

# Expressive adjectives in Romance

A comparative study



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**UNCENSORED**

In this talk, I will present expressive content, including swearwords and slurs in English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish.

I apologise for any distress caused because of this.

Speakers' attitudes and perspectives are conveyed through expressive language

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Expressivity comes in many forms: interjections, modal particles, fillers, expressive adjectives



The peculiar semantic meaning of expressivity is mirrored by an atypical syntax



In this talk, I examine the syntax of expressive adjectives in Romance showing that they differ in interesting ways from their Germanic counterpart, but also that we can nevertheless identify striking **similarities** between expressive adjectives in these language families



This is a revealing finding by itself, but also in a broader crosslinguistic picture



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How is the speaker's perspective conveyed in language? Is it represented semantically? And syntactically? If yes, how? Does this change how we perceive meaning and syntax, and their relation?

# Outline

- Why expressivity?
- Expressive adjectives
- The data
- Conclusions



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# What is expressivity?

Expressive content conveys the speaker's perspective or attitude

It comes in the form of interjections, expressive adjectives, sentential and modal particles, etc.

# Descriptivity vs expressivity

(1) I witnessed a minor mishap.      DESCRIPTIVE

(2) Oops!      EXPRESSIVE

(Kaplan 1999 quoted in Gutzmann 2019: 2)

SIMILAR MEANING, DIFFERENT WAYS OF CONVEYING IT

# Descriptivity vs expressivity

The **descriptive** function of language describes objects, situations, and is **truth-conditional**

The **expressive** function expresses the point of view of the speaker. It is **use-conditional**, i.e. we need to state when it is felicitous to use an expressive item or not

(Gutzmann 2019: 2, building on Bühler 1934, Kaplan 1999, Potts 2005, 2007, Recanati 2004)

# Truth and use conditions

(3) “I witnessed a minor mishap.”

is **true**,

iff the speaker witnessed a minor mishap.

(4) “Oops!”

is **feliculously used**,

iff the speaker witnessed a minor mishap.

(adapted from Gutzmann 2019: 2)



Kaplan (1999) “The meaning of ouch and oops. Explorations in the theory of meaning as use”

In a nutshell: we can provide a formal approach of expressivity taking use-conditions seriously

# Semantics and... syntax

- Lots of work on the semantics of expressivity (Recanati 2004, Potts 2005, 2007)

- What about syntax?

Hoeksema and Napoli 2008, Napoli et al. 2013, Doliana (2016), Sailor (2017), Gutzmann (2019) a.o.



# Expressive syntax?

- Expressivity as a means to express emotions and attitudes, but still subject to syntax
- Crosslinguistic patterns?
- Interesting learnability questions
- What does this tell us about the Language Faculty more generally?

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# Pure expressive adjectives I

- Pure EAs (Potts 2005, Gutzmann 2019) like *damn*, *fucking*, *freakin'*, *bloody* signal the heightened emotional state of the speaker
- They can convey contempt or anger  
(5) The dog ate the damn cake.  
(adapted from Gutzmann 2019: 87)
- But also positive attitudes in specific contexts  
(6) I absolutely love that freakin' car.

# Pure expressive adjectives II

- Pure EAs convey only expressive meaning, and lack any descriptive content
- They do not specify any characteristic of the individual/object/event denoted, but just express an attitude of the speaker towards it

(7) They stole my freakin' car.

≈ 'I am in a heightened emotional state because they stole my car!'

# Mixed expressive adjectives

- Mixed EAs like *shitty* contribute both expressive and descriptive meaning
- They both specify a characteristic of the individual/object/situation denoted and express an attitude of the speaker towards it

(8) They stole my shitty car.

≈ 'My car is in poor condition and I am heightened emotional state about it being in poor condition!'

# Pure vs mixed expressive adjectives

(7) They stole my freakin' car.

We know nothing about the state of the car.

**Just** expressive content

(8) They stole my shitty car.

We know that the car is in poor condition.

**Both** expressive and descriptive content

Semantic difference is mirrored by syntactic differences

# Pure EAs in English and German

- Gutzmann (2019) analyses the syntax of pure expressive adjectives, showing their peculiarity;
- For instance, they can be found only prenominally
- And they cannot be turned into adverbs

QUESTION: Is this **Germanic** or is this **expressivity**?



# Romance differs from Germanic:

- Pre- and post-nominal position
- Post-nominal focus position (Dam 2018)
- Higher degree of morphological modification
- More overt morphological marking of lexical category

# Adjectives

- Same adjective will get different interpretations according to which position it is merged in

(Svenonius 2008: 37)

- Crosslinguistic studies show that subjective or speaker-oriented adjectives are found higher in the DP

(Hetzron 1978: 178, Subject-Comment FP in Scott 2002)

# Romance allows us:

- To test whether expressive adjectives can occur postnominally
- To test whether expressive adjectives can be morphologically modified
- To test whether the syntax of expressive adjectives has some crosslinguistically stable characteristics

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# English pure expressive adjectives

- In English, there is a morphological distinction between pure expressive adjectives and the deverbal adjectives they are etymologically related to

(9) a. damn/bloody/fucking/freakin'  
b. damned/fucked

# German expressive adjectives

- This is not the case in German, where the same lexical items can have both literal meaning and the expressive one

(10) verdammt/verfickt/verflucht

damned/ fucked/ cursed

‘damn/fucking/damn’

but also literally ‘damned/ fucked/ cursed’

- Same ambiguity in Romance
- The syntactic environment disambiguates



# French and Italian

(11) foutu      French

fucked

‘fucking’

(12) dannato/ fottuto/ maledetto/ benedetto      Italian

damned/ fucked/ damned/ blessed

‘damn/ fucking/ damn/ bloody’



# Spanish

(13) jodido/ puto /maldito/bendito  
fucked/ prostitute/damned  
'bloody/ fucking/ damn' Spanish

(14) chingado/ pinche  
fucked/ crappy  
'fucking/ bloody' Mexican Spanish

# Portuguese

(15) o maldito (do) mosquito  
the damned (of-the) mosquito  
'the damn mosquito'

(Martins, p.c.)

Across Romance

Det-Expressive Noun-of-Noun

# Romanian

Instead of adjective, a binominal construction

(16) cacatul ăla de câine

shit.DEF.M.SG that.M.SG of dog.M.SG

‘that fucking dog’

(Costea p.c.)



# Data from English and Italian

(interpolated from other languages when necessary)

For the full data see Gutzmann (2019) and Cuonzo (to appear)

# Ordering in Germanic

- (17) a. that damn new dog  
b. ??that new damn dog

(Gutzmann 2019: 75)

- (18) a. das verdammte neue Auto  
the damned new car  
'the damn new car'
- b. das neue verdammte Auto  
the damned new car  
'the new damned car' (descriptive meaning)  
'the damn new car' (expressive meaning only if the fact that the car is new is old information)

# Ordering in Romance

(19) a. un fottuto buon caffè

a fucked good coffee

‘a fucking good coffee’

b. \*un buon fottuto caffè

a good fucked coffee

intended ‘a good fucking coffee’

- Same for French and EP
- Ban on having both EA and a descriptive one in prenominal position in BP and Mexican Spanish

# No postnominal position in Germanic

(20) Mary interviewed every candidate possible.

(21) \*Every car damn was destroyed.



# No postnominal position in Romance

(22) a. quel fottuto ragazzo

that fucked boy

‘that fucking boy’

b. quel ragazzo fottuto (\*pure expressive reading)

that boy fucked

‘that screwed boy’ Italian

- Same for French, Spanish, Portuguese

# Focused postnominal position

(23) ?o cemitério MALDITO

the graveyard damned

‘the damn graveyard’

(✓ pure expressive reading in Brazilian Portuguese, \*pure expressive reading in European Portuguese)

(24) \*?el examen PUTO

the exam prostitute

‘the fucking exam’

Spanish (Uriagereka, p.c.)

- Similarly marginal in Italian, ungrammatical in French

# The importance of the comparison I

Romance is a great testing ground:

- The regular postnominal position → descriptive meaning
- The postnominal focused position that shows greater freedom in meaning (see Dam 2018) → very marginal
- So, Romance shows that expressive adjectives are allowed only prenominally and that this is not a specificity of expressive adjectives in Germanic

# Syntax and semantics interaction

Expressive adjectives found very high in the DP:

- shown by ordering restrictions in Germanic
- shown by unavailability of postnominal occurrence in Romance
- Speaker-oriented adjectives found high crosslinguistically (Hetzron 1978)
- Speaker-oriented adverbs equally high
- Relation between speaker and (phase-)edges?

# The importance of the comparison II

- Pure expressive adjectives are not ambiguous in English
- They are in German and Romance
- Contexts in which pure expressive adjectives are ungrammatical in English, we see **descriptive/literal meaning** surfacing in German and Romance → mixed expressive adjectives or even simply descriptive

# No predicative position in Germanic

(23) \*The dog is damn.

(24) Der Hund ist verdammt. (\*pure expressive reading)  
the dog is damned  
'The dog is damned.'

(Gutzmann 2019: 82)

# No predicative position in Romance

(25) Quella casa    è maledetta. (\*pure expressive reading)  
that    house is damned  
'That house is damned.'

- Same across Romance

# No coordination in Germanic

(26) a. \*the damn and freakin' dog

b. \*the damn and young dog

(27) a. \*der verdammte und verfickte Hund

the damned and fucked dog

('the damn and fucking dog')

b. der junge und verdammte Hund (\*pure EA)

the young and damned dog

'the young and damned dog'



# No coordination in Romance

(28) a. il fottuto e maledetto cane (\*pure expressive)

the fucked and damned dog

‘the screwed and damned dog’

b. il fottuto e stupido cane (\*pure expressive)

the fucked and stupid dog

‘the screwed and stupid dog’ Italian

- Same in Spanish
- In French and Portuguese impossible to test coordination of 2 expressive adjectives since there is only one, but no coordination with descriptive adjectives in these 2 languages either

# Stacking in Germanic

(29) the damn fucking car

≈ 'I am in a very heightened emotional state about the car!'

# No stacking in Italian

(30) \*il fottuto maledetto cane  
the fucked damned dog  
intended 'the fucking damn dog'

- Impossible to test in French and Portuguese there is only one expressive adjective

# Stacking in Spanish

(31) esa puta jodida maldita silla

this prostitute fucked damned chair

‘this fucking damn bloody chair’

Peninsular Spanish (Uriagereka, p.c.)

(32) la chingada pinche puta silla

the fucked crappy prostitute chair

‘the fucking damn bloody chair’

Mexican Spanish

# No adverbial modification in Germanic

- (33) a. \*the very/extremely/utterly damn dog  
b. \*the presumably/probably/actually damn dog

(Gutzmann 2019: 79-80)

# No adverbial modification in Romance

(33) \*le très foutu chien

the very fucked dog

intended 'the very fucking dog' French

(34) o muito maldito rapaz (\*pure expressive reading)

the very damned boy

'the very damned boy'

European Portuguese (Martins, p.c.)

- A priori ungrammatical in Italian
- Spanish and BP same as French

# No comparative nor superlative in Germanic

(35) \*the damn-er/-est dog

(Gutzmann 2019: 78-79)

# No comparative/superlative in Romance

(36) \*il più fottuto cane

the more/most fucked dog

intended 'the more/most fucking dog'

(37) il più maledetto cane del mondo (\*pure expressive)

the most damned dog of.the world

'the most damned dog in the world'

- Spanish and French like Italian *fottuto*
- Portuguese like Italian *maledetto*



# -issimo/e l

- Suffix –*issimo/e* derived from the Latin superlative suffix – *issimus/a/um*
- Synchronically it is just an elative and it doesn't build a syntactic superlative
- Especially productive in Italian where it can modify past participles and even nouns
- Fairly productive in Portuguese and Spanish, but it is completely lexicalised in French

(Napoli 2013, Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994)

# -issimo/e in Italian and Spanish

(38) a. quel fottutissimo cane

that extremely.fucked dog

‘that fucking bloody dog’ Italian

(39) a. el putísimo perro

the extremely.prostitute dog

‘the fucking bloody dog’

b. \*malditísimo, \*benditísimo, \*chingadísimo Spanish

# **-issimo/e in French and Portuguese**

(40) \*le foutussime chien

the extremely.fucked dog

intended 'the fucking bloody dog' French

(41) \*o malditíssimo rapaz

the extremely.damned boy

intended 'the fucking bloody boy'

Portuguese (Martins, p.c.)

# Other suffixes

(42) a. **stra**maledett(issim)o

b. **stra**fottut(issim)o

c. **stra**benedetto

d. \***stra**dannato

Italian

(43) a. **re**(**contra**)jodido

b. **re**(**contra**)puto

c. **re**(**contra**)maldito

Peninsular Spanish (Uriagereka, p.c.)

# Morphological modification

- Romance allows for more morphological modification than Germanic
- So, we can determine that expressive adjectives can be modified by intensifier suffixes
- However, we have also seen that pure expressive adjectives in Romance cannot be modified by degree modifiers
- So, these intensifier suffixes are not degree modifiers. They are **speaker-oriented** and probably **expressive** themselves (as argued by Wierzbicka 1986: 302-306)

# No derived adverbs in Germanic

(44) \*Helge sings damnly/fuckingly.

(45) \*Helge singt verdammt/verflucht/verfickt.

Helge sings damnly/ fuckingly/ cursedly

(‘Helge sings damnly/fuckingly/damnly.’)

(Gutzmann 2019: 82)

# No derived adverbs in Romance

(46) \*Maria canta dannatamente.

Mary sings damnly

(‘Mary sings fuckingly.’)

(47) %El jodido Maradona jugaba jodidamente al fútbol!

the fucking Maradona played fuckingly to.the football

‘Fucking Maradona played football as a rascal.’

(\*pure expressive interpretation)

Spanish (Uriagereka, p.c.)

- French like Italian, no form in *–mente* in Portuguese

# Use as intensifiers in Germanic

(48) the freakin' new car

a. ≈ the [freakin' new car]

adjective

b. ≈ the [freakin' new] car

intensifier



# Use as intensifiers in Romance

(49) Quel film è dannatam<sup>mente</sup> bello!

that movie is damnly beautiful

‘That movie is freakin’ beautiful!’

- Same in Spanish and French
- No form in *-mente* in Portuguese

# Use as intensifiers

- Again, Romance allows for more morphological modification than Germanic
- So, when expressive adjectives are turned into expressive intensifiers, this is signaled by the use of the suffix *-ment(e)*
- As before, the underlying behaviour is the same in Germanic and in Romance, but the morphological realization differs

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# Pure EAs in English and German:

- a. can only be found prenominally and preferentially precede all descriptive adjectives;
- b. cannot be found in predicative position;
- c. cannot be coordinated with any other adjective;
- d. cannot be modified by degree modifiers nor by adverbs;
- e. cannot be found in the comparative or superlative grade;
- f. cannot be turned into adverbs;
- g. can be turned into degree modifiers

# Pure EAs in Romance:

- a'. precede all descriptive adjectives, are mainly found prenominally, but can marginally occur in a postnominal focused position;
- b'. cannot be found in predicative position;
- c'. cannot be coordinated with any other adjective;
- d'. cannot be modified by degree modifiers nor adverbs, but can be modified by intensifier suffixes;
- e'. cannot be found in the comparative or superlative grade;
- f'. cannot be turned into adverbs;
- g'. can be turned into degree modifiers adding the suffix -mente.

# Romance peculiarities

- Systematic ambiguity between mixed and pure expressive meaning → resolved by syntactic position
- Marginal availability of postnominal focused position
- Morphological modification with intensifier affixes (*stra-*, *re(contra)-*, *-issimo/e*)
- Use of the suffix *-mente* to mark change in lexical category (from adjective to expressive intensifier)

Comparison between Germanic and Romance:



INTERESTING DIFFERENCES

BUT

UNEXPECTED UNDERLYING SIMILARITIES

Take home message

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If the grammar of expressivity is indeed stable crosslinguistically, what is this telling us about the language faculty?

Forging ahead



How is the speaker's perspective conveyed in language? Is it represented semantically? And syntactically? If yes, how? Does this change how we perceive meaning and syntax, and their relation?

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