

## An Ontological Approach to Affective Utterances

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Formal logical approaches to language have traditionally identified the propositional content of an utterance as the most important dimension of meaning. However, in addition to this propositional *effect*, most utterances also have a non-propositional *affect*, which is to say, our perception of the speaker's attitude and its influence on the listener. The most pointed affective utterances are those that carry a distinct polarity or charge, such as utterances intended to compliment (positive) or insult (negative). Our current research focuses on the latter, as we believe cognitive linguistics can have much to say on this topic.

A study of insults and compliments provides a valuable precursor for the study of irony, sarcasm and verbal humour. Insult terms can be either absolute or relative; absolute terms are those that become entrenched in language with a permanently derogatory meaning, while relative terms are not insulting or negative in themselves, but become so only in relation to other more appropriate or expected terms. For instance, the term "shyster" always denotes a negative category of person, mainly in the legal profession, and so this association should be modelled in absolute terms; in contrast, the term "cook" is not derogatory in itself, but can be perceived as such when the referent is more aptly labelled as "chef". We will argue that an ontological model of word meaning can elegantly accommodate both absolute and relativist forms of affect. Such an ontology will simultaneously organize word meanings at different levels of taxonomic detail, allowing absolute affects to be stored at the most appropriate junctures. Thus, the word "hooch" will become associated with the sub-taxonomy of alcoholic beverages; the word "plonk" with the sub-sub-taxonomy of wines, and so on. Relativistic schemas can also be defined in ontological terms: *leader to non-leader*, *professional to non-professional* and *non-wrongdoer to wrongdoer* each capture a different relativistic strategy for diminishing a referent by denying them some important aspect of status. This allows us to investigate non-literal insults, such as those based on affective analogies like *surgeons are mechanics*.