in this study are those which do appear in the relevant literature on expressives, but did not capture full attention: *idiot*, *fuck*, *jerk* (e.g. Hom 2010, Gutzmann 2013, Hess 2018). Finally, to supplement the analysis of previously considered expressives, five more words were taken from frequency of use lists in contemporary British English swearing from McEnery (2006): *arsehole* (and its variant *asshole*), *bitch*, *cunt*, *dickhead* and *shit*. This selection and number of items allowed me to have instances of different types of lexical expressives regarding their word classes, which ensures a broader analysis of expressive behaviour, while creating a manageable database.

I hypothesised that lexical expressives can occur in different syntactic positions while still working as expressives. Following the definition I stated in the previous section, expressives are items that carry expressive meaning (albeit this is may not necessarily be the only meaning they carry). Moreover, I expected similarities or patterns of behaviour among expressives belonging to the same grammatical category, and that one grammatical category will not be restricted to just one role in the sentence in order to behave as an expressive. A more detailed exploration of the trends (or lack of trends) and contexts in which different uses occur was expected to be gained from the corpus study and, at a later stage, used to propose a novel typology of expressives.

### 3.2.2 Corpus-driven database, retrieval methodology and procedure of data analysis

The selection of the corpora to retrieve data for my database was performed according to two criteria: they had to be corpora of (i) spoken language corpora and (ii) British English. The main reason behind the adoption of the spoken language parameter is the fact that spoken language is more often the realm of expressives due to their informal/taboo nature (as opposed to written language, which tends to be more formal, with the exception of corpora of online discourse). The variety of English used was delimited to British English due to methodological considerations as well as due to the time and length constraints in the project. Considering these criteria, the data used in this study was retrieved from the new [British National Corpus 2014](#) (henceforth, BNC2014) (Love, Dembry, Hardie, Brezina & McEnery 2017).

To retrieve the data for the analysis, a simple query type search was carried out for each of the twelve expressive lemmas outlined above. [Table 1](#) (left column) shows the total number of occurrences for each item in the [BNC2014](#) corpus. In order to generate a manageable database to work with for the scope of this project, the search was capped at occurrences per 4 million words (i.e., a third of the total amount of words in the corpus). However, the number of occurrences was still too high for the items *bloody*, *fuck*, *fucking* and *shit* to make the database manageable. I scrutinised briefly all the occurrences obtained after the cap at 4 million words,

but there did not seem to be any instances of use that stand up over the rest, which allowed me to assume that cuts will not adversely affect the results. For that reason, I took twice the largest number of occurrences obtained in an individual item after the cap at 4 million words as a second cap for the occurrences of these four items. The largest number of occurrences in an individual item was 140 for *bitch*. Therefore, the second cap was set at 280 words for *bloody*, *fuck*, *fucking* and *shit*. This generated a practical database while still keeping the number of occurrences that allows for a compelling analysis. The resulting numbers for each item are shown in [Table 1](#) (right column).

	<b>Total number of occurrences in the BNC2014 corpus (11.5 million words)</b>	<b>Number of occurrences per 4 million words</b> (*words with a second cap at 280 words)
<b>Asshole</b>	15	10
<b>Arsehole</b>	62	17
<b>Bastard</b>	185	68
<b>Bitch</b>	340	140
<b>Bloody</b>	1461	502/*280
<b>Cunt</b>	106	42
<b>Damn</b>	337	114
<b>Dickhead</b>	75	24
<b>Fuck</b>	6096	947/*280
<b>Fucking</b>	3551	1301/*280
<b>Idiot</b>	355	116
<b>Jerk</b>	15	10
<b>Shit</b>	3242	1155/*280

**Table 1** Number of occurrences (overall and capped numbers).

The data analysis procedure included several steps. Each of these steps was taken independently for each of the twelve items under analysis. Firstly, the occurrences retrieved from each item were scrutinised, including their concordance lines. This led to dismissing occurrences in the database where the items did not carry expressive content, but were used in an entirely descriptive sense (e.g., *jerk* used to refer to a style of cooking chicken). The second step involved the division of occurrences according to whether they were used in (13a) attributive position, (13b) predicative position, as (13c) nominals or as (13d) exclamation.

- (13) a. I don't want a *fucking* cold car, yeah, drive your car.  
(BNC2014, token 155238)

- b. She was being difficult, yeah, at least she acknowledged she was a *bitch* all weekend. (BNC2014, token 1622798)
- c. The world is a mess all because of money-making *idiots*. (BNC2014, token 488068)
- d. *Damn!* I was thinking if you could put anything on top. . . (BNC2014, token 3602863)

Following from this, the third stage involved the coding and annotating of each occurrence according to their grammatical position (within the categories above). This resulted in 10 labels, further explained in [section 3.2.3](#). To ensure reliability in the coding, an intra-rater reliability test was performed by recoding the datasets four weeks after the first coding was carried out. In the last phase of the analysis, a study of the trends between each expressive item and the annotations according to the categories aforementioned was conducted.

### 3.2.3 Findings

The departure point for the corpus study was to observe the behaviour of expressives from a holistic point of view. In other words, I am looking at lexical items regardless of the position they occupy in the sentence and the role they play in information structure. This preliminary distinction generated two categories: (i) attributive position and (ii) predicative position. When I examined the occurrences from the database, I realised that this distinction does not capture all the different roles because some expressives do not only appear in attributive or predicate uses, but also as subjects or vocatives, and as (stand-alone) exclamatives. Hence, two more categories were added: (iii) nominals and (iv) exclamatives. A fifth, last category had to be added in order to encompass cases in which expressives are mentioned in isolation from the propositional content of the utterance, such as when they are used to discuss the meaning of the expressive word itself (that is, when they are *mentioned* rather than *used*). This category was labelled as (v) (meta-linguistic) mention, in line with the use-mention distinction ([Saka 1998](#)). Instances of each general category are provided in (13) and are presented again below for ease of reference, together with the addition of an example of category (v) meta-linguistic mention.

- (13')
- a. I don't want a *fucking* cold car, yeah, drive your car. (BNC2014, token 155238)
  - b. She was being difficult, yeah, at least she acknowledged she was a *bitch* all weekend. (BNC2014, token 1622798)
  - c. The world is a mess all because of money-making *idiots*. (BNC2014, token 488068)
  - d. *Damn!* I was thinking if you could put anything on top. . . (BNC2014, token 3602863)

- e. No, it isn't the word *'bitch'* but well done for getting it in the conversation.  
(BNC2014, token 834204)

Table 2 depicts the preliminary classification that emerged from looking at the data. The categories and labels are explained immediately below, accompanied with examples of each subcategory.

Lexico-syntactic categories and sub-categories	Modifiers	Modifiers in a full proposition (Modifiers <sub>fp</sub> )
		Modifiers in a sub-propositional expression (Modifiers <sub>sp</sub> )
	Ascriptives	Ascriptives in a full proposition (Ascriptives <sub>fp</sub> )
		Ascriptives in a sub-propositional expression (Ascriptives <sub>sp</sub> )
	Nominals	Nominal-subject (N/s)
		Nominal-object (N/o)
Nominal-vocative (N/v)		
Exclamatives	Exclamatives of states and events (E <sub>se</sub> )	
Meta-linguistic mention (MLM)		

**Table 2** Lexico-syntactic categories and subcategories.

### Modifiers

Modifiers are expressions that appear in the attributive position (as contrasted with predicative and referential, instantiated by my other categories). Following Matthews (2014), modifiers accompany a head and are not typically required by it, which makes them the closest category to Pottsian expressives. This category is subdivided into modifiers occurring in full propositions (henceforth, modifiers<sub>fp</sub>) and those occurring sub-propositionally (henceforth, modifiers<sub>sp</sub>). This difference is illustrated in examples (14) and (15). The former displays a full proposition, with subject and predicate. The latter shows an incomplete proposition, which could be completed or unpacked as a full proposition on the lines of *I hate my damn son, I am upset by my damn son* or *I dislike my damn son for what he did*. It has to be noted here that there is not a unique completion option for modifiers<sub>sp</sub> but rather more than one depending on the context and on the intentions/motivations of the speaker. Further study on the particularities of behaviour and meaning retrieval of modifiers<sub>sp</sub>, including when combined with the other two parameters mentioned throughout this article (i.e., information structure and functional role), is being carried out as part of the bigger project of which this paper is part, but has not been included here since it still ongoing.

- (14) He's *bloody* useless. (BNC2014, token 298831)



- (15) *Damn son!* (BNC2014, token 2908206)

### *Ascriptives*

This second category encompasses cases of predicate uses of expressives. In particular, it includes uses of expressives in the predicate of ascriptive sentences. Ascriptive sentences are defined by Matthews (2014) as sentences which ascribe a property to some entity, who is normally the subject of the sentence. Ascriptive sentences are mostly copular, but they also include sentences whose verb is a ‘semi-copula’, like ‘become’, ‘seem’, ‘turn into’ or ‘get’ (Moro 1997). The label ‘ascriptive’ for my second category draws from this type of sentences, and it points out the fact that expressives in ascriptive sentences (i.e., ascriptives, following my terminology) are the elements that carry what is ascribed to the entity in the subject. What is ascribed by the expressive will be part of its descriptive content and the expressive content will convey an attitude of the speaker towards the entity, both at the same time. This shows the possibility of expressives to convey both descriptive and expressive meaning, as discussed in section 3.1. Despite conveying some descriptive meaning, there is still a relevant expressive component in them. Therefore, following my broader definition, they still fall under the label of ‘expressives’.

As with the modifier category, (expressive) ascriptives can also occur in full propositions (see 16) and sub propositionally (see 17). The label given for these subcategories is *ascriptives<sub>fp</sub>* and *ascriptives<sub>sp</sub>*, respectively.

- (16) He turned into a crazy *bastard*. (BNC2014, token 1447075)

- (17) Fucking *arsehole!* (BNC2014, token 1427121)

### *Nominals*

The third category in my classification is labelled as ‘nominals’. (Expressive) nominals are those that function like a noun, noun phrase (e.g., a pronoun) or a proper name. Nominals can fulfil different functions and positions, primarily as subjects (‘nominal/subject’; henceforth, N/s), objects – either direct or indirect – (‘nominal/object’; henceforth, N/o) and vocatives (‘nominal/vocative’; henceforth, N/v), as exemplified in (18 - 20), respectively. All these roles have in common the fact that, as opposed to the categories of modifiers and ascriptives, nominals do not modify nor ascribe any property to any entity. Rather, they act on behalf of the entity they make reference to.

As highlighted in the introduction to this section, nominals do not fit into the initial distinction of attributive vs. predicative positions, which made necessary to go beyond this preliminary division. It has to be noted that N/o do work in the predicate of sentences. However, since they do not fall into the category of ascriptives (i.e., a category of expressives working in predicate uses), they were

included in this third category that aims to go further and add another layer to the attributive-predicative distinction. However, I acknowledge and will take this fact into consideration when looking at nominals in the light of the next two parameters.

- (18) You could hardly hit it before the *bastard* came back at you.  
(BNC2014, token 2067157)
- (19) If she was not my mum, I would fucking hate that *bitch*.  
(BNC2014, token 3047237)
- (20) *Bitch*, shut up.  
(BNC2014, token 1867309)

### *Exclamatives*

The next category presents a use of expressives that typically occurs in sentences in exclamative mode. Crystal (2008: 177) points out that, traditionally, exclamative sentences primarily express speaker's feelings, lack the grammatical structure of a full sentence, and are often marked by a strong intonation. Following this, these items have been labelled as 'exclamatives'. A terminological consideration on this label has to be made. Exclamative sentences have also been referred to as 'exclamations' in Crystal (2008). Nonetheless, to avoid confusion between exclamations as 'exclamative sentences' and exclamations as 'speech acts' (Matthews 2014), I highlight here that my label 'exclamatives' for expressive items follows the former, and should not be confused with discussions of speech acts.

A second clarification is needed when discussing the category of exclamatives. They should not be confused with expressives in the subcategories of modifiers<sub>sp</sub> and ascriptives<sub>sp</sub>. Whereas modifiers<sub>sp</sub> and ascriptives<sub>sp</sub> modify or ascribe a quality to an entity to which they accompany in the sentence – either attributively or predicatively – exclamatives do not accompany and, hence, do not refer to any entity in particular, but allude to a state of affairs or an event. To emphasize this fact, the short label for this category will be E<sub>se</sub>. Moreover, the content of the sentences in which E<sub>se</sub> occur is not sub-propositional since there are no further sentences that can be recovered from them, as opposed to the sentences with modifiers<sub>sp</sub> and ascriptives<sub>sp</sub>. This difference is illustrated in (21) and its contrast with (15') and (17'), presented below again for convenience. A's utterance in (21) does not offer any possibility of completion because it is not a sub-propositional instance. Any additions to the utterance (for example, considering the context, the speaker could continue with an utterance along the lines of *They took my spot!*) would be a separate utterance from *Damn it!*, not a completion of it. Conversely, instances (16) and (18) offer possibilities of completion because they are examples of sub-propositional utterances. As said before, there is not a unique completion but, for comparison between these two instances and (21), a potential possibility of completion considering the context has been offered for each instance after B's and C's utterances.

- (21) *Context:* The speaker is trying to find a car space in a car park and realises someone else has taken a spot that was available. They utter the following:  
 A: *Damn* it! (BNC2014, token 223435)
- (15') *Context:* The son of the speaker wants to go to a chocolate factory and finds out that the tickets are £50. They utter the following:  
 B: *Damn* son! (BNC2014, token 2908206)  
 (Possible completion: 'My damn son is going to break me.')
- (17') *Context:* The speaker was in a taxi and gave the taxi driver the map indications to go to their language school. The taxi driver, instead of following their instructions, drove them to every language school. After giving this information to a friend, the speaker utters the following:  
 C: *Fucking asshole!* (BNC2014, token 1427121)  
 (Possible completion: 'That taxi driver was a fucking asshole.')

On a final note, the uses of  $E_{se}$  could be compared with those of interjections (e.g., *oops* or *ouch*). As stated in the introduction, my project of typology is concerned with lexical expressives, and interjections fall in between lexical and non-lexical phenomena. For this reason, interjection uses have not been considered here nor a further comparison is offered between interjections and exclamatives. Nonetheless, I hypothesise that this similarity will be worthy of consideration when expressives are examined under my third parameter – functional role – yet to be completed.

#### *Meta-linguistic mention*

The last category is meta-linguistic mention (henceforth, MLM). As stated above, this category gathers cases in which the expressive item is *mentioned*, but not *used*. That is to say, the content of the lexical item is not *used* in the sentence, rather, the expressive is *mentioned* in order to discuss some aspect of its meaning or to provide a definition of it (see 22).

The uses included in this category do not have to be confused with uses of expressives in reported speech in which the speaker is quoting (or reporting) someone else's words and might or might not back the content conveyed by the expressive (for further discussion on this debate, cf. Harris & Potts 2009). Expressives occurring in reported speech have been included in the corresponding category according to the syntactic position in which they are used in the reported or quoted sentence, following the lexico-syntactic parameter that guides the corpus study. Reported or quoted uses of expressives in utterances from other speakers differ considerably from the MLM uses included in this category, in which the speaker *mentions* them without reporting or quoting any words from another speaker and with the sole purpose of discussing an aspect of the expressive itself (hence, the necessary 'meta-linguistic' addition to the label). Both uses can be contrasted in examples (22) and (23) below.

Towards a redefinition of lexical expressives

(22) I don't think '*cunt*' is a mild word, like it's the worst word you can say.  
(BNC2014, token 2315351)

(23) He just said something like 'oh I had *bloody* nearly hit him'.  
(BNC2014, token 320212)

### 3.2.4 Discussion

The categories and subcategories presented stem from the examination of the retrieved occurrences. Since the aims of this study are not focussed on how each individual expressive behaves but on trends of behaviour among expressives contingent on their syntactic position and grammatical role, the discussion of findings will examine and describe these trends, rather than focusing on a quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, for clarity, a summary table of the categories and subcategories for each individual item under analysis can be found in Appendix.

The expressives *damn*, *bloody*, and *fucking*, the most commonly addressed in the literature, only appear in attributive positions (as modifiers) or as exclamatives. However, *bastard*, another of the favourites in the literature on expressives, appeared mainly in predicative positions (as ascriptives), together with nominal and exclamative uses. The occurrences in the database did not show examples of *bastard* in attributive (modifier) uses. However, the literature discusses many of these cases and it often occurs in natural language. An exploration of this item in other corpora of natural language was carried out in order to confirm and provide evidence of this. These additional examples are illustrated in (24) and (25). Analogous behaviour, that is mainly predicative use but also sometimes attributive is also seen in other expressives such as *idiot*, *asshole/arsehole*, *bitch*, *cunt* and *shit* (see instances 26 - 30).

(24) That *bastard* Kresge is famous. (Potts 2007: 167)

(25) I'm not a *bastard*. (BNC2014, token 3853028)

(26) a. I wrote it down in like an *idiot* form. (BNC2014, token 1146627)

b. He was such an *idiot*. (BNC2014, token 538383)

(27) a. Her *arsehole* flatmates had not given her the letter hidden.  
(BNC2014, token 3268738)

b. You guys are *assholes*. (BNC2014, token 1446246)

- (28) a. Scrawny *bitch* girls are so horrible, aren't we?  
(BNC2014, token 598485)
- b. Two of them were the miserablest *bitches* I ever met in my entire life.  
(BNC2014, token 561931)
- (29) a. We're playing hard rules, basically *cunt* rules.  
(BNC2014, token 1670749)
- b. Parents hit their children only because they're *cunts*.  
(BNC2014, token 318005)
- (30) a. Every day at our house was like *shit* food (BNC2014, token 103545)
- b. She's taking it in her stride, to be fair, but I think it is *shit*.  
(BNC2014, token 152015)

This initial observation from the data shows that it may not be justifiable to take the attributive position as a defining feature of the class of expressives. This is clearly shown by the case of *bastard*, whose attributive uses have been in the centre of debates about expressives but whose actual usage appears here to be dominated by predicative uses. This, together with the parallelism in behaviour of other items such as *idiot*, *asshole/arsehole*, *bitch*, *cunt* and *shit*, suggests that it would be more adequate to delimit the class of expressives in a way that comprises in a wider range of grammatical contexts.

To pre-empt a potential objection, I would like to acknowledge that some terms such as *bitch* or *fuck* had uses as verbs. However, these uses have not been included in the different categories and subcategories nor are discussed in the trends here. The reason why they have not been considered in the classification is because in these uses, the lexical items are not used as expressives (i.e., they do not primarily display expressing meaning) but as swear words (in the sense of being taboo words but do not necessarily convey expressive meaning).

A second trend that can be gleaned from the data. There is a correlation between the type of uses of expressives and their grammatical category. The expressives used only in attributive positions as modifiers (e.g., *damn*, *bloody*, *fucking*) are adjectives or adverbs of a type that does not appear in predicative position (*He is bloody upset* vs. \**He is bloody* vs. *The bloody dog is on the sofa*). The expressives used both in attributive and predicative positions belong to the grammatical category of nouns and, therefore, it is not unusual to see them in predicative positions as ascriptives and as nominals or in attributive positions when they are nouns used as adjectives. This shows a correlation between (i) (exclusively) attributive adjective and adverbial expressives and attributive positions/modifiers; (ii) nominal expressives and predicative/ascriptives and nominal positions; and (iii) nominal expressives used as adjectives and attributive positions/modifiers.

This explains why expressives have been traditionally associated with attributive positions (since the focus of expressive literature has mainly been placed on lexical

expressives that belong to the grammatical categories of adjectives and adverbs). Nonetheless, when more attention is paid to under-analysed types of occurrences of these expressions and expressives are described in a broader sense, it becomes apparent that the use of expressives is diverse and that, as Geurts (2007) rightly implied, the descriptive and the expressive dimensions of meaning are intertwined. In turn, this has shown that the delimitation of expressive category has room for improvement and should consider traditionally analysed as well as under-analysed items.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this paper, I have discussed and evaluated the main approaches to the study of expressives to date, focusing on their definitions and classifications, and have argued for an alternative, holistic, three-parameter proposal. This proposal is part of a bigger project still in-progress. Therefore, I have put the emphasis for this paper on the first parameter – lexico-syntactic dimension, or grammatical role, of each instance of their use in the corpus – and have sketched the links between it and the other two – information structure and functional role – and the next steps to be taken.

As is evident from this discussion, the term ‘expressive’ and its delimitation are still a topic of debate in the linguistic literature. My analysis has shown that none of the definitions and classifications is fully successful in capturing the different facets of expressives. For this reason, my aim was to redefine the category and work towards a new proposal of classification and typology of this category.

This is still very much work in progress but my results from the preliminary corpus study suggest that expressives should not be seen as a group of items with a restricted use (e.g., restricted to attributive uses), but that they are better treated more ‘holistically’ as a category in that they can occupy a wide variety of roles in a sentence. Therefore, the first step in my novel proposal was to widen the definition of expressives to, simply, words that convey expressive meaning.

On the other hand, it has to be pointed out that this could lead to confusion with expressions or words that are not normally expressives but nevertheless can carry expressive meaning in certain contexts. Arguably, some words can convey expressive meaning in certain contexts but not in others. For example, the word *paw* is normally used to refer to the hand of an animal. However, sometimes it is used to refer to the hand of a person while conveying expressive meaning of affection. In this context, *paw* would behave as an expressive, conveying both expressive and descriptive meanings. Nonetheless, this occasional expressive usage does not make it an expressive. Instead, in this context, *paw* would act as an expressive. So, it has to be emphasised that words that occasionally acquire expressive meaning in certain contexts are not encompassed under my label of ‘expressives’; only words whose *regular* behaviour conveys expressive meaning are classified under my label ‘expressives’. Instead, words with occasional expressive meaning are said to merely *act as* expressives in certain contexts. Moreover, the corpus research has shown that predicative occurrences convey expressive meaning sufficiently commonly so

as not to be regarded as a separate phenomenon. This reinforces the idea that the definition of expressives needs to be widened and account for the heterogenous behaviour of the words included in this category.

Drawing from these preliminary results, the next step will be to develop a more extensive argument in favour of a definition of expressives as lexemes, moving away from expressives as a dimension. The corpus study has given a wider perspective on expressives and has helped establish a connection between the definition proposed in section 3.1 and the real behaviour of these words.

The next question to be asked is how this parameter of meaning, namely (i) lexico-syntactic dimension (or grammatical role) interacts with the remaining two parameters outlined above: (ii) information structure and (iii) functional role. My expectation is that the addition of these two further parameters will result in a suitably fine-grained final definition and a typology of expressives that encompasses the heterogeneity of this linguistic phenomenon. I will leave these routes to be explored in my future research.

#### REFERENCES

- Blakemore, D. 2011. On the descriptive ineffability of expressive meaning. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43(14). 3537–3550. doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2011.08.003.
- British National Corpus. 2014. [online]. <http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/bnc2014/>.
- Crystal, D. 2008. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. sixth edn. doi:10.1002/9781444302776.
- Geurts, B. 2007. Really fucking brilliant. *Theoretical Linguistics* 33(2). 209–214.
- Gutzmann, D. 2013. Expressives and beyond: An introduction to varieties of use-conditional meaning. In D. Gutzmann & H.-M. Gärtner (eds.), *Beyond Expressives: Explorations in Use-Conditional Meaning*, 1–58. Leiden: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198723820.001.0001.
- Gutzmann, D. 2015. *Use-Conditional Meaning: Studies in Multidimensional Semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198723820.001.0001.
- Harris, J. & C. Potts. 2009. Perspective-shifting with appositives and expressives. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 32(6). 523–552. doi:10.1007/s10988-010-9070-5.
- Hess, L. 2018. Perspectival expressives. *Journal of Pragmatics* 129. 13–33. doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2018.02.007.
- Hom, C. 2010. Pejoratives. *Philosophy Compass* 5(2). 164–185. doi:10.1111/j.1747-9991.2009.00274.x.
- Hom, C. 2012. A puzzle about pejoratives. *Philosophical Studies* 159(3). 383–405. doi:10.1007/s11098-011-9749-7.
- Kaplan, D. 1999. The meaning of Ouch and Oops. Explorations in the theory of meaning as use. Ms. University of California Los Angeles.
- Lasersohn, P. 2005. Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28(6). 643–686. doi:10.1007/s10988-005-0596-x.
- Löbner, S. 2002. *Understanding Semantics*. London: Hodder Education. doi:10.4324/9780203528334.

- Löbner, S. 2013. *Understanding Semantics*. Oxfordshire, England; New York: Routledge 2nd edn. doi:[10.4324/9780203528334](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203528334).
- Love, R., C. Dembry, A. Hardie, V. Brezina & T. McEnery. 2017. The Spoken BNC2014: designing and building a spoken corpus of everyday conversations. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 22(3). 319–344. doi:[10.1075/ijcl.22.3.02lov](https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.22.3.02lov).
- Matthews, P. 2014. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 3rd edn.
- McEnery, T. 2006. *Swearing in English: Bad language, purity and power from 1586 to the present*. London: Routledge. doi:[10.4324/9780203501443](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203501443).
- Moro, A. 1997. *The Raising of Predicates: Predicative Noun Phrases and the Theory of Clause Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:[10.1017/cbo9780511519956](https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511519956).
- Potts, C. 2005. *The Logic of Conventional Implicatures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi:[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199273829.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199273829.001.0001).
- Potts, C. 2007. The expressive dimension. *Theoretical Linguistics* 33(2). 165–198. doi:[10.1515/tl.2007.011](https://doi.org/10.1515/tl.2007.011).
- Potts, C. 2012. Conventional implicature and expressive content. In K. von Stechow, C. Maienborn & P. Portner (eds.), *Semantics : An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*, vol. 3, chap. 17, 598–622. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. doi:[10.1515/9783110589849-017](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110589849-017).
- Recanati, F. 2004. Pragmatics and Semantics. In L. R. Horn & G. Ward (eds.), *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, 442–462. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. doi:[10.1002/9780470756959.ch20](https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470756959.ch20).
- Saka, P. 1998. Quotation and the Use-Mention Distinction. *Mind* 107(425). 367–387. doi:[10.1007/978-3-319-01011-3\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-01011-3_16).
- Sauerland, U. 2007. Beyond unpluggability. *Theoretical Linguistics* 33(2). 231–236.
- Zimmermann, M. 2007. I like that damn paper – Three comments on Christopher Potts’ ‘The expressive dimension’. *Theoretical Linguistics* 33(2). 247–254.

## APPENDIX

Key to colours in [Table 3](#):

- Green: Ascriptives category
- Purple: Nominals category
- Red: Modifiers category
- Yellow: Exclamatives category
- Blue: Meta-linguistic mention category



	Ascr.fp	Ascr.sp	V	N/s	N/o	N/v	Mod.fp	Mod.sp	E <sub>se</sub>	MLM	Excl. <sup>9</sup>	Total
<b>Asshole (n)</b>	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	1	<b>10</b>
<b>Arsehole (n)</b>	8	2	-	1	2	-	1	-	-	-	3	<b>17</b>
<b>Bastard (n)</b>	15	31	-	5	10	6	-	-	-	-	1	<b>68</b>
<b>Bitch (n)</b>	45	38	14	11	9	20	2	-	-	1	-	<b>140</b>
<b>Bloody (a)</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	180	8	79	-	13	<b>280</b>
<b>Cunt (n)</b>	21	6	-	3	1	-	3	-	-	2	6	<b>42</b>
<b>Damn (a)</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	31	6	74	1	2	<b>114</b>
<b>Dickhead (n)</b>	15	6	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	<b>24</b>
<b>Fuck (v)</b>	1	-	61	-	-	-	12	-	206	-	-	<b>280</b>
<b>Fucking (a)</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	236	8	33	-	3	<b>280</b>
<b>Idiot (n)</b>	61	23	-	17	11	-	3	-	-	-	1	<b>116</b>
<b>Jerk (n)</b>	5	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	<b>10</b>
<b>Shit (n)</b>	70	1	5	14	60	1	32	2	95	-	1	<b>280</b>

**Table 3** Breakdown of items selected per subcategory.

<sup>9</sup> The non-classifiable items (such as the descriptive use of *jerk* mentioned above) were included in the total count in Table 3 (under the label 'Excl.', for 'excluded') but were excluded from the analysis.

## Towards a redefinition of lexical expressives

List of abbreviations in [Table 3](#):

- n: noun
- a: adjective/adverb
- v: verb
- V: verbs
- MLM: meta-linguistic mention
- N/s: nominals in subject position
- N/o: nominals in object position
- N/v: nominals in vocative position
- Excl.: excluded
- Ascr.<sub>fp</sub>: ascriptives in full propositions
- Ascr.<sub>sp</sub>: ascriptives in sub-propositional expressions
- Mod.<sub>fp</sub>: modifiers in full propositions
- Mod.<sub>sp</sub>: modifiers in sub-propositional expressions
- E<sub>se</sub>: exclamatives of states and events

Mireia Cabanes Calabuig  
University of Cambridge  
[mc2140@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mc2140@cam.ac.uk)