

When is an adjective not an adjective? Stance markers have to go somewhere!

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Conversational English is frequently sprinkled with expletives occurring in various positions within utterances, or as complete utterances themselves, as evidenced in Bergen (2016) and in Bopp's (1992) essay. One notable case, not explored in Bergen, is the expletive *fucking* occurring in the adjective position in an NP, as in the following from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken English (SBC) (Du Bois et al. 2000-2005):

- (1) This is a big fucking fish SBC003
- (2) I didn't have enough judgement to, ... to trade him that fucking machine SCB060

Other expletives can occur in this same position as in:

- (3) That's why nobody fixed up the damn lights outside SBC037

and, of course, regular descriptors occur as the adjective:

- (4) This is a big smelly fish.

In contrast to the descriptive adjective in (4), the expletive in (1) and (2) appears to have no semantic value within the NP whatsoever, meaning that *fucking* is in no way descriptive of *fish*. The questions, then, concern first what the expletive's function might be and second, why it is positioned in the NP. It is possible for an expletive to have at least some descriptive semantic value, as in:

- (5) That's why nobody fixed up the shitty lights outside

where *shitty* offers a descriptive quality to the lights.

Here I argue that the expletive adjective, and especially *fucking*, is a stance marker having wider scope than just the noun in that it is an indicator of the speaker's epistemic stance on the state or event as a whole. Additionally, at the utterance level, it has a focusing function, such that the speaker is commenting on that element of the event as opposed to another, when other positions are possible, for example pre-verbally in (2), so this may explain the adjective-noun positioning. Overall, there appears to be some variation in how these expletives indicate speaker perspective, stance-taking, and semantic value. In this study I take a corpus approach to explore the questions these examples lead to, specifically the Santa Barbara audio corpus and YouTube video recordings, which allow for examination of stance markers such as the expletive itself, its position in the utterance, where stress falls within the intonation phrase, and gestures as stance markers in a multimodal sense. In this way, the composite nature of stance marking illustrates stance-stacking in these utterances, and together build a sense of the relative strength of subjective speaker stance.

References:

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