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Expressive commitments: A normative approach to exclamations

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One more sweet surprise I won't be faking

The Alan Parsons Project "The real world"

Abstract

Pragmatics has made a Copernican shift from Gricean intentional approaches to normative approaches based in commitments. This has been good news for assertions, and questions of several stripes, but we still don't know whether the commitment approach can be extended to expressive speech acts in general, and exclamations in particular. In this article, I will show that an approach to exclamations based on commitments at different levels of meaning, namely, the descriptive and expressive level, can be devised and it can offer interesting answers to old issues, like the contribution of exclamations to discourse, or their at-issue status, while raising new theoretical and empirical questions on lying and deceiving and commitment strength.

Keywords: exclamation, commitment, normativity, expressive content, at-issue content

1 Introduction

When I go to the vaccination site to get my n^{th} COVID dose, and I get my arm punched, I can react in diverse ways, as for example:

(1) a. It hurts.

b. Ouch!

c. How it hurts!

Intuitively, in (1a) we would say that I am describing my inner feeling or emotion objectively, namely I am being informative about my pain. In contrast, we would say that using (1b), I am just expressing my pain irreflexively, without any informative intention, just as I would do non-verbally by means of a grimace or a sigh. This intuitive difference between *It hurts* and *ouch* has important linguistic consequences regarding the accessibility of their information. When I utter *It hurts*, its content can foster different replies from the people in the vaccination room:

(2) A: It hurts.

B: Yes, me too. [from another person just shoot]

B': No, it doesn't. [from the vaccinator]

The content of my utterance is accessible to manipulation by other people in the room, so it can be taken as antecedent to an event anaphor: it is part of the at-issue content.¹ Note that, since it is at-issue, it is thus subject to confirmation or denial. Moreover, this content can be reported:

(3) I told everybody that it hurt.

When we move to pure expressives like *ouch*, things change dramatically. Its content cannot be the antecedent for an event anaphor like the following examples show:

(4) A: Ouch!

B: #Yes, me too. [from another person just shoot]

B': #No, it doesn't. [from the doctor]

Also, it is unsurprising that these elements cannot be embedded under reporting contexts like the following:

¹ For Potts (2005: 6), *at-issue content* is equivalent to Grice's *what is said* (Grice, 1969, 1975).

(5) #I told everybody that ouch.

This shows that the utterance *It hurts* clearly says that I am in pain, but that *ouch* does not. Obviously, this does not mean that *ouch* is not informative about my feelings, but it informs us indirectly: just as a grimace or a sigh, expressing my pain by means of *ouch* serves as a clue for inferring that I am in pain.

All of this is quite uncontroversial, but the problem arises when one considers exclamations like *How it hurts!* How do we relate these utterances to our previous cases, namely assertions like *It hurts* or pure expressives like *ouch*? On the one hand, exclamations display a descriptive meaning accessible to anaphoric elements (6) and possible in reporting contexts (7):

(6) A: How it hurts!

B: It hurts me too, so shut up!

B': This pain is normal, so stop whining.

(7) I told everyone how much it hurt.

Yet, at the same time there is a clear sense in which exclamations are not equivalent to assertions and contribute to the expression of emotion just as

expressives like ouch do. To my knowledge, this was originally pointed out by Sadock (1974, 41):²

It is clear that these exclamations do not have the informative status of assertions. While they commit the speaker to a particular view, they are not used, and cannot be used to inform, enlighten or instruct. In that they are noncontroversial by nature, exclamations of this kind serve a social function. They point up a commonality between speaker and addressee, which, however trivial, helps lay the groundwork for further conversation.

In his classic paper with Arnold Zwicky (Sadock and Zwicky, 1985: 162), Sadock pursued the idea for defining the exclamation speech act:

Exclamations are intended to be expressive whereas declaratives are intended to be informative. Both represent a proposition as being true, but in an exclamation, the speaker emphasizes his strong emotional reaction to what he takes to be a fact, whereas in a declarative, the speaker emphasizes his intellectual appraisal that the proposition is true.

² Exclamations are not mentioned in any of the classic works on Speech Acts: Austin (1962), Strawson (1964), Searle (1969, 1979) nor Bach and Harnish (1979).

This very same idea was adopted by Michaelis (2001: 1040) in her influential paper on exclamations:³

The major semantic feature which distinguishes exclamations from interjections is also the major semantic property that exclamations share with declaratives: recoverable propositional content. Both exclamations and declaratives linguistically encode a proposition which the speaker assumes to be true.

Krifka (2019:88) takes a similar stand suggesting that the main point of exclamations is expressing a state caused by some unexpected state of affairs:

Emotives that contain expressions that denote the object of the emotive attitude, like surprise or desire as in (25)(a,b), are no different from interjections in that respect except that they contain expressions that identify the object of surprise or desire.

(25) a. What a terrible mistake you made!

b. If only I were rich!

³ As we will see later, in her list of semantic-pragmatic properties of exclamations (Michaelis, 2001, 1041), we can find the ingredients for developing a commitment approach.

The picture that follows is one in which exclamations share properties with assertions and pure expressives: on the one hand, they encode descriptive content, just as assertions do, but on the other hand, they also encode the speaker emotional attitude, just as pure expressives do.

Not everybody feels comfortable with this dual characterization of exclamations, and we find two main views highlighting just one of these two contents. What I will dub the expressivist view takes exclamations as a basic expressive speech act, so it emphasizes the importance of the attitude expressed while rendering the descriptive content an optional secondary role. In contrast, what I will dub the assertivist view insists that exclamations are a constative speech act, just like assertions, but with an expressive flavor.

1.1 The expressivist view

Castroviejo (2008) is a good example of the view that takes exclamations as purely expressive speech acts. Her main point is clear: neither the descriptive nor the expressive content of exclamations are at-issue, so they cannot modify the

common ground as assertions do.⁴ Consider the example she discusses to make her point with respect to the descriptive content:

(8) a. I've got some news: Pau is very tall.

b. I've got some news: #How tall Pau is!

As we can see, even though the exclamation in (8b) includes the proposition *Paul is very tall*, this content is not at-issue, and hence cannot be used to convey new information, in sharp contrast with the assertion in (8a).

As for the expressive content of exclamation, Castroviejo also shows that it cannot be used as an informative answer, hence suggesting that it is not at-issue either:

(9) A: How do you feel about Pau's high degree of tallness?

B: #How tall he is!

Hence, if neither the descriptive nor the expressive content of exclamations are at issue, Castroviejo (2008) concludes that the only informative contribution of exclamations to the common ground must be the very same speech act they realize, which serves as an index of the psychological state of the speaker, just as

⁴ Castroviejo's common ground is the classical Stalnakerian "presumed background information shared by participants in a conversation" (Stalnaker 2002: 701). This general intuitive idea will be sufficient for now, but see 2.2 below for details.

an interjection or a gesture would do (see Unger 2019 for a more nuanced proposal that exclamations are purely iconic utterances pointing towards a psychological state). To her, thus, both exclamations and pure expressives like interjection just contribute to the common ground in a performative way, by their mere uttering. What makes exclamations special is that they include as not at-issue content a proposition that denotes the situation causing the emotion of the speaker, generally one of surprise.

Castroviejo's (2008) approach raises several concerns. From a theoretical point of view, it is very vague on the way that these expressive speech acts enter the common ground. She sticks to the proposal by Stalnaker (2002) that speech acts may change the common ground by the mere manifestation of the speech act, besides the further addition of its propositional content. However, as Chernilovskaya et al. (2012) and Chernilovskaya (2014) remark, this approach (just as Stalnaker's) leaves unexplained how the expressive content manages to get into the common ground if they are not at-issue, particularly if only the speech act is considered at the information level. While one can argue that the descriptive content of exclamations is presupposed, so part of the common ground, we cannot assume that this is the case for the expressive content, which is clearly not presupposed at all.

The second problem for Castroviejo's approach is empirical: it is simply wrong that the descriptive and the expressive content of exclamations are inert at

updating the common ground. As discussed in Trotzke and Author (2020), exclamative sentences can be informative responses, which suggests that they can modify the common ground beyond their merely ostensive value, as in the following examples (ex. 10 is from Castroviejo 2006, and ex. 11 from Trotzke and Author 2020):

(10)a. Saps res de l'Antonio?

‘Have you heard from Antonio?’

b. Queen fa de temps que no el veig!

that of.it does of time that not him see

‘I haven’ t seen him for such a long time!’ (= No, I haven’ t heard from Antonio.)

(11)Karl has a new boss at work and is talking to one of his colleagues.

a. Kollege: Was für einen Eindruck macht Dein neuer Boss?

‘Colleague: What kind of impression does your new boss make?’

b. Karl: Mein Gott! Wie gemein dieser Kerl ist!

Karl my God how mean this guy is

‘Karl: My God! How mean this guy is!’

The Catalan example in (10) shows that *that*-exclamatives can be used as a felicitous response to a polar question, whereas the German example in (11) shows that *wh*-exclamatives are also possible responses to non-polar questions. The reported experimental data are robust and suggest that exclamatives, and hence exclamations are possible in informative dialogues to address the QUD. One could argue that these are not direct answers, but indirect ways to answering the QUD: the hearer infers the answer from the propositional content of the exclamative sentence, even though it is typically not asserted. However, this is a widespread strategy not limited to exclamations. For instance, Trotzke and Author (2020) discuss the following case:

(12) Context: A group of friends just finished dinner, and suddenly one of them realizes that Mary is missing at the table and went to the balcony.

A: What is Mary doing on the balcony?

B: She hasn't managed to quit smoking.

In (12), B is answering the question by A in a very indirect way. From the presuppositional trigger *hasn't managed*, the hearer rescues the presupposition that Mary smokes, and then she must use this content to generate the conversational implicature that 'Mary is smoking on the balcony', which answers

the question. This is a standard case of conversational implicature derived from a violation of Grice's Maxim of Quality.

My point is: if a conversational implicature generated by a presupposition can contribute to answering the QUD, should we exclude a priori that an exclamation also can? Indeed, experimental work on exclamatives (Author, 2017; Trotzke, 2019, Trotzke and Author 2020) has shown that the contents that Castroviejo claims to be non at-issue can be denied or canceled, suggesting that some propositional content is really at-issue and, hence, available for addressing the QUD (see Rett 2008: 197-200 for the original observation). These works show that even the unexpected degree value forcing the attitude of the speaker can be denied, at least weakly, that is by means of *not really* or *I don't think so* (we will turn back to this in section 2.4). Overall, evidence suggests that we cannot equate exclamations with purely expressives like *ouch*.

1.2 The assertivist view

In the opposite side of the spectrum, we find authors that emphasize the assertive nature of exclamations, to the point that they are just another constative speech act, with the particular property of attributing a psychological state to the speaker. Geurts (2019a: 117) offers a clear example of this approach:

This point becomes acute when we turn to other cases that Krifka proposes to classify as emotives, like *What a terrible mistake you made!* Whereas Krifka takes it to be evident that this is not a constative, I'm not sure that its communicative effect is markedly different from *You made a terrible mess*, when uttered with the right intonation.

A more articulated proposal is put forward in Trotzke and Giannakidou (2020), where exclamations are analyzed as emotive assertions. Yet, none of the proposals are explicit on the way the expressive content is added to the common ground nor why exclamations cannot be used as responses about the emotional state, as the previous example from Castroviejo (2008) shows:

(13) A: How do you feel about Pau's high degree of tallness?

B: #How tall he is!

If the exclamation *How tall he is!* is essentially an assertion like *I am surprised how tall he is* with an expressive overtone (Trotzke and Giannakidou's point), why is it behaving so differently in this context? Witness:

(14) A: How do you feel about Pau's high degree of tallness?

B: I am surprised how tall he is.

Moreover, the assertivist view cannot offer an explanation for the following contrast:

(15) a. How expensive this wine is! #Which doesn't surprise me at all, for it is a very special Eiswein.

b. How expensive this wine is! #Or maybe not, for other wines are much more expensive.

(16) a. This wine is so damn expensive, which doesn't surprise me at all, for it is a very special Eiswein.

b. This wine is so expensive. Or maybe not, for other wines are much more expensive.

Whereas exclamative sentences cannot cancel the extreme degree associated with the emotional state of surprise, assertions can, without contradiction. This suggests that reducing exclamations to a species of constative speech acts falls short in offering a proper explanation of the behavior of the former.

2 A commitment approach

We have just seen that exclamations share properties with both expressive and constative speech acts, but the literature has been at pains to offer a clear and

coherent proposal for exclamations as speech acts. In this section, we reconsider what we know about the kinds of meaning involved in exclamations from the perspective of normative pragmatics and commitments, and we will see that, once we take into account the commitments of the speaker, the previous confusing panorama becomes much clearer and coherent. In a nutshell, I will argue that when the speaker utters *How expensive this wine is!*, she is making a commitment to the truth of the state that she expresses, which is not different from the one she would have when uttering *Wow!*; yet, exclamations also involve a propositional content whose truth the speaker is committed to, just as when one simply utters *This wine is more expensive than I expected*. Then, for offering a satisfactory explanation of exclamations as speech acts, we need two different commitments: (i) a commitment to the psychological state (expressive content), and (ii) a commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed (propositional content).

Let's flesh out the proposal in some detail.

2.1 The framework

The normative pragmatics approach stemming from the work by David Lewis (Lewis, 1969, 1979, 1983), and Richard Brandom (Brandom, 1983, 1994) makes a crucial shift from the (neo)Gricean approach to meaning, based on the speaker's beliefs and intentions, to a proposal based on public commitments and norms.

Here I will follow the framework developed by Bart Geurts (Geurts, 2018, 2019a,b) (see also Gazdar 1981; Beyssade and Marandin 2009; Coltier et al. 2009; De Brabanter and Dendale 2008; Farkas and Roelofsen 2017; Gunlogson 2008; Kissine 2008; Krifka 2015, 2021; Malamud and Stephenson 2015; Hamblin 2019; Murray 2021; Rett 2021a,b), who assumes the Lewisian stance that human communication is a highly sophisticated tool for solving coordination problems among individuals, therefore he defines commitments as relations between two individuals, who can act on a proposition p in two basic ways. First, one can commit to the truth of p (atelic commitment in Geurts's sense), as in the following case:

(17) It is raining.

As Moore (1942, 1944) observed (see Shapiro 2020 for more antecedents), the assertion of (17) must involve the commitment of the speaker to its truth, otherwise, we fall in an infelicitous utterance, a case of what was latter labeled a Moore's paradox (see Williams 2015 for a general overview, and Mandelkern 2021 for an extension to directives):

(18) #It is raining, but I don't believe it.

Crucially, this commitment has a clear normative status beyond individuals' beliefs: when I assert p I am supposed to behave accordingly to my commitment to p . This can be appreciated in the following dialog:

(19) Anne: It is raining.

Bill: Then, you better quit preparing the barbecue in the garden, don't you?

The point by Bill is clear: Anne's commitment to 'It is raining' is at odds with her acts and behavior. Our commitments create normative expectations, and we are accountable for them to the participants in the communicative act.

Secondly, one can be committed not to the truth of a proposition p , but rather to acting on p (telic commitment in Geurts's sense). This is the case of a promise:

(20) Anne: I'll clean my room.

Here, the speaker commits herself to perform certain actions that will make the promise of cleaning the room fulfilled. It is quite clear that her commitment to clean my room has an impact on the hearer's behavior (e.g. Bill), for he will be able to plan future actions accordingly. Obviously, just as it happened with assertions, telic commitments have an intrinsic normative value, and one can be justly reproached if not keeping their promise.

Since commitments are normative expectations of behavior, they do not require belief. When Anne says 'It is raining', it doesn't really matter whether

Anne believes p , as long as she behaves accordingly to her commitment to p : the hearer will find no difference whether Anne does believe that it is raining or just pretends that this is the case. Therefore, the normative approach frees us from the psychologically unrealistic assumptions of the (neo)Gricean approach based on beliefs and intentions, particularly when we build the common ground (see 2.2). Moreover, this normative feature of commitments will be also important for dealing with the rich gamut of interactions that exclamations enter in.

We have seen what commitments are, now let's consider in some detail their mechanics with the case of a promise like 'I'll clean my room'. The first step is a speech act whereby Anne makes public her commitment to the hearer (Bill) to act on p ($C_{A,B} p$). The hearer may just acknowledge this offer, namely the hearer commits to Anne to the fact that he is committed to her to act on p ($C_{B,A}(C_{A,B} p)$). This is just a recognition of Anne's offer, but the offer is still open to rejection:

(21) Anne: I'll clean my room.

Bill: No, thank you. I don't mind doing it myself.

Anne is committing herself to cleaning the room with respect to Bill $C_{A,B} p$, and Bill is aware of this, so he accepts Anne's commitment ($C_{B,A}(C_{A,B} p)$). Yet, Bill refuses to take the next step and share her commitment, resulting in an unfulfilled promise. Obviously, Bill will not be entitled to reproach Anne for not cleaning

her room, even though she was committed to do so originally: the promise was offered, but not shared, so it didn't enter the Common Ground.

Henceforth, a further step is needed: commitment sharing. Only when Bill is also committed to Anne to act on p ($C_{B,A} p$) is the commitment entering the Common Ground, and, as a consequence, bounds the participants to the accomplishment of p . Obviously, at this point, Anne becomes accountable to Bill for her success or failure to cleaning her room.

2.2 *Common ground*

Note that this conception of the Common Ground departs from the mainstream Stalnakerian view, which deals with common belief (Stalnaker 2002, 704). Indeed, when we move to a normative framework based on commitments, some important changes must be considered. The most important change is that we can substitute mentalist notions like common belief by public commitments, so that some proposition p is part of the CG if both the speaker and the hearer are committed to each other regarding p , namely it is part of the CG if there is a shared commitment ($C_{A,B} p$ and $C_{B,A} p$). Consider a case where we do have a shared commitment:

(22) Anne: I'll clean my room.

Bill: Great. I'll fix myself a Martini.

Once Bill accepts Anne's offer, it is part of the CG that both are committed to this, so any further action will be able to track this commitment and influence further developments. Hence, commitments are a powerful tool for allowing action coordination: since it is part of the CG that Anne will clean her room, Bill can concentrate on his Martini, with the confidence that Anne will stick to her commitment.

Something similar happens with atelic commitments (aka assertions):

(23) Anne: It is snowing.

Bill: I see: so why are you wearing hot pants for the school?

Since Anne is committed to act accordingly to the fact that it is snowing, Bill's reply is perfectly adequate: he is highlighting the contradiction between the commitment to the truth that it is snowing with her behavior.

Such a simple framework is particularly successful at explaining the inherently normative and coordinated nature of speech acts and communication, while avoiding problems associated to concepts like knowledge and belief, which are crucial for the Stalnakerian CG (see Geurts 2018, 2019b). Now let's see how it works for exclamations.

2.3 *Commitments and exclamations*

It is a mainstream assumption that exclamations involve different levels of meaning (Michaelis, 2001; Beyssade, 2006, 2009; Castroviejo 2008; Faure, 2017; Author, 2017; Trotzke, 2019; Unger, 2019; Trotzke and Author, 2020), particularly a descriptive and an expressive one. See for instance, the list of properties that Michaelis (2001, 1041) proposed for defining exclamations:

(24) a. Presupposed open proposition (with a degree as the variable);

b. Expression of commitment to a particular scalar extent;

c. Expression of affective stance toward the scalar extent;

d. Person deixis (judge is the speaker by default);

e. Identifiability of the referent of whom the scalar property is predicated.

Leaving aside (24c) and (24d), which are typical properties of all expressives (Potts, 2007), we can see that (23b) corresponds to the descriptive content, (23c) to the expressive content, and (23a) to the presupposed meaning typically associated with exclamative sentences (Grimshaw, 1979). My claim is that the speaker of an exclamation has different commitments to each of these pieces of information (see Boisvert and Ludwig 2009 for a similar idea in the context of the sincerity of expressives): commitment to a proposition p that describes an

unexpected state of affairs [\rightarrow descriptive content], commitment to a psychological state s [\rightarrow expressive content], and (consequential) commitment to a proposition q entailed by p [\rightarrow presupposed content].

Let's see how it works on the following case:

(25) How expensive this wine is!

Here the speaker makes a public commitment to the hearer regarding a proposition p (roughly equivalent to) 'this wine is more expensive than I expected' and to a psychological state s of surprise or annoyance. Hence, we have

(26) $C_{A,B}p \wedge C_{A,B}s$

Since the speaker is committed to p , she is also consequentially committed to the proposition q 'this wine is expensive', entailed by p . This gives us a direct explanation of the inherently factive nature of exclamatives (Grimshaw, 1979; Michaelis, 2001; Abels, 2010).

Therefore, the commitment approach can properly describe the multidimensional nature of exclamations, but more importantly, it helps us understand how exclamations work in discourse, including the hearer's reaction to each commitment. Let us consider the most straightforward case:

(27) A: How expensive this wine is!

B: Yeah, so expensive! / Yeah, I am also surprised!

This is a case of fully agreement and even of shared surprise, so the hearer accepts and shares all the commitments of the speaker. As a consequence, all commitments enter the CG. Formally:

- speaker's commitments:
 - $C_{A,B}p$,
 - $C_{A,B}s$, and
 - $C_{A,B}q$.
- hearer's commitments:
 - $C_{B,A}(C_{A,B}p) \wedge C_{B,A}p$,
 - $C_{B,A}(C_{A,B}s) \wedge C_{B,A}s$, and
 - $C_{B,A}(C_{A,B}q) \wedge C_{B,A}q$.

A weaker variant involves acceptance and sharing of the commitment to p and q , but only acceptance of commitment to s . Namely, we agree with the speaker, but without sharing her amazement:

(28) A: How expensive this wine is!

B: Yeah, so it seems.

Consequently, we drop $C_{B,A} s$ from the set of commitments of the hearer, and, consequently from the CG.

- speaker's commitments:
 - $C_{A,B} p$,
 - $C_{A,B} s$, and
 - $C_{A,B} q$.
- hearer's commitments:
 - $C_{B,A}(C_{A,B} p) \wedge C_{B,A} p$,
 - $C_{B,A}(C_{A,B} s)$, and
 - $C_{B,A}(C_{A,B} q) \wedge C_{B,A} q$.

Let us move now to disagreement cases. Consider the following case:

(29) A: How expensive this wine is!

B: How can you say that? It is a bargain!

Intuitively, the hearer is not questioning the sincerity of the speaker's surprise state s , but rather that the proposition p is reason enough for causing such a state. Hence, the hearer accepts that the hearer is committed to p , s , and q , but he is not sharing these commitments.

- speaker's commitments:

- $C_{A,B}p$,
- $C_{A,B}s$, and
- $C_{A,B}q$.
- hearer's commitments:
 - $C_{B,A}(C_{A,B}p)$,
 - $C_{B,A}(C_{A,B}s)$, and
 - $C_{B,A}(C_{A,B}q)$.

One could say that this is a discussion about tastes or a mild evaluative disagreement, but we can consider stronger rejection scenarios. Consider, for instance, the following case, where the hearer is challenging the sincerity of the hearer's commitments:

(30) A: How expensive this wine is!

B: Why are you saying this? You know it is not expensive.

Here B is questioning A's commitment to the truth of p or more precisely B is accusing A of have different private and public commitments with respect to p . We can formalize this case as disagreement at the acceptance level (see the distinction in 2.1): the hearer rejects not only sharing the commitment to p , but even accepting that the speaker really has it herself. Simply put, B is accusing A of insincerity.

Until now, all cases involve accepting or rejecting commitments to the propositional content p , but we can take one step further and consider the possibility of not accepting the speaker's commitment to the psychological state s , namely a case like the following:

(31) A: How strong this woman is!

B: Come on! Don't act surprised: you told me that she knocked Mike Tyson down with one punch.

At first sight, B is questioning the sincerity of A regarding the attitude expressed, not about the proposition p , or more precisely that her commitment and her private judgment regarding the psychological state s are contradictory. This case was explicitly entertained by Charles Hamblin in his posthumous book (my emphasis):

It is possible that Q, whether through a similar present propensity or through suggestibility will agree with P that the circumstance of the dejection is an objective, shared circumstance appropriate to the same reaction in himself, and in others relevantly placed. He may say Yes in such a way as to imply agreement with P's feelings. *Or he may accept the objectivity but reject the attitude, saying No in such a way as to*

indicate that he is contradicting P and thinks P should retract or revise.

Or he may react in neither of these ways.

Hamblin (2019, 74)

In other words, our commitments can be challenged if we are not behaving accordingly: that's what public commitments are about in the first place.

I must remark that this possibility is explicitly denied by most scholars working on exclamations, who only admit questioning the grounds for commitment to *s* (ex. (30) above), but not the commitment itself (Beyssade and Marandin, 2009; Castroviejo, 2008; Trotzke and Giannakidou, 2020). For these scholars, exclamations are performative, and the expression of the attitude enters the CG without discussion, for it is not at issue or addressing the QUD. In the next subsection, I will argue that this position is not correct, and that our normative pragmatic approach based on commitments makes a better prediction.

2.4 Emotions, exclamations, and normativity

The performativist approach considers that the commitment to the truth of a proposition (i.e., a belief) is inherently different from the commitment to a psychological state (i.e., an emotion). However, we know that pure expressives or

even emojis can be questioned or judged false (example (33) is built on an example from Patrick Grosz):

(32)[Context: B is going to vaccinate A] A: Ouch!

B: Come on! It haven't hurt you. I haven't even removed the cap from the needle yet!

(33)[Context: Everybody knows that A loves sunbathing, and A is always happy when it is sunny.]

A: It is sunny 😞

In both cases, we can safely say that A is faking her emotion, hence deceiving us about her real feelings, what could not be possible if speaker's commitments entered the CG for free, without any chance for discussion.

It is important to emphasize that, as already observed by Bach and Harnish (1979: 51), the truth of the expressed emotion is not crucial in many typical expressive speech acts, as far as the social expectations associated with such an emotion are satisfied. They consider the case of apologies, but this seems also true for exclamations. For instance, imagine the following scenario. I have been promoted and my workmates are preparing me a surprise party to celebrate it after lunch. Yet, I discover the preparations. In this situation no genuine surprise is

possible, however I don't want my workmates to feel disappointed: I say nothing, and I behave as if it were a real surprise.

(34) What a wonderful surprise!

Obviously, I am not expressing a genuine feeling, so can we say that (34) is not a true exclamation? I don't think this is a reasonable conclusion, for as far as public commitments are concerned, this speech act is as normative as a genuine expression of surprise, for I am committing myself publicly to act as if I were truly surprised.

What is more, if somebody knew about my acting, she would be entitled to refuse my attitude as false:

(35) A: What a wonderful surprise!

B: You're faking: you are not surprised at all! You knew all the preparations in advance.

A: And you're a jerk! I didn't want to spoil the party.

In plain terms, I was faking my surprise for being polite. Obviously, this can only be possible if commitments are separated from real feelings or attitudes and can function independently as normative courses of action/behavior.

I must emphasize that my proposal does not entail that all commitments are rejected with the same strength.⁵ Indeed, all the instances of rejection of the expressive content we have considered are indirect forms of cancellation (e.g. Come on!), rather than outright rejections (e.g. That's not true!), which are fine with descriptive content (see experimental evidence in Author 2017):

(36) A: How strong this woman is!

- a. B: That's not true! She is not strong at all.
- b. B: #That's not true! You are not surprised at all.

Yet, this is nothing special about exclamations, but rather a consequence of the kind of commitment involved. When an assertive speech act is considered, the strong rejection may affect the propositional content, but it is not felicitous with the speaker's commitment to its truth:

(37) A: Mary is a very strong woman.

- a. B: That's not true! She is not strong at all.
- b. B: #That's not true! You are not surprised at all.

⁵ We must make a distinction between lack of commitment to ϕ and commitment to $\neg\phi$. Only the second would count as rejection. As for ways to avoiding commitment, see Malamud and Stephenson (2015).

The higher strength of subjective-based commitments is unsurprising on pragmatic grounds since disagreement on objective facts is less disruptive on social grounds than questioning the sincerity of the speakers. Hence, politeness joins the play: even though both (37a) and (37b) are face threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1987), open disagreement at the level of personal feelings is much more embarrassing in our cultural background.

Yet, this point is based on intuitions and experimental studies would help us to clarify the issue, as in recent works on the degree of commitment by speakers (Mazzarella et al., 2018; Reins and Wiegmann, 2021; Yuan and Lyu, 2022, among others). Henceforth, a pilot acceptability task was performed with eleven informants, who were tested for four conditions:

(38) How tall Mary is!

1. strong rejection of p : That's not true: she is not tall.
2. weak rejection of p : Come on: she is not tall.
3. strong rejection of s : That's not true: you're not surprised.
4. weak rejection of s : Come on: you're not surprised.

Each condition was presented in two experimental items, and two lists were built with eight fillers each, and a Latin square design. The informants evaluated the degree of adequacy of each rejection on a 7-point Likert scale.

Even though this is a pilot study, results show clear tendencies, which are summarized in Table 1.

Experimental condition	Mean value
strong rejection of p (SY)	5.82
weak rejection of p (WY)	5.73
strong rejection of s (YS)	1.91
weak rejection of s (YW)	4.09

Table 1: Mean acceptance rates of rejection of descriptive and expressive commitments regarding the kind of rejection (weak vs. strong)..

Rejection of the descriptive commitment, either strong or weak, is judged adequate. In the case of the expressive commitments, instead, a clear contrast arises, for weak rejection is accepted, but strong rejection has a score below 2, more than two points below weak rejection.

While I did not perform significance tests, the standard error whiskers in the histogram in Fig. 1 do not overlap with strong and weak rejection of expressive commitments, suggesting that the kind of rejection plays a role. Note, that in the case of descriptive commitments, there is an almost perfect overlap, confirming that the kind of rejection is not relevant in this condition.

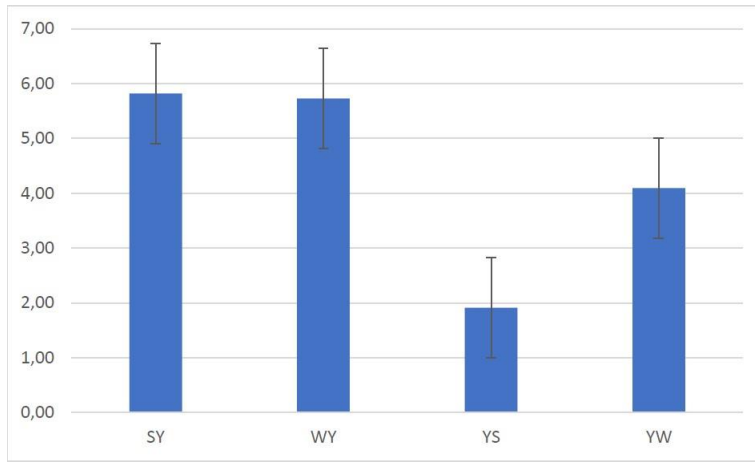


Figure 1: Mean acceptance rates of rejection of descriptive and expressive commitments regarding the kind of rejection (weak vs. strong).

This is just a pilot study, so its results must be taken with caution until a long-scale experiment is performed, but the picture is quite consistent with our previous intuitions that expressive content in general, and commitments to psychological states in particular, can be rejected, even though in a weaker way than descriptive contents are. This is strong evidence for the commitment analysis of exclamations presented here, and bad news for performativist analyses.

3 Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that exclamations involve different levels of meaning, and, consequently, different kinds of commitments. On the one hand,

there is a commitment to a psychological state (expressive content), as in interjections; on the other hand, there is a commitment to a proposition (descriptive content), as in constative speech acts. Moreover, we have contended that both commitments are at issue, and subject to questioning and deception, but not necessarily with the same strength: while commitments to propositions can be strongly and weakly rejected, commitments to psychological states can only be subject to weak forms of rejection.

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