

Expressives in the wild: Extracting pragmatic generalizations from large corpora

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Expressives* are characterized, not by their meanings, but rather by the complex, highly varied conditions that stimulate speakers to use them (Kaplan 1999). This makes them vital to our understanding of how semantic content and pragmatic content influence each other, but it also raises a difficult question: How do we obtain proper empirical support for claims about use conditions? In this talk, we report on our ongoing efforts to address this question through large-scale corpus investigations. These investigations rely heavily on what we know about the linguistics of expressivity and about the texts involved (mostly online customer reviews with associated meta-data), and they are guided by results from statistical natural language processing. We argue that they can help paint an accurate, detailed picture of the expressive realm.

* The class of expressions we have in mind includes swears, honorifics, epithets, probably exclamatives, some uses of diminutives, perhaps many discourse particles, arguably most evidentials, and a host of other morphemes, constructions, and intonational tunes. Potts (2007) offers a working definition.

References

Kaplan, David. 1999. What is meaning? Explorations in the theory of Meaning as Use. Brief version --- draft 1. Ms, UCLA. (For a video recording of Kaplan delivering a newer version: <http://www.uctv.tv/search-details.asp?showID=8593>.)

Potts, Christopher. 2007. The expressive dimension. *Theoretical Linguistics* 33(2): 165-197.