Not-at-issue processing: More than semantics

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Expressives are speaker-oriented, not-at-issue (NAI) content. How is the expressive dimension (Potts 2007) of language processed and represented? Multidimensional semantic accounts (Potts 2007) remain influential, but several alternatives also exist (e.g. Barker et al. 2010; Schlenker 2010; Frazier et al. 2015/2017). The present study focusses on swear words to offer new insight on this debate. We present findings using a Maze Task, which is comparable to self-paced reading (Forster et al. 2009). Stimuli included 66 **Swear/Descriptive Adj** pairs (e.g. *damn car* vs *old car*), which were preceded by a short context and controlled for frequency and other factors. We predicted that, because expressives reflect NAI content, they will be processed relatively quickly. Behavioural results of 31 participants were analysed using linear-mixed effects modelling in R (Table 1), and show that participants are significantly *faster* for **Swear Adj** than **Des Adj**. Still, even though psycholinguistic factors were controlled for, ultimately e.g. *old* and *damn* are different words. To control for this, RT results on the noun were compared when it was preceded by a Swear Adj or Des Adj, as the noun is the same in both conditions. Here, participants were significantly *slower* for the **Swear Adj** versus the **Des Adj** condition (754 vs. 721 ms). Together, these results show that swear words presented in context facilitates their processing relative to descriptive adjectives, but there is a wrap-up effect downstream. These results are difficult to incorporate into the current semantic-only approaches. We follow Gutzmann (forthcoming) and argue that the results support an agreement-based analysis, accounting for the processing differences in adjective types. We thus contribute a new data set for probing our understanding of the syntactic-pragmatic boundary and its intersection with social meaning.

Table 1: RT in ms for each stimulus type. Significance is with respect to noun as the baseline (0~***, .001~**, .01~*, .05~.).

Det (*The*)	Des Adj (*old*)	Swear (*damn*)	Noun (*car*)
616.3***	988.9***	871.8***	736.2

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