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Portner, Paul. 2026. The semantics of profane quasi-verbs: Social relations in a dynamic framework. *Semantics and Pragmatics* 19(13). <https://doi.org/10.3765/sp.19.13>.

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The semantics of profane quasi-verbs: Social relations in a dynamic framework *

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Abstract Though profane imprecations like *F*** you!* have received no attention in formal semantics, we might expect our theory of linguistic meaning to have something to say about such common expressions. In this paper, I discuss the nature of the meanings of profane quasi-verbs (Quang 1971) that function syntactically like *f**** in the example above, and I provide a formal model that can account for some important aspects of their meaning and conversational use. This analysis throws light on the role of social relations in semantics and pragmatics.

Keywords: imprecatives, social relations, speech acts, quasi-verbs, social meaning

1 Quasi-verbs

Quang (1971) identified a class of expressions which appear to have ordinary VP-like meanings, but which in fact have a distinctive syntax and semantics. Some of his examples are the following:¹

- (1) a. Fuck you.
- b. Fuck Lyndon Johnson.
- c. Shit on all irregular verbs.
- d. To hell with Lyndon Johnson.

Each of these examples combines a fixed profane expression, labeled a QUASI-VERB by Quang, and a noun phrase; in (1), the quasi-verbs are *fuck*, *shit on*, and *to hell with*. The

* I'd like to thank Liz Camp, Nick Fleisher, Elena Herburger, Larry Horn, Magda Kaufmann, Stefan Kaufmann, Manfred Krifka, Steve Kuhn, Bill Lycan, Miok Pak, and Raffaella Zanuttini, as well as audiences at ZAS, University of Connecticut, University of Maryland, and Yale, for discussion and feedback on this paper or an earlier version of the ideas about social relations that play a role in it. The paper has also benefited from feedback by the reviewers at *Semantics and Pragmatics* and the editor who handled the submission, Elin McCready.

¹ Quang is a fictitious scholar created by James McCawley.

present paper is concerned with the semantics and pragmatics of these quasi-verbs and the expressions of which they are a part.

An IMPRECATION is a sentence used to wish ill of someone, while an IMPRECATIVE is a form that conventionally has such use (as a clause type or sentence mood, cf. Portner 2018). The examples in (1) are imprecatives. Quang suggests the term EPITHET for these imprecatives formed from a quasi-verb and a noun phrase, but as the term ‘epithet’ has more frequently been used as a lexical category,² I employ the label QUASI-VERB IMPRECATIVE, or **qv-imprecative**, instead. The term ‘imprecation’ can also be used for the illocutionary force of wishing ill in whatever way such sentences do (on the assumption that it is a distinct illocutionary force), and for the speech acts performed with this force.

PROFANITY is language which shows disrespect — or more generally which gains its meaning by the fact that it can be used to show disrespect or is perceived by some as naturally or intrinsically showing disrespect — for a deity, religion, morality, or other social customs; a profane word typically comes to meet this characterization by referring to a taboo event or action (e.g. (1a-c)). Example (1a) is a profane qv-imprecative. Quang notes that some examples, such as his example (2a), may be seen as containing non-profane quasi-verbs, though the oddness and sarcastic implications of (2b) raise the possibility that *hooray* is not a quasi-verb, but rather something slightly different:

- (2) a. Hooray for Christine Keeler.
- b. ?Hooray for you.

Sections 2 and 3.1 contain additional discussion of *hooray*.

Quang argues convincingly that qv-imprecatives are not examples of any of the major sentence types:

A sentence consisting of one of these items plus a noun phrase has neither declarative nor interrogative nor imperative meaning: one can neither assert nor ‘answer’ nor ‘comply with’ such an utterance.

(Quang 1971, p. 6)

Though qv-imprecatives clearly do not have the same discourse function as canonical imperatives (as Quang writes, they cannot be “complied with”), their syntactic status seems to vary across languages. In English, they show significant differences from imperatives.

² For example, racial epithets (e.g. Hom 2008) and anaphoric epithets (e.g. Patel-Grosz 2015).

As seen in (3)–(5), they do not reflexivize a second person object, are incompatible with negation, and disallow tags:^{3,4}

- (3) a. Love yourself/*you.
b. #Fuck yourself.
c. *To hell with yourself
- (4) a. Don't close the door.
b. #Don't fuck Lyndon Johnson.
c. *Don't fuck you.
- (5) a. Close the door, won't you?
b. #Fuck Johnson, won't you?
c. *Fuck you, won't you?

In contrast, some of the same imprecative meanings can be expressed in Spanish with a form that looks much more like canonical imperatives. Note that the verbs and reflexives in (6a-b) are the same as imperatives:⁵

- (6) a. ¡Jódete!
fuck.IMP.REFL.2SG
'Go fuck yourself!' (informal)
- b. ¡Jódase!
fuck.IMP.REFL.3SG
'Fuck yourself!' (formal)
- c. ¡Que se joda la clase media!
that REFL.3SG fuck.SUBJ.3SG the class middle
'Fuck the middle class!'

There are other differences between the languages as well. The Spanish forms are sometimes morphologically imperative and sometimes subjunctive, as in (6c). Moreover, the range of

³ The mark # indicates that the example cannot be understood as a qv-implicative. Of course, the #-marked strings in (3)–(4) are grammatical on other readings. Some of the following examples are Quang's, while others are minor variants. Besides its use as a quasi-verb and as a verb referring to a sexual act, *fuck* (optionally with the particle *over*) has an idiomatic interpretation as a verb in which it means roughly 'betray' or 'thwart'. This meaning is intuitively available in (4b) and (5b).

⁴ Interestingly, *(Go) fuck yourself* has a meaning similar to (1a), but the fact that it uses the reflexive shows that it is an imperative with an idiomatic use as an imprecation. Note that *#Go fuck Lyndon Johnson* doesn't have the relevant use as a qv-implicative.

⁵ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for making this point with similar examples. (They cited the voseo form *jodéte* rather than (6a).) Thanks to Elena Herburger for discussion of the Spanish data.

meanings that can be expressed with these qv-implicatives might differ between languages. The meaning of *Fuck the consequences!*, to be discussed in Section 5, cannot be expressed using the imperative form in Spanish.⁶

In what follows, I accept Quang's conclusion that English qv-implicatives are not imperatives. In other languages like Spanish, some of the corresponding forms might be appropriately classified as morphosyntactic imperatives. My goal in this paper is to understand their semantics and pragmatics, and I set aside their morphosyntactic analysis, including the important question of why languages differ in the ways we see with English and Spanish.

As far as I know, qv-implicatives have received no attention in formal semantics. This paper aims to give a precise analysis of their meaning, not only for its own sake, but also because the tools that need to be developed may provide a basis for analyzing other expressions with meanings that do not fit neatly into existing frameworks.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: It discusses some relevant previous work on expressives and profanity in Section 2. As we will see, while the literature includes some important insights, it does not give us the resources we would need for an analysis predictive of the pragmatic functions of qv-implicatives. Section 3 develops a new perspective on the meanings of qv-implicatives; this is followed in Section 4 by a formalization of that perspective and in Section 5 by an attempt to extend the analysis to the full range of qv-implicatives. The paper concludes in Section 6 with some general comments.

2 Previous literature and the expressive approach

While Quang's work is focused on syntactic issues, he makes a brief remark on the semantics of qv-implicatives: "These sentences simply express a favorable or unfavorable attitude on the part of the speaker towards the thing or things denoted by the noun phrase" (p. 6). Many other scholars have made similar claims, typically about swearing in general. Austin (1962) notes that "We may evince emotion in or by issuing an utterance, as when we swear" (p. 566).⁷ Jay & Janschewitz (2008) write that "Swearing is the use of taboo language with the

⁶ The same reviewer describes (i), with the subjunctive, as grammatical:

(i) ¡Que le jodan a las consecuencias!
 that DAT.SG fuck.SUBJ.3PL DOM the consequences
 'Fuck the consequences!'

However, some other consultants describe it as questionable or ungrammatical (even though they accept (6c)). There is clearly interesting work to be done on the syntax and semantics of quasi-verbs in Spanish.

⁷ However, he says here that "we have no use here for performative formulas and the other devices of illocutionary acts."

purpose of expressing the speaker's emotional state and communicating that information to listeners." These descriptions are related to the speaker's emotions. Swearing can also impact the addressee's emotions, and in fact [Pinker \(2007\)](#) considers this to be an essential characteristic. [Roache \(2023\)](#) carefully discusses the role of emotion in swearing, and we will return to her perspective below.

In this section, I evaluate the idea that the meaning of qv-imprecatives is to be analyzed in terms of feelings or emotions expressed by the speaker. In order to do this in a precise way, I build on the theory developed by [Potts \(2007\)](#). In this work, Potts uses the tool of EXPRESSIVE INDICES, elements of the context that represent how one individual feels about another.⁸ According to the most well-known version, these indices are triples of the form $\langle individual_1, interval, individual_2 \rangle$. The interval, which ranges between -1 and 1 , encodes the first individual's feelings or emotions towards the second; positive values represent positive feelings, negative values represent negative feelings, and the intensity of the positive or negative feeling is indicated by the distance of points in the interval from 0 . For example, the index $\langle speaker, [-1, -.75], Johnson \rangle$ indicates that the speaker has strongly negative feelings about Johnson. Let us consider how this theory could be applied to quasi-verbs and qv-imprecatives. I will use this discussion to argue in Sections 2.1–2.2 that we cannot fully capture the meanings of qv-imprecatives in terms of the idea that they express the speaker's attitudes.

As we undertake this evaluation of the expressive approach, it is important to bear in mind that not all work in the expressive index tradition focuses on language that is expressive in the sense of conveying the speaker's feelings. Several scholars, including [McCready \(2019\)](#), [Davis & Gutzmann \(2019\)](#), and [Davis & McCready \(2020\)](#), use the same types of techniques to account for social meaning. For example, [McCready \(2019\)](#) uses a construction from expressive indices (the REGISTER) to model "*a*'s sense of her social relation with respect to *b*." While this line of work has not been applied to quasi-verbs, the way that it conceptualizes the meanings of honorifics is somewhat similar to the ideas developed here. I will incorporate discussion of these "social index" theories in Sections 3–4.

⁸ In his earlier work, Potts treats fully saturated expressive contents as truth conditions. For example, *damn X* says (in the CI-dimension) that the speaker regards the plural individual made up of all individuals in the extension of *X* as 'bad'. He considers the possibility that 'bad' has a negative valence or that it simply means that the speaker has "a heightened emotional state regarding *X*" ([Potts 2005](#): p.168). However, he suggests that we should not take the details of these denotations too seriously: "In any event, to be more precise about the specifics of these meanings would imply a degree of understanding of the semantics of [expressive adjectives] that I do not possess. My interest is in managing the content, whatever it is" (p.168). Because it focuses on the speaker's emotions, this analysis is subject to the same concerns as the expressive index theory discussed in the text.

2.1 The expressive theory

Although Potts does not make a proposal about quasi-verbs, he does consider the related expressive modifiers *damn* and *fucking*. He argues that such modifiers, when combined with a type *e* expression, add an expressive meaning component; they stipulate that the context contains an expressive index representing the speaker's negative feeling towards the referent. For example, *damn Johnson* in (7) updates the context to include an index of the form $\langle \text{speaker}, I, \text{Johnson} \rangle$, where *I* must be a subinterval of $[-1, 0]$.

(7) Damn Johnson is in Texas this weekend.

If we suppose that this sentence is used in a context that already contains (8a), *damn Johnson* may have no effect, since this index is already compatible with the requirements of *damn*.

- (8) a. $\langle \text{speaker}, [-.9, -.1], \text{Johnson} \rangle$
- b. $\langle \text{speaker}, [-.5, .5], \text{Johnson} \rangle$
- c. $\langle \text{speaker}, [-.5, 0], \text{Johnson} \rangle$
- d. $\langle \text{speaker}, [-.9, -.6], \text{Johnson} \rangle$

In contrast, if the preceding context contains (8b), indicating that the speaker has moderate feelings, positive or negative, towards Johnson, the use of (7) will have a contextual effect. The update is not defined in a deterministic way, but the index could plausibly be updated to (8c). Potts captures the fact that *fucking* is stronger than *damn* by saying that it requires that *I* be a narrower negative interval. It also fits with the intended interpretation of expressive indices to require that the interval's mean after the use of *fucking* be more negative than what would be effected by *damn* in the same context; for example, in a context containing (8a), *fucking Johnson* might be seen as updating the index to (8d). A crucial feature of expressive modifiers is that they leave the ordinary, non-expressive meaning of the phrase they modify unaffected and available for further composition. Thus, *damn Johnson* refers (in the non-expressive dimension) to Johnson, even as it does the work discussed above in the expressive dimension.

Within the expressive index theory, one can give a meaning for qv-imprecatives that makes them purely expressive. Given the tools of this approach, it is natural to propose that the quasi-verb *fuck* does nothing but stipulate that the context contain an index representing the speaker's strong negative feeling towards the referent of the noun phrase that follows. For example, (1a) ensures that the context contains a triple $\langle \text{speaker}, I, \text{Johnson} \rangle$, with *I* both narrow and negative. Moreover, since as Quang says “one can neither assert nor ‘answer’ nor ‘comply with’” a qv-imprecative, we would assume that it has no non-expressive meaning.

This expressive meaning analysis has some positive consequences. It treats qv-imprecatives as belonging to a more general class of expressives, explaining their expressive-like properties: Their meanings are, in Potts' terms, independent, nondisplaceable, perspective dependent, descriptively ineffable, immediate, and repeatable. See [Potts \(2007\)](#) for discussion.

Another potential advantage lies in the link to emotion. As noted above, scholars like [Austin \(1961\)](#), [Jay & Janschewitz \(2008\)](#), and [Pinker \(2007\)](#) state that the function of swearing is to express or generate emotions. The expressive index analysis of qv-imprecatives seems well-poised to explain how quasi-verbs, as a type of swear word, do so. If by saying (1a), I update the context to represent that I have a strong negative feeling towards you, this seems like a good basis for inferring that I have a negative emotion. Though there are some details to be filled in, we can record this as a possible advantage of the expressive analysis.

2.2 Problems for the expressive approach

There are, however, problems for the expressive analysis. Some point to weaknesses of the theory that could potentially be ameliorated; others amount to serious, perhaps fatal, problems. All of them reveal features of the semantics and pragmatics of qv-imprecatives that any candidate analysis should contend with.

The first problem for the expressive index analysis of quasi-verbs is that it implies that all negative quasi-verbs have meanings that differ only in intensity in a way that can be modeled by associating them with different intervals. It does not seem likely that this tool is sufficient to capture the differences among the examples in (1).

Potts anticipated this type of limitation as a potential weakness for the expressive index theory generally. He suggests that the specific structure for expressive indices that he proposed should be considered a first sketch, and he notes that the “we are very likely to require a generalization [...] that allows more than just real intervals as the middle coordinate” and that “we might see this very abstract sort of definition replaced by one closer to the theory of cognition” ([Potts 2007](#)).⁹ I think we should accept that the expressive index theory has not provided an adequate analysis of the differences between different quasi-verbs, while acknowledging that an advocate of the theory might hold out hope that an enriched theory of expressive indices will allow a better one to be given in the future.

This leads to the second problem for treating quasi-verbs as expressive of the speaker's attitude. The speaker does not need to have any particular feeling or emotion in order to sincerely use them. [Jay & Janschewitz \(2008\)](#) realize this point when it comes to swearing

⁹ Some proposals for enriching expressive indices in the literature involve adding social information, for example [McCready \(2019\)](#). We will discuss such “social index theories” below.

generally, writing “we argue that swearing [...] may be used with any emotional state” (p. 269). For example, and as pointed out by Roache (2023), in the right kind of informal context, some speakers can use (1a) in a solidarity-building way with friends. To solve this problem, we might say that such a use literally expresses a strong negative feeling, with the solidarity-building effect coming from the fact that the speaker counts on the relationship being strong enough to withstand the momentary shock of the speaker expressing this feeling. I think there’s a lot that’s correct about this way of looking at the situation, but it does remind us that the contextual, interpersonal dynamics that flow from expressing a feeling are not simple, and so an analysis that centers expressiveness and emotion does not fully explain the pragmatics of qv-implicatives on its own. We will discuss this particular case in Section 5.3 below.

A third problem for the expressive analysis sketched above is that it treats the expressive contribution of the modifier (9a) as identical to that of (9b):

- (9) a. Fucking Johnson is in Texas this weekend.
- b. Fuck Johnson.

Though the difference is not yet clear, they are not the same. In some sense, the modifier is more descriptive; it conveys that the speaker has a negative attitude about Johnson, but it doesn’t have any clear interpersonal consequences. In contrast, the use of the qv-implicative is less about what the speaker feels about Johnson, and more about what the speaker wants to do about Johnson. It calls, one might say, for denying Johnson respect and deference (clarifying this characterization will be the main point of Sections 3–4). If the expressive index analysis fully captures the meaning of the modifier, it cannot do the same for the qv-implicative.

A fourth issue for expressive theories is that they do not provide an obvious basis to explain the offensiveness of qv-implicatives. The following is largely derived from a more extensive discussion by Roache (2023).

The offensiveness of quasi-verbs has two different sources. At one level, it can be offensive to merely use a profane word; in this way, an utterance of (9b) could cause offense, even if no one likes Johnson. But at another level, a profane implicative directed at the addressee is even more offensive; for example, unless we are close friends in the kind of informal setting alluded to above, if I utter (1a) towards you, I am presumably intending to cause offense, and will probably succeed. A difference between the two cases is that the former is defeasible, in a way, while the latter is not.

- (10) a. Fuck Johnson! Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to offend.
- b. Fuck you! ??Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to offend.

Example (10b) has something of the character of an epistemic contradiction; it’s an “implicative contradiction”, we might say.

Neither kind of offensiveness seems to arise from the speaker just expressing a negative emotion. Suppose it's already known that the speaker greatly dislikes Johnson; they might still offend a very polite interlocutor by saying (10a). In the case of the addressee-directed version, no matter how clear it is that the speaker dislikes the interlocutor, it adds something to utter (10b). From the addressee's point of view, there's a difference between your letting me know you don't like me with (11a), and your disparaging me with a profane qv-imprecative, (11b).

- (11) a. Oh I so hate you!
b. Fuck you!

The first level of the offensiveness of qv-imprecatives is presumably in some way related to their origin in profane and obscene language. As discussed by Roache (2023), there must be some explanation of the evolutionary path from words that refer to sexual acts, body parts, and bodily functions, to ones that function as quasi-verbs. And as she notes, offensiveness cannot be explained simply by the original descriptive content, because even when used in the "literal", "descriptive" way, these terms are more offensive than synonyms. That is, *fuck* is the offensive, taboo counterpart of *have sex with*, and its taboo-ness and offensiveness facilitates its evolution into a quasi-verb. So, we can assume that the offensiveness of (10a) as a qv-imprecative is due to the offensiveness of the quasi-verb it contains, which is in turn based on the offensiveness of *fuck* as a verb. Of course, while all of this may be correct, it does not yet explain what feature of the meaning, in the broadest sense, manifests in a perception of offensiveness when such expressions are used.

Given that it can be offensive merely to use a profane quasi-verb, we can then ask whether this allows us explain the offensiveness of (1a). Specifically, does the fact that the qv-imprecative is directed at the addressee, in combination with the offensiveness of the quasi-verb *fuck*, explain the non-defeasible offensiveness of (1a) that was illustrated in (10b)? The answer is that it cannot, as argued persuasively by Roache (2023: Ch. 6):

... both expressions express disrespect, but one does so more directly than the other. *Fuck you!* shows another person, in a way that leaves no room for doubt, that the speaker disrespects them or even holds them in contempt; in fact, I hold you in contempt is a reasonable (if clumsy and less expressive) non-swearing translation of *Fuck you!* By contrast, saying 'Lovely fucking weather we're having' does not directly express any negative attitude about the listener. If you end up being offended, it's because you take my choice of words to be inconsiderate of you, and you infer from this that I disrespect you.

In addition to this point, the offensiveness we have been discussing in (10a), which comes from merely using the taboo word, has nothing to do with the noun phrase argument of the quasi-verb. What we need to understand is what *Fuck Johnson!* says about Johnson, and then apply this to the addressee. This will explain the powerful offensiveness of (1a).

Before we move on, I would like to make two notes on the general point that quasi-verbs are offensive. Both have to do with the fact that a qv-imprecative directed at someone other than the addressee can target the addressee “by proxy”. First, there are cases where the addressee is offended through the targeting of someone else. In the preceding discussion, I have tacitly assumed that an imprecative directed at Johnson would not offend the addressee, beyond (potentially) any offense they take at the profanity used. But in a situation where the addressee is a friend of Johnson’s, they might be offended “on Johnson’s behalf”. This feature of language can be vividly observed with qv-imprecatives directed at female family members of the addressee (*Fuck your mother/sister!*).¹⁰

The second note is that a speaker can actually align with the addressee by targeting someone else with a qv-imprecative. If you and I are both opponents of Johnson, my use of *Fuck Johnson!* might lead to a greater feeling of solidarity — you respond with *Yeah, Fuck him!* This type of example also suggests that the meaning of the quasi-verb involves a call to deny the object respect and deference. We will return to this perspective below.

The fifth argument against the expressive index theory concerns the semi-compositional way they interact with arguments of different grammatical persons:

- (12) a. Fuck you.
- b. Fuck Johnson.
- c. Fuck me.
- d. Fuck it.
- e. Fuck.

We have been investigating the meanings of (12a) and (12b), where the arguments are second and third person. We also have (12c) with a first person object, (12d) with an expletive or impersonal object, and (12e), where the object is either null or absent. Each of these have a meaning that differs in an interesting way from (12a-b). Roughly speaking, (12c) is mirative (it means something like “I can’t believe it”); (12d) has to do with action (it roughly means “I am going to do the thing I’ve been hesitating about”), and (12e) has a wide range of uses involving a reaction to immediate circumstances, including some similar to (12c) and others connected to extreme pain or pleasure.

Of particular interest is the difference in meaning between (12a-b) and (12c). Why can’t *fuck* have the same quasi-verb meaning when its argument is *me* as when *you* or third

¹⁰ As Elin McCready points out, *Fuck your father!* is also likely offensive, but because it does not draw on entrenched misogyny in the same way, is less common and less prone to be used as fighting words.

person? According to the expressive index theory, the speaker would be expressing a strong negative feeling about themselves — something that appears to be possible, if not downright common. The theory to be developed in the next section can explain the incompatibility of the basic quasi-verb meaning with first person arguments. We will discuss how the meanings of (12b-d) might be connected to (12a) in Section 5.1.

Other quasi-verbs have similar ranges of uses, though in English *fuck* seems to be among the most flexible. Next consider *damn* and *to hell with*:

- (13) a. Damn you. / To hell with you.
 b. Damn Johnson. / To hell with Johnson.
 c. #Damn me. / #To hell with me.
 d. Damn it. / To hell with it.
 e. Damn. / #To hell (with).

Example (13c) shows that a first person argument is not possible with these quasi-verbs. As seen in (13d), when the object is expletive/impersonal *it*, *damn* and *to hell with* yield different meanings; in the case of *To hell with it*, the meaning is parallel to (12d)'s (indicating that the speaker is overcoming their hesitation to do something), but with *Damn it*, what we see is the meaning like (13a-b) applied to the general situation. In (13e), we see that *damn*, but not *to hell with*, can occur without a noun phrase argument.

The paradigm with *hooray* is rather different:

- (14) a. Hooray for you.
 b. Hooray for Johnson.
 c. Hooray for me.
 d. #Hooray for it. (non-referential *it* is ruled out.)
 e. Hooray.

The meanings of the grammatical examples in (14) are all based on the same core denotation, something like “I publicly approve of”. In (14a-c), the thing approved of is the referent of the noun phrase argument. (In paradigm contexts of use for *hooray*, the speaker is in a group that doesn't include the target of approval, and aligns their approval with the group's; this renders (14c) a bit pathetic.) In (14e), the approval would be offered towards some event given in the context. The fact that *hooray* has the same meaning with a first person argument as with second and third person arguments marks it as different from the quasi-verbs discussed above.

Though in this paper I will not try to give a fine-grained analysis of each combination of a quasi-verb with a distinct type of noun phrase argument, I do return to the paradigm in (12) in Section 5.1 with some ideas about how we might give a unified analysis. For

now, the point is that the range of meanings cannot be readily captured by saying that each qv-implicative expresses a positive or negative feeling towards the referent of its object.

2.3 Naturally occurring examples

In order to hone our intuitions about the function of quasi-verbs, it helps to think about naturally occurring examples. Here I discuss three corpus examples.¹¹

- (15) Children of same-sex couples fare just as well as children of opposite-sex couples, with children of lesbians actually doing better. Way to simultaneously say “**fuck you**” to both same-sex families and descendants of slaves.
- (16) you’re consumers not employees you have the right to say when you are not satisfied with what you paid for and are willing to pay for. . . **fuck you** bein nice for **fuck these guys** you don’t owe them anything!
- (17) My husband wrote off a grand, grand sum of money, (**fuck you**, Lloyds TSB, for practicing irresponsible lending and taking advantage of someone in despair . . .

This is not the place for a quantitative analysis, but at least these examples nicely fit the intuitive characterization that qv-implicatives “deny the addressee respect and deference”. In (15), a blogger is responding to someone who suggests that some same-sex parents should get their kids on the “underground railroad” out of where they live. That person clearly does not have negative feelings about the children or descendants of slaves; rather, they are expressing a view about what keeps oppressed groups safe. But according to the blogger commenting on this opinion, they have disrespected both groups through the comparison, and this disrespect is expressed with “*fuck you!*” With (16), a blogger is complaining about other video gamers being respectful towards a gaming studio that has, according to the blogger, let its customers down. In this passage, *you don’t owe them anything* is essentially a statement of the present proposal. In example (17), a blogger declares that they do not have respect for Lloyds because of what the bank did.

These examples also allow us to consider once again the expressive analysis, which claims that it is the meaning of a qv-implicative to express a negative feeling. Such a characterization is completely wrong for (15). The one whose opinion is restated did not have any negative feelings about these families or descendants; they wanted both to be safe. In (16)–(17), the authors are angry at the target, but in each case this anger is the result of some action that has led to the target losing their claim to respect.

The overall picture is that we can apply the idea that the speaker denies the addressee respect/deference to all of the data. While in many (but not all) examples, the speaker has

¹¹ To avoid cherry-picking, I present the first three examples of the qv-implicative ‘fuck you’ from a COCA search (Davies 2008, accessed 11/23/2025).

negative feelings, the imprecative is used at junctures where the addressee's right to respect is challenged. Hence, we can reasonably conclude that the form's primary meaning has to do with the denial of respect/deference.

2.4 Conclusions from Section 2

In this section, I have argued that we cannot fully explain the meanings of qv-imprecatives in terms of the idea that they express a strong feeling or negative emotion on the part of the speaker. This conclusion provides the motivation for developing a different approach in the next two sections. It should be emphasized, however, that we have not seen an argument for two stronger claims.

First, I am not arguing that qv-imprecatives are not expressive in same way as expressive adjectives; rather, the point is that, whether or not they are expressive, they have some other kind of meaning besides. And second, it's important to keep in mind that I have not argued that other profanities are not expressive or that they have the kind of meaning that qv-imprecatives do; in particular, words that are morphologically related to quasi-verbs (e.g. *fucking Johnson*) could be purely expressive, as on Potts' (2007) analysis.

In what follows, I will focus on saying something new about the meanings of quasi-verbs and the qv-imprecatives they construct. I will no longer consider the meanings of expressive modifiers, and while I will return briefly to the idea that quasi-verbs have an expressive meaning in addition to some other type of meaning in Section 4, it will not be a main theme of the analysis.

3 The meanings of qv-imprecatives

In Section 2, we found a number of clues about how to conceptualize the meanings of qv-imprecatives. In this section, I will attempt to tie these observations together in an analysis of our central examples, (1a-b), repeated as (18a-b).

- (18) a. Fuck you.
b. Fuck Johnson.

My central proposal is that qv-imprecatives constitute an act of denying the referent of their noun phrase argument respect and deference. This idea will be developed as follows:

- i. The context incorporates a representation of SOCIAL RELATIONS between individuals, in particular relations between the interlocutors and other parties (including each other).

- ii. One role of such representations of social relations is to encode what actions (including speech acts) are APPROPRIATE (and what actions are not), given the social relation. Respect and deference are particular patterns of (in)appropriateness.
- iii. Qv-implicatives like (18a-b) PERFORMATIVELY reject the appropriateness constraints of the existing social relation between the speaker and the referent of the noun phrase argument.

Using these ideas, we will be able to give an account of the semantics of (18a-b). The analysis will be formalized and extended to additional examples in Sections 4–5.

3.1 Social relations

Roache (2023) raises the importance of the social relation between speaker and addressee in our attempt to understanding swearing, writing that “the relationship between the person swearing and the person being sworn at . . . makes a huge difference” (p. 103). She points out the fact that, while in cases we think of as canonical, swearing is offensive towards the addressee, in others it can serve to build intimacy and trust. She also highlights the fact that “Only certain speakers can reliably offend people with swearing” (p. 220), while others are denied this power, for example people with disabilities, children, and people speaking a foreign language (to which I would add the homeless and other outcasts). However, while many of Roache’s examples involve quasi-verbs, her discussion concerns swearing in general, and her broad approach leads her to overlook their distinctive semantics.

The idea that semantic and pragmatic theories need to incorporate a model of social relations is not new. The claim has been argued for in previous work on allocutive markers, for example Portner et al. (2019, 2022) and McCready (2019). Portner et al. model social relations as SOURCE FUNCTIONS from eventualities to partial orders (hierarchies) among participants; such functions are also classified for formality. McCready represents social relations as multi-dimensional expressive indices which are reduced to a single REGISTER, which is classified by level of formality. Both systems propose that each allocutive marks a class of social relations, and its use maintains or increases alignment between the contextual social relation and the class so marked. The present paper builds on Portner et al.’s system, but as we are not dealing with allocutive marking, this choice is simply for convenience.

Let’s begin with a few preliminary points about the role of social relations in the meaning of qv-implicatives. The first is that the meanings of qv-implicatives have to do with social relations involving the referent of the noun phrase argument. Let’s start with (18b). Suppose that the speaker is an anti-war opponent of President Johnson. In that case, let us assume for the sake of argument, the existing social relation between the speaker and Johnson is the one that holds between a citizen and the President; it is understood

that citizens have a distant, formal, and respectful relation to the President. If they were to speak to President Johnson, they would use formal address terms (*Mr. President*) and allow him to control the floor. As citizens, they acknowledge the President's right to present his agenda, commit to considering it respectfully and to working within the system to support or oppose it. It is in this context that the speaker's (18b) is interpreted.

In such a context, the speaker's use of (18b) would signal that they reject this way of relating to Johnson. Probably they think it's appropriate, not merely to oppose Johnson's public agenda, but to do so in insubordinate and contemptuous ways. They can disparage his policy and undermine the assumption that those policies are offered in good faith. In other words, the speaker rejects a type of respectful relation to Johnson that might be described as "citizen/leader".

The speaker's rejection of the constraints of the respectful social relation to Johnson could be more or less confined to the local context. They might, after a few belittling comments, return to talking about Johnson respectfully, showing that the background social relation has reasserted itself. Or, at the other extreme, the utterance could be followed by an extended campaign of denunciation and truculent opposition. This shift to a non-respectful social relation could also be limited to certain social situations; that is, the speaker could treat Johnson contemptuously with a certain close group of people, but show respect and deference when surrounded by people with whom they are not so close. We can imagine, for example, a subordinate who has been ill-treated by Johnson; they might say (18b) in private, but maintain a deferential stance in public to further their career or other goals. This just shows that we can maintain multiple social relations to a given individual, with one or another being active at different times (a similar idea is used by [Portner et al. 2022](#) to explain flexibility in honorific usage).

Besides establishing the speaker's own lack of respect towards Johnson, the use of (18b) will frequently present the addressee(s) with the opportunity to adopt the same stance. If used among a group of friends all opposed to the war, the speaker may expect others to second their imprecation. But the utterance can just as easily lead to dissonance with one's audience, for example if the addressee is a known supporter of Johnson or merely someone who is deeply committed to norms of civility. In these cases, the difference between the interlocutors' chosen relations towards Johnson may be a source of conflict.

An immediate advantage of the idea that qv-implicatives have to do with social relations is that it explains the fact that implicative quasi-verbs cannot take first person arguments, as in (12c) and (13c).¹² The reason is simple: We do not have social relations to ourselves, and so there is no social relation between the speaker and the referent of *me* for the quasi-verb to operate on. If this explanation is correct, then we must conclude, based on the fact that

¹² Recall that, though (12c) is grammatical, it has a different, mirative meaning.

hooray is compatible with a first person argument, that its meaning does not involve social relations in the same way.

The way social relations are incorporated into the analysis also captures the intrinsic offensiveness of qv-implicatives directed at the addressee, i.e. (18a). Suppose a married couple is having a disagreement about something trivial. One of the individuals, feeling tired and annoyed about problems at work, goes to too far, saying (18a). If the analysis is correct that the utterance announces that the speaker will not treat their partner with the respect due to one's spouse, we can see why it is offensive. In contrast, on an expressive analysis, it is unclear why the utterance should be so offensive. Given that they are fighting, it's already clear that the speaker has a negative feeling towards the addressee, and even if the qv-implicative conveys that the speaker has a very strong negative feeling, why would this be offensive in a context where this is not new information?

There are situations where we might say that the use of (18a) is not offensive to the addressee, and the analysis in terms of social relation can also explain this. As mentioned above, Roache (2023: Ch. 16) discusses the fact that people who are relatively powerless in society “lose out on being able to offend by swearing”. In effect, such a speaker's attempt to deny their addressee respect is beneath the notice of the addressee. Similarly, a lowly employee may be unable to offend their rich boss. (It is also possible that the addressee would punish the act of insubordination and compel acts of deference, in order to insist on the asymmetrical social relation that flows from their power.) Another is when the addressee can distance themselves from the immediate lack of respect, for example if the addressee is the speaker's therapist. All of these are cases where the speaker challenges the expectations of a polite, respectful, or deferential social relationship in an ineffectual way.

Another commonplace situation where the use of (18a) might not cause offense is the following: Two coworkers have long had a polite but cold relationship. Then, it is revealed that one (“the schemer”) has told derogatory lies about the other (“the victim”) to their boss. The victim then says (18a). Given the situation, the schemer might well not be offended — after all, by spreading lies, they have already failed to treat the victim with the consideration that we normally expect people to offer their coworkers. Instead, the schemer might laugh at their little victory. Nevertheless, the victim's utterance makes sense; they establish the end of a polite relationship that had already been undermined by the schemer's actions. In contrast, the expressive approach does not seem to capture the situation. It's a forceful step for the victim to tear down the facade of the polite relationship; expressing a strong negative feeling would be merely pathetic.

Yet another way in which a profane qv-implicative can fail to be offensive is when close friends use them in a solidarity-building way. I will have some further comments on this and other types of inoffensive uses in Section 5.3, after the formal analysis has been developed.

3.2 Appropriateness

This approach to quasi-verbs asserts that social relations establish restrictions on the range of actions that count as appropriate for the individuals that they relate. Next I will attempt to clarify this concept of appropriateness to an extent that will allow it to play a role in the explanation of the linguistic properties of quasi-verbs.

It's obvious that the way we talk to people depends on our relationship to them, and this makes sense from even the most basic Gricean perspective. I will typically have different reasons for talking to my boss, my child, or a stranger at a sporting event; and so, to the extent that I aim to say things that are relevant “for the current purposes of the exchange” (Grice 1975: p. 308), I will typically say different things to them. However, we are more constrained in our interactions than can be explained by Relevance alone.

As is well known, politeness has a severe impact on what we say—I will not directly tell the President of my University that his breath is terrible, even if it is entirely relevant (because it is impacting his effectiveness in making points that are important to the functioning of the University). But while politeness (as analyzed within Politeness Theory by e.g. Brown & Levinson 1987) makes a very important contribution, it does not fully explain on its own how language users are guided by considerations of appropriateness either. For one thing, the setting and frame matter. Speakers can feel unable to raise certain topics even though what they have to say would not undermine the positive or negative face of their interlocutors; for example, it would be inappropriate to tell a grieving family member at a funeral that they look beautiful. For another, empirical work has shown that the interlocutors' social relationship affects the ways in which they deploy politeness strategies (Wolfson 1989, Kasper 1990). These cases make the point that appropriateness is to a significant degree determined by the broader social environment in which the interaction occurs.

Given the “social” nature of appropriateness, a fully grounded explanation of its nature will likely involve drawing on insights not just from pragmatics, but also sociology and sociolinguistics.¹³ It is beyond the scope of this work to give such an explanation, and so I propose that we content ourselves with defining the role of appropriateness within a structured model of conversation. The idea is that it is a mutually presupposed feature of a conversation that certain acts (including speech acts) are appropriate and others are not; these restrictions of (in)appropriateness are represented in the conversational model (in a way that will be made more precise in Section 4).

¹³ I'd point to the interactional FRAME as particularly important (Goffman 1974), perhaps along with related concepts like ‘footing’ and ‘positioning’ (Goffman 1981, Davies & Harré 1990; see Gordon 2015 for an overview of work in sociolinguistics). Outside of sociology and sociolinguistics, Camp (2019) discusses a relevant but different concept of ‘frame’.

As I have argued above, what matters as we give an analysis of qv-implicatives are considerations of appropriateness derived from our social relations to specific other individuals. For example, if someone says (18a) to a friend, it is the relation between that speaker and the friend that is most relevant. In the case of (18b), it is in the first place the speaker's relation to Johnson, but also as discussed above, possibly their relation to their addressee(s). This makes the point that social relations between pairs of individuals are linked into a network, and that one individual can align or disalign with another not just through the social relations between them, but through the social relations each bears to third parties. Given this complexity, our model of appropriateness will ultimately have to say something about what combinations of social relations are possible (or at least, what combinations are likely) for sets of individuals, in a context.

I have highlighted that it is the social relation that restricts what actions are appropriate, not linguistic forms or speech acts. This point distinguishes the view here from an interesting and otherwise convergent discussion of pronouns by McCready (2019). McCready proposes that a speaker's use of pronouns which mark different levels of "formality"¹⁴ make public their expectations or commitments about one interlocutor's actions towards the other. These expectations are for the kind of behavior that I would describe as "appropriate". For example, she proposes that when a speaker uses a formal first person pronoun, they indicate an expectation that the addressee will "behave formally" towards them (p. 131-3). Yet despite this connection, the analysis as developed below differs from McCready's both in that it gives a formal model of appropriateness and in that it links appropriateness directly to social relations.¹⁵

3.3 Performativity

I think no one would deny that ordinary utterances of qv-implicatives are performative in the Austinian (1961) sense that in using them, a speaker is doing something, performing some sort of action other than describing the world in a way that may be judged true or false. The goal of this paper is to explain the nature of this action and give an analysis of it. However, given that scholars working within the tradition of speech act theory eventually concluded that the distinction between performative and constative utterances was not clear enough to be maintained in the original way, there is more to say about exactly in what sense an utterance of sentences like (18a) is performative.

¹⁴ She mainly discusses *T/V* pronouns in European languages and the more complex paradigms in Japanese.

¹⁵ Note that McCready's ongoing work on this topic has continued to evolve, so what I say here may not apply to it.

Within classical speech act theory, the term ‘performative’ has been relegated to describing only sentences and utterances involving a verb that names the illocutionary act performed by the sentence.

As I shall use these expressions a *performative sentence* is a sentence whose literal utterance in appropriate circumstances constitutes the performance of an illocutionary act named by an expression in that very sentence in virtue of the occurrence of that expression. A *performative utterance* is an utterance of a performative sentence token, such that the utterance constitutes the performance of the act named by the performative expression in the sentence. A *performative verb* is simply a verb that can occur as the main verb in performative sentences. When such a verb occurs in such a sentence in a performative utterance I shall speak of the *performative use* of the sentence and the verb.

(Searle 1989, p. 537)

Within a qv-implicative, the quasi-verb is the relevant expression that might name the illocutionary act performed by the qv-implicative. In other words, if qv-implicatives are to count as performative in Searle’s sense, it must be the case that *fuck*, *shit on*, and *to hell with* name the speech acts performed by the qv-implicative. For example, the claim would be that (18a-b) perform acts of fucking (in a relevant sense). Likewise, (1c) would have to be analyzed as performing an act of shitting on, and (1d) an act named by *to hell with*.

A puzzle for thinking of qv-implicatives as performative in the way understood within classical speech act theory is the fact that they cannot be paraphrased with the full performative formula. Neither of the options in (19) works:¹⁶

- (19) a. *I hereby fuck you (that ...).
b. *I hereby VERB you that fuck you.

The ungrammaticality of (19a) suggests that *fuck* is not a performative verb, whereas the inability to fill in the pattern in (19b) with any actual verb suggests that (18a) does not perform an ordinary illocutionary act. This issue was noticed by Austin, as pointed out in footnote 7.

Though classical speech act theory has an important perspective on performativity, it does not have the only one. Despite its being critiqued by speech act theorists, the original concept of performative sentences is useful and lives on in the semantics literature. For example, Kaufmann (2012) distinguishes descriptive from performative uses of deontic modals, saying that they “can either be used to describe the way the world is with respect

¹⁶ When *fuck* has the non-quasi-verb sense of ‘betray’, it can be used in the pattern (19a).

to all kinds of possibilities and necessities (descriptive usages or descriptive modal verbs), or to change the way the world is in such respects (performative usages or performative modal verbs)” (p. 58). If we apply this intuitive distinction between “describing the world” and “changing the world”, qv-implicatives clearly come out as performative. To the extent that an utterance of (18a) implicates or disparages the addressee, this is more than simply describing the addressee or the speaker’s attitude towards the addressee.

The descriptive/performative distinction is also useful because of its close fit with contemporary dynamic theories of meaning. In terms of such theories, a descriptive use affects only the common ground (or other parallel component, such as the speaker’s belief set). In contrast, performative uses affect other discourse components; in the case of imperatives, for example, they are seen as “performative” because they update a different component, variously described as the to-do list, plan set, or preference structure (Han 1998, Portner 2004, Ninan 2005, Condoravdi & Lauer 2011, Charlow 2014, Starr 2020). A dynamic analysis of qv-implicatives would treat them as affecting a discourse component other than the common ground.

A number of syntactic restrictions on qv-implicatives may be connected to the claim that they are performative. They cannot be negated and their argument can be a universal quantifier but not an existential.

- (20) a. *Don’t fuck you.
b. #Don’t fuck Johnson.
- (21) a. Fuck everyone/all of you.
b. #Fuck someone/some of you.

In these respects, they are similar to explicit performatives.

- (22) *I hereby don’t ask you whether it’s raining.
- (23) a. I hereby ask everyone whether it’s raining.
b. *I hereby ask someone whether it’s raining.

These similarities between qv-implicatives and explicit performatives can be connected to performativity. Negation cannot scope over a constituent whose meaning is a speech act,¹⁷ and this restriction applies equally to (20) and (22).

¹⁷ We often say “negation cannot scope over force”, though this is accurate only if we assume that force is syntactically represented. There are some important issues which are being elided in the text. For example, I am not explicit about what exactly is implied by saying that some constituent’s meaning is a speech act. It could be that the compositional semantics gives such a meaning, or that the compositional semantics gives a denotation to which force is assigned by other components of the grammar. Such subtleties are not crucial to the main point here, which is that qv-implicatives are performative.

When it comes to the quantifiers, the basic fact is similar. As shown in (23), indefinites cannot take scope over the constituent whose meaning is a speech act, while universals can. This difference has been explained by Krifka (2002). He argues that when a universal quantifier takes scope over a speech act, the configuration can be interpreted as a conjunction of acts, whereas there is no way to interpret an indefinite in such a configuration, since disjunction of speech acts is not defined. In light of this analysis, the pattern with qv-implicatives is as expected. In (21), the universal is acceptable, and the indefinite is not because it seeks to implicate a non-specific target.

To summarize this discussion of performativity: qv-implicatives are performative in the sense of the performative/descriptive distinction, and they show diagnostic similarities to explicit performatives.

4 A model of social relations in the common ground

4.1 Outline of the analysis

My claim about the semantics of qv-implicatives can be summarized as follows:

- (24) The use of a qv-implicative performatively rejects some or all of the appropriateness constraints imposed by the active social relation between the speaker and the referent of the quasi-verb's argument.

The goal of this section is to provide a formal model of this claim. I will develop the analysis within a dynamic semantics framework that includes, in addition to the standard common ground/context set, a component that represents some of the linguistically relevant features of social relations among individuals. This component, the PARTICIPANT STRUCTURE (Portner et al. 2019, 2022), models what updates to the context set would be appropriate, given the active social relations. The meaning of a qv-implicative can then be modeled as a function which updates the participant structure to another one, where the social relation between speaker and the target no longer rules out as inappropriate some of the updates that would previously have been inappropriate.

In arguing for a dynamic analysis of qv-implicatives, rather than an expressive index approach, I adopt a point of view similar to Rett's (2021) analysis of expressives. Rett extends the table model of Farkas & Bruce (2010) with "flavored" discourse commitments, proposing that *damn* in (25a) introduces a speaker's commitment to (25b):

- (25) a. Damn, Jane lost the race. (Rett 2021, (43))
b. ⟨is-angry, Jane lost the race⟩

My proposal also extends a structured model of the discourse context, but unlike Rett's proposal, the approach here represents social information in the context, rather than propositional attitudes of the interlocutors. Despite this difference, the extensions are in principle

compatible; a single model could incorporate both flavored propositions for expressive commitments and a participant structure for social commitments.

Before going on to details, I will lay out how the participant structure analysis works for (18a) in schematic form. We begin with a context $c = \langle cs, ps \rangle$ consisting of a context set and a participant structure. Considering the pair of individuals $\langle S, A \rangle$, the participant structure partitions a subset of the context set ($appropriate_c(\langle S, A \rangle)$) is a partition of a subset of cs , and this partition represents appropriate updates that S can make to cs given the currently active social relation between S and A . (Note that this includes not only linguistic updates, changes to cs that can be made by saying things, but also active, direct updates, changes to cs that can be made by doing things in a way that is apparent in the context.) An action is appropriate in the context only if it results in a new context set which “follows the lines” of the partition given in c .¹⁸

Let us assume that one type of update that does not accord with the partition imposed by the social relation is for it to become common ground that S suddenly leaves the room without an exchange of parting words between S and A ; this represents the fact that it would be very rude for S , given their relation to A , to leave the room without saying goodbye.

In this context, S says (18a): *Fuck you*. This utterance performatively changes the social relation active in the participant structure, stripping away some restrictions on what is appropriate; in terms of the model, this amounts to saying that it refines and extends the domain of the partition $appropriate_c(\langle S, A \rangle)$. In the case of this very strongly profane utterance, let us assume that it removes all appropriateness restrictions; in other words, the utterance imposes on the new context $c' = \langle cs', ps' \rangle$ a new participant structure such that $appropriate_{c'}(\langle S, A \rangle) =$ the set of singleton subsets of cs' . The new partition extends the domain of the old one, in that it partitions the entire context set (whereas the prior partition might have just partitioned a subset of the context set), and it refines the partition in that non-singleton cells of the prior partition are broken up into singleton cells in the new one. Now we have a context where S can say or do anything at all, without contradicting what is required by their social relation to A . (This does not imply that S can in fact say or do anything to A . S may be held back by moral or legal constraints, or by the constraints of their social relations to other individuals.) In particular, at this point, it is no longer inappropriate (according to the post-(18a) social relation) for them to leave the room without exchanging parting words, and so it will not be surprising at this point if they do turn and leave without saying goodbye. My contention is that this effectively captures some important aspects of the meaning of (18a).

¹⁸ This use of partitions is inspired by the role they have been put to in modeling SUBJECT MATTERS and related concepts. See, for example, Lewis (1988), Yalcin (2011, 2018), Cariani (2013), van Rooij (2014), Yablo (2014), Hulstijn (2000), Bledin & Rawlins (2020), and Mari & Portner (2021). Previous work has not applied partitions to social aspects of meaning, however.

The proposal that (18a) rejects all constraints on appropriateness that were derived from the social relation between speaker and addressee is convenient for the sake of presentation, since the model provides us with a transparent representation of what such an unconstrained context looks like. So as we develop the formal analysis in this section, I ask the reader to set aside any questions about the precise strength of qv-imprecatives. In Section 5, we will discuss several issues related to this: How to represent the meanings of qv-imprecatives as less than maximally strong within the overall framework that will have been developed, and how to think about uses of qv-imprecatives that are not offensive in the context in which they are used.

The idea that qv-imprecatives remove constraints might seem to have trouble with the observation that it is unlikely that the speaker would do something nice for the addressee after saying (18a). As pointed out by a reviewer, (26) is a bit strange:

(26) Fuck Johnson! I'd sacrifice my life for him.

To begin with, note that the analysis is correct in predicting that it would not be inappropriate for the speaker to say (26), or even to actually sacrifice their life for him (imagine that the speaker is a firefighter and the White House is on fire). That is not the critique; the point is that, in the absence of such special circumstances, (26) strikes us as odd. Yet this observation also fits the analysis. A White House firefighter could say (26), but unlike firefighters and other heroes, ordinary people only sacrifice themselves for people with whom they have a close relationship, like their child. Assuming that the speaker is an ordinary person, it is hard to imagine why they would die for Johnson, when they won't even commit to treating him with basic respect.¹⁹

This analysis allows us to understand better why it is that profane words easily evolve into quasi-verbs. Since profane words originate as offensive words for taboo concepts, simply to utter them often amounts to violating a constraint imposed by the social relation between the speaker and addressee. Then, in their quasi-verb use, they are recoded so that they do not simply run afoul of this one constraint; now they have a meaning that declares void many (or even all) such constraints. The basic taboo-violatingness of *fuck* has been multiplied in the meaning of *Fuck you*.

This observation about the relationship between profanity and the meaning of quasi-verbs contains the seeds of an explanation for why qv-imprecatives are performative. In many instances, by merely uttering the qv-imprecative, the speaker shows that they reject something about the existing social relation, namely the constraint against uttering the profanity, in contexts where profanity is inappropriate. But beyond this, by virtue of the literal meaning of the qv-imprecative itself, the speaker is doing something even more

¹⁹ It should be noted that the overall framework has the capacity to incorporate the idea that qv-imprecatives do not simply remove restrictions on appropriate behavior, but rather modify restrictions. See Section 5.2 for further discussion.

offensive by issuing it:²⁰ the speaker is putting into the conversation something with a meaning that, if it (as the speaker intends) updates the context, rejects the existing social relation and replaces it with one that no longer rules out some previously inappropriate updates. Naturally, this act is seen as even more offensive than uttering *fuck* alone, and by saying (18a), the speaker has rejected this restriction on appropriate behavior as well. In other words, by saying (18a), the speaker has shown that they will follow neither the don't-say-*fuck* restriction on appropriate behavior, nor the don't-profanely-imprecate-your-addressee restriction on appropriate behavior.^{21,22} That's a lot of damage to the social relation! The qv-imprecative is performative basically because this severe taboo-violating act is enough to change the context in accord with the meaning of (18a). I will offer a more precise version of this analysis of performativity below.

4.2 Formalization

Next I would like to show that it is possible to give a formal model of the meaning of qv-imprecatives that reflects the ideas about their meaning that I have set out above. A context is a pair of a context set and participant structure which meets some additional constraints set out below:

$$(27) \quad c = \langle cs, ps \rangle$$

The nature of the context set is familiar. The participant structure is a tuple consisting of two interlocutors and a function ps_r :

$$(28) \quad ps = \langle S, A, ps_r \rangle$$

I label the two interlocutors S and A because I will always assume, for the sake of illustration, that the first interlocutor is the speaker. Of course, to model a real conversation, we need to

²⁰ This way of explaining the offensiveness of the qv-imprecative leaves out a few familiar caveats. Just saying the words without intending to bring about the update encoded in the qv-imprecative's dynamic meaning (for example, in a linguistics talk about profanity) only risks the first kind of offensiveness, the one that comes from violating the taboo against uttering profanity. It does not risk the offensiveness that comes from actually trying to reject the social relation. In my discussion, I focus on instances where the speaker and addressee are mutually aware that the speaker intends to bring about the context change expressed by the qv-imprecative.

²¹ In close relationships, we are sometimes more offended by the fact that the other party said something they knew would upset us than by what they actually said. This point illustrates the importance of the second type of restriction.

²² I leave as an open question whether there is a role in this explanation for a propositional dimension of meaning based on the denotation of the verb *fuck*. For example, it may be that, as part of a multi-dimensional meaning, the qv-imprecative has as one dimension the proposition that the speaker and addressee engage in sexual relations. It could be that evoking this proposition (without asserting it) contributes to damaging the social relation in the way that explains the qv-imprecative's performativity.

The semantics of profane quasi-verbs

track which interlocutor is speaking. The function ps_r maps pairs of individuals (including S and A) into partitions of subsets of the context set.²³

- (29) a. For any context c and pair of individuals $\langle a, b \rangle$ for which it is defined, $ps_r^c(\langle a, b \rangle)$ is a partition of a subset of cs^c .
 b. For any conversational context c , $ps_r^c(\langle S^c, A^c \rangle)$ and $ps_r^c(\langle A^c, S^c \rangle)$ are defined.

The partition represents what updates to the context are appropriate for first individual, given their social relation to the second:

- (30) APPROPRIATENESS
 For any c and pair of individuals $\langle a, b \rangle$ such that ps_r^c is defined:
 c' is an **appropriate subsequent context** of c , relative to $\langle a, b \rangle$, only if for some $C \subseteq ps_r^c(\langle a, b \rangle)$, the context set of c' , $cs^{c'} = \bigcup C$.
 (31) An agent a 's action in context c is an **appropriate action**, given their social relation to b , only if it results in an appropriate subsequent context of c , relative to $\langle a, b \rangle$.

For purposes of the model, we can use $ps_r(\langle a, b \rangle)$ and $ps_r(\langle b, a \rangle)$ together as an approximation of the social relation between a and b .

- (32) SOCIAL RELATION:
 Given any context c and individuals a and b such that $ps_r^c(\langle a, b \rangle)$ and $ps_r^c(\langle b, a \rangle)$ are defined:
 $S_{\langle a, b \rangle}^c$, the **social relation** between a and b in c , is $\langle ps_r^c(\langle a, b \rangle), ps_r^c(\langle b, a \rangle) \rangle$.

As an example, we can consider the social relation that holds between Alice and her mother, Mary. They are on good terms and adhere to traditional standards of decorum and filial piety, so we expect that, as they interact in context c , each of the following is **not** an appropriate subsequent context for $\langle \text{Alice}, \text{Mary} \rangle$:

- (33) Some inappropriate subsequent contexts:
 a. c' that is the same as c except that $cs^{c'}$ is cs^c updated with the fact that Alice has turned away from Mary and walked out the door without any parting words.
 b. c' that is the same as c except that $cs^{c'}$ is cs^c updated with the fact that Alice has said the word *fuck*.

Given (33), it would be inappropriate for Alice to walk out the door without any parting words or to say the profane word in question.

Note that a subsequent context can be inappropriate in two ways. Since $ps_r^c(\langle a, b \rangle)$ is a partition of a subset of cs^c , it would be inappropriate if either the new context set is

²³ Superscripts are used to indicate the particular instance of a discourse component in a given context. Thus ps_r^c is the ps_r function of the participant structure of context c .

not a subset of the part of the old context that is partitioned ($cs^{c'} \not\subseteq \bigcup ps_r^c(\langle a, b \rangle)$) or if it is a subset of the part that is partitioned, but doesn't follow the lines of the partition ($cs^{c'} \subseteq \bigcup ps_r^c(\langle a, b \rangle) \wedge \neg \exists C [C \subseteq ps_r^c(\langle a, b \rangle) \wedge \bigcup C = cs^{c'}]$). Though these both fall under the simple definition of (30), they correspond to different types of notional inappropriateness. The first case represents an action which is completely out-of-bounds (like walking out without parting words); the second case represents a conversational update which is about an inappropriate subject matter (like updating the common ground of your conversation with a grieving family member at a funeral with the proposition that they are beautiful). These two levels are linked: The inappropriateness of the subject matter (e.g. the addressee's physical appearance) might be the basis for an explanation of why the speech act (of the speaker telling the addressee that they are beautiful) is out-of-bounds.

Now we can define the update potential of our central example (18a).

- (34) The update potential of *Fuck you* is that context-update function F such that, for any context c with speaker S and addressee A ,
 $F(c) = c'$, where:
- a. $cs^{c'} = cs^c$, and
 - b. $ps_r^{c'} = ps_r^c$ except that $ps_r^{c'}(\langle S, A \rangle) = \{C : \exists w [w \in cs^c \wedge C = \{w\}]\}$

There are two things to observe about this meaning. First, it makes no change to the context set. This point represents the fact that (18a) contributes no information to the context. It should be noted, though, that whenever (18a) is uttered, some changes to cs will result (just not as a result of the literal meaning of the qv-implicative uttered), at least by incorporating the information that the speaker has said this profane qv-implicative. And second, the new participant structure incorporates a new social relation between S and A , given that the partition $ps_r^c(\langle S, A \rangle)$ has been changed. In (34), we assume that this qv-implicative denotes the update to the social relation which makes it the case that every world in the context set has a singleton cell in the partition. This represents the idea that (18a) completely rejects the appropriateness constraints of the prior social relation — after *Fuck you!*, there's nothing that S could do that would count as inappropriate towards B . (As mentioned, we will discuss some less extreme updates below.) At least it captures the idea that one normally wields this qv-implicative to reject any assumption that one will treat their addressee with politeness, deference, or respect. It will be convenient to have a way to refer to the partition that results from an application of (34), the most refined partition of the context set:

- (35) The MAXIMAL PARTITION:
 For any context set cs , $MAX(cs) = \{C : \exists w [w \in cs \wedge C = \{w\}]\}$.

The remaining steps in building our formal model are devoted to explaining the performativity of qv-implicatives. Recall that the idea we wish to capture is that the manifest

taboo-violation of using a qv-implicative directed at the addressee is sufficient to bring about the effects that would result from accepting its conventional meaning into the context. The typical thing that happens when a speaker utters a qv-implicative Φ with the intention to update the context as per Φ 's dynamic meaning M , is the following:

- i. The context c^0 is first updated to incorporate a variety of manifest facts, including especially the fact that the speaker uttered Φ , resulting in c^1 .
- ii. The context c^1 is then updated with the fact that the speaker intended to update the context further through the update M , resulting in c^2 .
- iii. The context c^2 is then updated to $M(c^2)$, resulting in c^3 .

Step 1 is pretty much inevitable. Step 2 follows if the addressee has no reason to doubt the sincerity of the speaker's utterance of a sentence that is conventionally used to update the context according to M . Step 3 then follows if the addressee either does not object or has no way to object effectually to the final update.

Qv-implicatives are performative because Steps 1-2 render Step 3 superfluous. In other words, if S utters (18a) to A in context c with the intention to bring about the change to ps_r^c given by (34), the resulting context is the same one that would result from incorporating the manifest facts of the utterance, this assumption about intention, and the update (34) into c . In schematic form, the claim is that there are contexts in which (36) and (37) are identical, and that this fact is what makes an utterance of (18a) performative in these contexts:

- (36) The context c^* that results from S uttering (18a) to A in c with the intention of creating a context c' , where:
- a. $cs^{c'}$ entails that S uttered 'Fuck you', and
 - b. $cs^{c'}$ entails that S intended for $ps_r^{c'} = MAX(cs^{c'})$
- (37) $F(c^*, S, A)$, where c^* is the context specified in (36).

In order for the identity of (36) and (37) to hold, certain social facts must be in place. Roughly speaking, the taboos against saying *fuck* and against imprecating your addressee with (18a) must be so strong that, when they are manifest in a context, the social relation is automatically "broken" to the point that it no longer places any restrictions on what the speaker can do. I claim that these facts are, typically, in place (though not always, as we will discuss below). And while these social facts are very strongly motivated by deep psychological and sociological factors, in the end, they are not entailed by those factors. This suggests that there exist some social facts related to the use of language (what we may call 'conventions') that apply to profanity, and specifically to qv-implicatives. The final step of our derivation is to try to characterize these conventions.

The assumption we want to encode is, from the addressee's perspective, 'Given my relationship to S , if S would say *Fuck you* to me, they won't restrict their actions on the basis of their relationship to me at all.' In terms of the formal model:

(38) **Available social relations**

Given a context c , the set $SR(c)$ is the set of AVAILABLE SOCIAL RELATIONS in c .

- $SR(c) \subset \{\langle A, B \rangle : A \in PART(cs^c), B \in PART(cs^c)\}$, where $PART(cs^c)$ is the set of partitions of subsets of cs^c .

(39) **Profanity convention F**

PROFANITY CONVENTION F holds in context c iff

$$(cs^c \subseteq F(c) \wedge \langle ps_r^c(\langle S, A \rangle), ps_r^c(\langle A, S \rangle) \rangle \in SR(c)) \rightarrow ps_r^c(\langle S, A \rangle) = MAX(cs^c)$$

- $F(c)$ = the set of worlds in which S has said 'Fuck you' to A just before the time of c with the intention to bring about its dynamic effect $F(c, S, A)$ in c .

(38) introduces the concept of an available social relation. It is a deep psychological and sociological matter what determines the set of available social relations in a context. We can refer to some of them roughly as we have done so far, with labels like citizen-leader, parent-child, or subordinate-boss. Relations like these are broadly recognized throughout a society, and I tend to illustrate the analysis with them. Others are available only within particular sub-communities or as nonce creations (showing that, in some contexts, there are actions with the power to create new social relations).²⁴ What matters here, and what is represented by $SR(c)$, is that the context (largely though not entirely due to society-level forces) limits the range of social relations that the interlocutors can adopt to a subset of the formally definable ones.

According to (39), there's a Profanity Convention F that holds in certain contexts. Specifically, it holds in c iff every social relation available in c implies that there are no restrictions on S under that social relation in any context in which S has sincerely said (18a) to A . Therefore, if the context is one in which the profanity convention holds, a sincere utterance of (18a) performatively rejects all of the constraints of the existing social relation.

4.3 Connections to theories of allocutivity

The analysis of *Fuck you!* given in this section is the first treatment of the meaning of this particular construction, and as far as I know is the first non-expressive formal analysis of

²⁴ Social relations vary in other ways as well. For example, some relations are rigid, while others are flexible; some are hierarchical, while others are symmetrical; some are entered freely, while others are imposed by forces beyond the individuals' control. It is interesting to consider whether any of these properties of social relations can be modeled logically or put to use in explaining semantic or pragmatic phenomena.

profanity. But as we have seen, the proposals do make contact with the previous literature, in particular with theories of allocutivity (defined to include honorificity). Building on Portner et al. (2019, 2022) and McCready (2019), I assume that social relations should be modeled in pragmatics, and I think those works are correct in saying that allocutive markers both describe and performatively affect social relations. In this way, they are similar to qv-imprecatives, which also performatively affect social relations.

Previous works have differed in how exactly social relations are modeled. Portner et al. use functions ('source functions') from eventualities to discrete partial orderings of the participants in the eventuality. McCready applies triples of expressive indices, each representing an aspect of politeness; the three indices are combined and this value is classified by 'register'. It is these constructs (source functions or registers) that each theory uses to link allocutive expressions with social relations.

In this paper, I have focused on another aspect of social relations, their role in defining what actions are, in a particular sense, appropriate. McCready touches on this aspect when she says that the use of an honorific can make public expectations about how one participant will treat another, but in McCready's work, these expectations are only described in the metalanguage (e.g. *S* "makes public that she will behave (in)formally with respect to" *A*, p. 133). A main contribution of the present paper is to propose that social relations themselves classify actions as (in)appropriate, and to give a formal model of appropriateness.

Overall, we see that imprecatives offer a different perspective on some of the central issues in allocutive semantics: the place of social relations in semantic/pragmatic theory, their role in structuring interpersonal behavior, and the nature of performativity. Even setting aside the particular theory developed here, I hope that the connections among these topics will be explored further.

5 Extensions

In building up a formal analysis, we have focused on the prototype qv-imprecative (1a). We must extend the analysis to three additional types of cases:

- i. qv-imprecatives with third and first person arguments.
- ii. qv-imprecatives with different quasi-verbs.
- iii. Uses of qv-imprecatives which are not offensive in the context in which they are used.

Repeating (1):

- (40) a. Fuck you.
- b. Fuck Lyndon Johnson.

- c. Shit on all irregular verbs.
- d. To hell with Lyndon Johnson.

5.1 Third and first person arguments

So far we have focused on qv-implicatives with second person objects, but they are able to receive a similar interpretation with third person objects that refer to people, as in (40b). Assuming the approach developed here, this shows that the participant structure encodes social relations not just between the interlocutors, but also between the speaker and other individuals. For example, in the context in which (40b) is used, it encodes something about the relation that is assumed to hold between the speaker and Lyndon Johnson.

Let's assume again the type of context described in Section 3: it is the time of Johnson's Presidency, and the speaker is a US citizen opposed to the Vietnam war. In the context, let us assume, it is presupposed that the speaker is related to Johnson through the formal, distant 'citizen/leader' relation, which normatively requires that a citizen speak politely, use formal address terms like *Sir*, and so forth. If the speaker dares to express disagreement with the President about the war, they might say something like (41a), not (41b).

- (41) a. Sir, I believe your policy in Vietnam is misguided.
- b. Asshole, you're a war criminal.

Of course, there are situations in which a speaker would state their opinion with (41b). In these contexts, the speaker adopts a different social relation to the President, one we might refer to as 'dissident/ruler'.

The social relation between the speaker and Johnson plays a role not only if they come into direct dialogue, but potentially also when the speaker talks about Johnson. For example, with a neighbor whose views of the war they do not know, and with whom they want to maintain friendly relations, they might say (42a), not (42b):

- (42) a. The President's policy in Vietnam is misguided.
- b. That asshole Johnson is a war criminal.

But in a conversation with a fellow anti-war activist, in which they have cause to take up the social relation dissident/ruler, they might well say (42b).

The above has provided an argument that there exist contexts which encode a social relation between the speaker, an ordinary anti-war citizen, and the distant, never-met President Johnson. In this type of context, the meaning of (40b), that is the update $F(c, S, Johnson)$, gives a context change that removes any constraints on the speaker's actions due to their social relation to Johnson. We will adapt (34) to give a formalization of $F(c, S, Johnson)$ below.

It is a difficult question whether (40b) is performative in the same way and for the same reasons as (40a) is. In order for it to be performative for the same reasons, (39), Profanity Convention F, would have to be extended to apply not just to A , but to other individuals to whom S bears a social relation as well. Of course, technically we can just declare that this is the case, but some of the motivations for the application of (39) to imprecations directed at the addressee do not hold for, say, Lyndon Johnson. In particular, we can't really say that Johnson would find (40b) so offensive that anyone could infer that the speaker will no longer avoid any action on the basis of their respect for Johnson. After all, the speaker does not offend Johnson, who is not even present, at all.

What the speaker is indicating by saying (40b) has less to do with what they might say or do to Johnson, and more with how they will interact with their addressee in talking about Johnson or planning actions related to Johnson. That is to say, the dynamic effect is related to the participant structure $\langle S, A, ps_r \rangle$, not $\langle S, Johnson, ps_r \rangle$. So, any performative effect involves the addressee's assumptions about the speaker-Johnson social relation encoded in ps_r . And here, we can bring into the discussion a couple of points.

First, the speaker has some control over their own relation to Johnson; if they do not feel respect and do not intend to censor their actions due to any expectation of respect, there may be little the addressee can do about it.²⁵ If the speaker indicates their intention to update the context to one in which they are not constrained to show deference and respect towards Johnson, this is a good reason for the addressee to believe that they will not, and since both interlocutors know this, it's reasonable for them to settle on an updated context in which such constraints are removed. However, this way of describing the situation does not differentiate it from what happens with regular declarations, and in particular it leaves out the role of the taboo-violating and offensive qualities of (40b). As with the addressee-directed qv-imprecative, a speaker's use of (40b) partially achieves its end by virtue of the fact that it is profane. So, it seems there's a convention in place to the effect that, if S is constrained by their social relation to Johnson in any way, they are constrained not to say (40b). This way of explaining the performativity of third person qv-imprecatives points to the need to generalize (39) and some of the other definitions given in Section 4:²⁶

(43) **Profanity convention F'**

PROFANITY CONVENTION F' holds in context c iff

for any individual x such that the social relation between S and x is defined in c ,
 $(cs^c \subseteq FX(c, x) \wedge \langle ps_r^c(\langle S, x \rangle), ps_r^c(\langle x, S \rangle) \rangle \in SR(c)) \rightarrow ps_r^c(\langle S, x \rangle) = MAX(cs^c)$

²⁵ Of course, if the addressee has some power over the speaker, they may be able to force them to act as if they have respect.

²⁶ Here $[x]$ is the token of a phrase that refers to x in the context in which it was uttered.

- For any context c and individual x , $FX(c, x)$ = the set of worlds in which S has said ‘Fuck [x]’ to A just before the time of c with the update potential $F(c, x)$ in c and the intention to bring about update $F(c, x)$ in c .
- (44) The denotation of *Fuck* is that function F from individuals to context-update functions such that, for any argument x and context c ,
 $F(x)(c) = c'$, where:
- a. $cs^{c'} = cs^c$, and
 - b. $ps^{c'} = ps^c$ except that $ps_r^{c'}(\langle S, x \rangle) = MAX(cs^c)$.

From these definitions, we can derive the performative update of (40b).

As seen above in (12), the effect of using a quasi-verb is different when the object is non-animate or first person:

- (45) a. Fuck the consequences.
 b. Fuck it.
 c. Fuck me.

With (45a), the speaker is indicating that they will not be constrained by the consequences of some action they might take; it might be used before doing something with negative consequences, for example skipping a class. (45b) has a similar function, but it is vaguer about the nature of the requirements that they will not be bound by. It is more natural than (45a) in a case where the speaker chooses to give up on trying to do something they wanted to do (for example, if the lid on a jar of pickles they have been trying to open is too tight, the speaker could say (45b) before putting it down in frustration). As noted earlier, example (45c) has a mirative meaning; it is naturally used when the speaker learns something extremely unexpected. There is a commonality between these examples and qv-imprecatives like (40a-b). In the remainder of this section, I aim to articulate this connection and point the way to an extension of the formal analysis.

The common core of these examples can be paraphrased “I will not be constrained by X ”. With (45a), X is the consequences of some action. With (45b), X is more generally a buletic/teleological requirement (for example, the requirement that they need pickles to fully satisfy). With (45c), X is their prior assumptions about some subject matter; saying they will not be constrained by X amounts to rejecting some of those assumptions. Another interesting example, brought up by Elin McCready, is *Fuck my life!*, which means something like ‘I hate my life’ or ‘My life sucks.’ I think that this one is more of an idiom, but its meaning might be derived under the present analysis if we say that, in using it, a speaker tries to reject the constraints of their life; usually this is something they can’t do, so it gives a sense of both dissatisfaction and disempowerment.

The paraphrase “I will not be constrained by *X*” also applies to examples like (40a-b), which the present analysis says have to do with social relations. In our analysis, the social relation between the speaker and another individual specifies what actions they can take, if they are to behave in appropriately (in terms of that social relation). Thus, the paraphrase applies, with *X* being the constraints on appropriate action imposed by the social relation between the speaker and the target.

In order to generalize the analysis given here, therefore, we would say that the object of a quasi-verb always provides constraints on the speaker’s actions, and the use of a sentence headed by that quasi-verb performatively rejects those constraints. In order to formalize this, one would need to give a unified model of all of these types of constraints. Though we cannot go any further with this idea for reasons of space, I suggest that partitions can handle all of the cases. If so, then the general meaning of the *fuck* is to performatively reject the constraints represented by the partition associated with its object.

5.2 Other quasi-verbs

Thus far, we have focused on the very strong quasi-verb *fuck*, and I have analyzed qv-imprecatives as having the strongest possible meaning in the dimension made available by the analysis. This analysis might be too strong for some speakers, and certainly it is too strong to be extended without modification to other quasi-verbs. Now the question arises of how we should treat weaker quasi-verbs, as well as how we should treat *fuck* in the grammar of speakers for whom it is not so strong. Next, I will discuss the analysis of *to hell with* and *damn* in their quasi-verb usage.

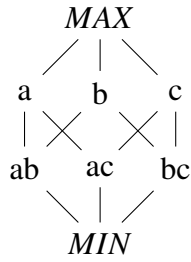
At a most general level, the meaning of a qv-imprecative within this framework is a function that changes the social relation between the speaker and another individual as represented within the current context. The analysis of (40a) given above says that *fuck* [*x*] changes the context by replacing the social relation between speaker and *x* with the least constraining relation representable in the context. However, the framework allows for more possibilities. The meaning of a qv-imprecative can be thought of in a more general way as “shifting” the social relation, where shifting to the maximally unconstrained relation is merely one case. As we look at other quasi-verbs, we can consider what other types of shifts are possible.

It will be useful to label three types of shifts that might be useful in linguistic analysis: additive shifts, sideways shifts, and reductive shifts.²⁷

- REDUCTIVE SHIFT: Only removes constraints (upwards in Figure 1).²⁸

²⁷ I thank Liz Camp (p.c.) for raising the possibility of sideways shifts.

²⁸ The figure is schematic, and I do not mean to commit to representing the space in terms of any particular algebraic structure.



MAX: any action is appropriate

MIN: The fewest actions are appropriate

a, b, c: constraints on appropriate actions

Examples:

Reductive: $a \rightarrow MAX$

Sideways: $a \rightarrow bc$

Additive: $a \rightarrow ac$

Figure 1 Shifting the social relation in social space

- **SIDEWAYS SHIFT**: Both adds and removes constraints (neither upwards nor downward in Figure 1).
- **ADDITIVE SHIFT**: Only adds constraints (downwards in Figure 1).

A reductive shift moves the social relation closer to $MAX(cs^c)$, while an additive shift moves it farther from it. A sideways shift changes the social relation in a way that cannot be described as simply adding or removing constraints, for example from ‘colleagues’ to ‘romantic partners’. The analysis of *fuck* given above is maximally reductive. We can formulate the problem of explaining the meanings of other quasi-verbs as that of determining what types of shifts they produce.

I suggest that sentences headed by *to hell with* are reductive but not necessarily maximal. They might change *ab* to *a* in Figure 1. The following lexical entry will do the trick.

- (46) The denotation of *To hell with* is a function H from individuals to context-update functions such that, for any argument x and context c ,
- $H(x)(c) = c'$, where:
- $cs^{c'} = cs^c$, and
 - $ps^{c'}$ differs from ps^c only in that one or more actions that were inappropriate given ps^c are appropriate given $ps^{c'}$, i.e.
 - $\exists C \exists w, w' [C \in ps^c \wedge w, w' \in C \wedge \neg \exists C' [C' \in ps^{c'} \wedge w, w' \in C']]$

As far as logical relations go, (46) gives the minimum requirement, but we might wonder whether we can specify the nature of $ps_r^{c'}(\langle S, x \rangle)$ more specifically. Does saying (47) lead to a new relation between the speaker and addressee with any particular qualitative character, or is it just made closer to *MAX* in a non-specific way?

(47) To hell with you.

I personally don't detect any particular qualitative character. All I can say is (47) does not suggest as complete and final a rejection of the addressee as (40a).

Now let us turn to *damn*. Although we might expect, on the basis of the relation between damnation and hell, that this quasi-verb would be identical to *to hell with*, in fact the two are quite tangibly different.²⁹

- (48) a. Damn you.
b. Damn Lyndon Johnson.

It's intuitively clear that *damn* is much weaker than the other quasi-verbs, but beyond that, the examples in (48) don't suggest a radical rupturing of the relationship between speaker and target. For example, I could say (48a) to you during a debate about some matter, and then continue with the discussion. In contrast, saying (40a) or (47) would signal that the debate per se is at an end.

I'd like to suggest that we can capture the intuitive meaning of *damn* by associating it with a particular kind of weak reductive shift. Specifically, I propose that (48a) rejects constraints of politeness towards the target, while not rejecting any more fundamental social constraints. To model this type of meaning formally, we need to identify a specific "level" of social relation which represents politeness constraints, and then erase this from the existing social relation between the speaker and target. In terms of Figure 1, suppose that *ab* is the current social relation and *b* represents a hypothetical relation based only on norms of politeness; then the idea is that (48a) shifts the social relation to *a*.³⁰

(49) **Politeness constraints of the social relation:**

For any context c , $P(c, S, x)$ = the partition of cs^c that represents the actions that S can take in c while not violating the politeness aspects of $ps_r^c(\langle S, x \rangle)$.

- (50) The denotation of *Damn* is that function D from individuals to context-update functions such that, for any argument x and context c ,
 $D(x)(c) = c'$, where:

29 (48b) also has a representation as a noun phrase with *damn* as an expressive modifier. This phrase can be used as an exclamation, similar to *That damn Johnson!*

30 The idea that we can change the social relation by subtracting or adding constraints suggests a technically interesting agenda. The representation in Figure 1 points to the possibility of organizing sets of social relations into higher-order algebraic structures. For example, we can consider the possibility that the social relation $ps_r^c(\langle S, A \rangle)$ between S and A in context is the sum of two more basic relations that we may gloss as *POL* ('general politeness (in this culture)') and *FR* ('friends of the same age (in this culture)'). In this way of looking at things, $ps_r^c(\langle S, A \rangle)$ is the sum $POL \oplus FR$; and so the result of subtracting *POL* from $ps_r^c(\langle S, A \rangle)$ is *FR*. More generally, $R_1 \ominus R_2$ is the sum of all of the proper parts of R_1 except R_2 (and its parts), i.e. $\Sigma(\{R : R < R_1 \wedge R \not\leq R_2\})$.

- a. $cs^{c'} = cs^c$, and
- b. $ps^{c'} = ps^c$ except that $ps_r^{c'}(\langle S, x \rangle) = (ps_r^c(\langle S, x \rangle) \ominus P(c, S, x))$

The practical effect of using *damn* could turn out to be more or less dramatic depending on how important the constraints that are removed from the social relation are.

To conclude this discussion of weaker quasi-verbs, I will point out a potential gap in the analysis. According to my intuition, the meaning of *damn* is more “speaker-oriented” than *to hell with* or *fuck*. There’s a strong feeling that (48a) is expressive of the speaker’s anger with the addressee, and in some contexts, this might be the main reason for someone to utter it. In contrast, while its counterparts with *fuck* and *to hell with* can be used to express anger, they are clearly also “addressee-oriented”, in the sense of performatively disrespecting the addressee in the way we’ve been discussing. We can ask whether this difference between *damn* and *to hell with/fuck* can be captured in our overall semantic/pragmatic model.

In Section 2, it was shown that the expressive index theory is not sufficient to fully explain the meanings of quasi-verbs, but as we noted, this did not imply that they do not have expressive meanings. A sentence can well have meanings in both the expressive and other dimensions. I’d like to suggest, without further investigation at this time, that the meaning of *damn* (as a quasi-verb) has a prominent expressive component in addition to its social relation component.³¹ The other quasi-verbs may also have expressive meaning, though in the case of *fuck* I am skeptical, because as we have noted, any such component would be highly variable.

5.3 Inoffensive uses

In canonical cases, a qv-imprecative directed at the addressee is offensive, and the analysis developed here is able to capture the way that this offensiveness is brought about. However, there are contexts in which the use of even the strongest qv-imprecatives like (40a) are not offensive, and the difference between contexts of offensiveness and contexts of inoffensiveness can be explained in terms of the social relation between the speaker and addressee.

We already discussed some of the ways in which qv-imprecatives can fail to be offensive in Section 3. There we mentioned, first, situations in which the addressee simply doesn’t care about what the speaker thinks of them — for example, when the addressee has much more power or when the addressee has already shown their contempt for the speaker. This is a case in which the qv-imprecative has its performative effect, and so everything is in place to give offense, but the target simply does not take offense. A similar case involves situations in which giving offense and refusal to take offense are itself valued. According to

³¹ This point of view might also help explain the differences in (13e).

my sources, in the macho worlds of finance and corporate governance, the use of profane language can serve as a display of power, and to show that one has not taken offense can serve to deny that power. In terms of our formal analysis, these are contexts in which the imprecative has its normal effect, but the addressee simply does not take offense.

A different case is seen with “friendly jabs”. A speaker might use a qv-imprecative directed at a close friend in order to show that, indeed, there are few restrictions on what actions they can take with regard to one another.³² With close friends, we can violate all sort of common social restrictions: we can walk into their home without asking, openly cry, and so forth. Saying “Fuck you” is just another liberty we can take. In this way, using a qv-imprecative to a close friend highlights one of the primary features of the friendship, and thereby strengthens it. In formal terms, the context is one in which the profanity convention does not apply.

6 Conclusion

This paper builds on some previous literature, notably [Quang \(1971\)](#) and [Roache \(2023\)](#), but is the first work on the topic of profane imprecations to attempt an analysis within formal semantics and pragmatics. It has made two main novel claims. First, it has argued that the meanings of qv-imprecatives have to do with the social relation between the speaker and another individual. Specifically, when employed successfully in their normal way, utterances of qv-imprecatives performatively establish a disrupted social relation which no longer constrains the speaker to treat the other individual with the same respect and deference as they did before. And second, it has proposed a formal theory which models this type of meaning using the tool of dynamic updates to partitions.

This work brings into focus the need for future research in several areas. Perhaps most obviously, the theory needs to be tested against data from other languages. Some other issues that have been barely touched are the connections among the social relations between different pairs of individuals in a given context; the psychological/social basis for the special role of profane and obscene terms in the performativity of profane qv-imprecatives; and the relationship between expressive meaning and performative social meaning of the kind studied here. At a broader level, there is work to be done to understand the connections to other linguistic categories, such as address terms, honorifics, and speech act adverbs, that have similarly “social” meanings. In any case, I hope that this study shows that a precise and explanatory semantic/pragmatic theory of qv-imprecatives, and other radically performative, interactional language, is possible.

³² Elin McCready suggests that this case may be related to the phenomenon of reclamation with slurs (e.g. [Jeshion 2020](#)). While there is an intuitive link, there is an important difference in the fact that reclamation involves community-wide coordination on a term that is derogatory of members of that community.

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