

The Epithet *Fucking* and Conventional Implicatures

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1. Introduction

In everyday conversation, when people are emotionally provoked, for example to indignation, they may swear impulsively.

- (1) *Fuck* you, man!
- (2) Dude, it was *freaking* awesome!

The epithets commonly regarded as ‘swear words’ or ‘four-letter-words’ are employed naturally by speakers, and consist of a crucial element of everyday conversations. Generally, such words (*fucking* and *freaking*) are utilised as an intensifier which strengthens one’s voice as exemplified by (1) and (2).

Nevertheless, it is inaccurate to interpret their function as merely an intensifier. (3) is a well-known example of abusive language uttered by the Hollywood actor, Mel Gibson, to a Jewish police officer who stopped him as he was driving drunk.

- (3) *Fucking* Jews...The Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world.

(Retrieved from *The Guardian*, 2006)

(3) conveys the speaker’s malicious sentiment towards the hearer himself and towards the Jewish people as a whole. The fact that Mel Gibson was forced to make a public apology suggests that the utterance was generally regarded as blatant racism. Namely, *fucking*, in this case, not only serves as an intensifier of the qualified noun, *Jews*, but also conveys negative feelings (attitudes) of the speaker towards Jewish people.

This paper focuses on the use of the epithet, *fucking*, and considers its adjectival usage as (3) represents. While the nuance and meaning of *fucking* can be comprehended instinctively, various pragmatic analyses have been proposed. Yet determining which approach is the most valid remains a contested argument. The aim of this paper is to offer empirical evidence in support of the approach of Conventional Implicatures professed by Potts (2005). Furthermore, I will also show that revising the approach of Potts (2005) can resolve its limitation.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 is dedicated to the critique of the various analyses previously put forward. Next, Section 3 discusses Potts's (2005) Conventional Implicatures and presents empirical evidence adopted from music and interviews with informants. In Section 4, I will argue that integrating Grice's (1989) Maxim of Quality in the Cooperative Principle with Potts's (2005) Conventional Implicatures provides a thorough framework to analyse the usage of the epithet, *fucking*. The evidence from the informant interviews will substantiate my argument. Finally, Section 5 concludes my discussion.

2. Previous Analyses

This section provides an overview of a wide range of analyses that are proposed regarding epithets such as *fucking*. One such approach is the paradigm of Conventional Implicatures (CIs) first presented by Potts (2005). Meanwhile, counterproposals of CIs have been advanced by Bach (2006) and Blakemore (2011). While the accounts of Bach (2006) and Blakemore (2011) do not fully explain the use of *fucking*, these issues are resolved by Potts's (2005) Conversational Implicatures.

2.1. Bach (2006)

One approach presented by Bach (2006) investigates the function of epithets in the light of their nature as being more than just expressives in Speech Act Theory. The foundation of Speech Act Theory, first presented by Austin (1962), is to classify the utterances according to their functions. Elaborated from Austin's (1962) work, the notion of expressives is sorted as one of five varieties of speech acts in Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory. According to Searle (1969), the fundamental function of expressives such as *damn* is to state a speaker's emotional state. In this sense, *fucking* can also be regarded as a representative instance of the kind.

Contrary to the characteristics of expressives in Searle's (1969) term, Bach (2006) insists that expressives are not intended to convey speaker's emotions to a hearer. As they are speaker-oriented in a more radical way, they DO NOT implicate anything conventionally. That is, in Bach's (2006) sense, expressives are words which do not communicate anything to a hearer. Expressives are purely an expression of a speaker's feelings.

Nevertheless, (3) substantiates the speaker's intent to communicate his feelings to the hearer in Searle's (1969) sense. The racist nature of the speaker is presupposed from his utterances and attitudes. Thereby, his intention to selectively insult its referent, the Jewish police officer, is exhaustively communicated as an implicature, in addition to the proposition; Jews are evil, derived from the utterance, '*Fucking Jews...*'. Gibson's overt emotional attitude is not only conveyed to the hearer but also, ultimately, to the general public. This is precisely why Gibson owed the public apology, which ultimately illustrates that *fucking* indeed is an expressive, against Bach's (2006) insistence.

Hence, regardless of the presence of a speaker's intention to devise an implicature or not, the analysis of expressives as being simply the means of expressing speaker's feelings in a cathartic way is not sufficient because the intensified adverse (and presumably malicious) feelings of the speaker are conveyed to the hearers.

2.2. Blakemore (2011)

Blakemore (2011) proposes a different approach based on Relevance Theory. Following this approach, Blakemore (2011) argues that expressives such as *well* and *damn* possess 'descriptive ineffability.' Being descriptively ineffable means that such words only encode a procedural meaning rather than a conceptual one. She points out that expressives can exploit both positive and negative connotations depending on their context. Thus, a specific conceptual meaning (either positive or negative), which constrains the process of a hearer inferring an implicature, is not encoded in expressives. If anything, the procedural meaning is encoded for a hearer to presume an implication of a speaker's expressed feelings. The following discussion in this section limits its focus on the use of *fucking* as an intensifier with a negative connotation. In Section 4, I will go on to further probe the use of *fucking* as an intensifier of positive meanings.

(4) summarises the application of Blakemore's (2011) approach to the expressive, *fucking*.¹

- (4) The analysis of *fucking* using the approach of procedural coding in the Relevance Theory
- a. Conceptual meaning: \emptyset

- b. Procedural meaning: encoded to imply and emphasise the speaker's any feelings (positive/negative)

According to Blakemore (2011)'s approach, *fucking* does not have a conceptual meaning. Instead, a procedural meaning which implies emphasised emotions of a speaker is encoded. What is unique in this approach is that both positive and negative feelings of a speaker can be intensified. In other words, the function of *fucking* is understood as similar to that of neutral emphatic expressions such as *very*, and it is not considered to emphasise the negative attitude of a speaker to the qualified noun.

However, from *fucking* in (3), we can sense the indisputable malicious intent of a speaker to a hearer along with a speaker's expression of feelings. This suggests the limitation of Blakemore (2011), in which she disregards the negative attitude of a speaker that *fucking* emphasises. The claim that *fucking* conveys such negative emotions of a speaker can be further corroborated with other examples of an adjectival use of *fucking*. The following (5) is a script adopted from Netflix original series, *13 Reasons Why*. In this scene, Alex was nearly run over by a car that Montgomery and Justin rode on the street, in front of their high school. Alex and Montgomery start a quarrel.

- (5) Alex: The fuck! Man, people are trying to walk here! The fuck is your problem?
Montgomery: Dude, Alex, chill. It's all good.
Alex: Oh, it's all good? You think you can run people over like everyone else at the *fucking* school?
Montgomery: You're tripping, man.
Alex: Okay. Get out of the car. Get out of the car! I'm gonna kick your *fucking* ass! Get out! Get out!

(14:20-, "Tape 1, Side B," *13 Reasons Why*, Season 1.)

Focusing on *fucking* in Alex's second utterance, the noun, *school*, that *fucking* qualifies, does not possess a positive nor negative connotation. However, the state of Alex that he is not happy about the school can be inferred from the fact that he was almost run over by his classmates.

This implicates that *fucking* here can be understood as an intensifier of a speaker's negative emotion. Understanding the effect of using *fucking* as simply emphasising the speaker's emotion glosses over Alex's dissatisfactory feeling towards the school.

Similarly, Alex is not in favour of Montgomery either, so *fucking* in his third utterance can be considered emphatic of his reproachful feeling towards Montgomery. Alex's negative attitude is consistent with the noun qualified by *fucking*, *ass*, which refers to a stupid person. Again, *fucking* intensifies the negative feelings of the speaker.

Another example is (6) from the same drama, *13 Reasons Why*. This is a conversation between a couple, Jessica and Justin. Jessica visited Justin's home without an appointment, and she curses him once he opens the door. The two of them get into an argument.

(6) Jessica: You are such a *fucking* asshole!

Justin: Hey! Hey! Come on!

Jessica: How could you do that for me! What did you tell him?

Justin: What did I tell who?

Jessica: Mr. Porter, what did you tell him yesterday and why haven't you been for school?

Justin: I just needed a day off to chill.

(43:00-, "Tape 1, Side B," *13 Reasons Why*, Season 1.)

In the absence of the preceding utterance, the fact that *fucking* emphasises Jessica's anger and criticism towards Justin becomes evident from Jessica's sudden outburst of her threatening and furious attitude. Her negative emotions are congruous with the qualified noun, *asshole*.

Furthermore, in this example, *asshole* is already emphasised by the determiner, *such*. *Such* can be used to put an emphasis not only for a negative meaning as in (6) but also a positive meaning as in 'He is such a nice person!' In this respect, *such* is one of the emphatic lexical items that can be used whether they qualify positive or negative meaning. Other such emphatic expressions include *very*, *so* and *rather*, to name a few.

(7) is a grammatically incorrect sentence based on the utterance 'You are such a *fucking* asshole!' from (6), in which *fucking* is substituted by *very*.

(7) You are such a very asshole.*

In (6), if a speaker intends to express one's emphatic intention regardless of its positivity or negativity, arguably, it seems sufficient to employ one neutral emphatic expression, *such*, as in 'You are such an asshole'. Plus, if we apply the analysis of procedural meaning, and understand the use of *fucking* as a mere intensifier of a speaker's emotions that can be used no matter how they lean on a positive or negative facet, the fundamental meaning and function of *such* and *fucking* are recognised as the same. If this is the case, it is unnecessary to use two emphatic expressions as (7).

However, in (6), Jessica dared to *use fucking*. This indicates that *fucking* can express extra nuance that neutral emphatic expressions such as *such* cannot. Hence, in order to fully encapsulate the speaker's negative intent in using *fucking*, *fucking* should be interpreted as an intensifier of a speaker's emotion with one's negative intention, not as a mere positive or negative emphatic expression. That is, we need to differentiate neutral intensifiers from *fucking*, and account the negative connotation inherent in *fucking*.

To sum up, from the perspectives of procedural coding in Relevance Theory summarised as (4), the issue arising is that the explanation regarding the effect of *fucking* as a neutral intensifier of a speaker's emotion is insufficient. Since what is implied by *fucking* primarily foregrounds speaker's negative feelings toward the qualified noun, Blakemore's (2011) approach overlooks the negative connotation that *fucking* inherits from its original meaning. How negative connotation of *fucking* derives will be elaborated on Section 3.

2.3. Other Approaches

Other approaches that have been proposed can be seen in Geurts (2007) and Blakemore (2019). Geurts (2007) identifies the vulnerability of Potts's (2005) rigorous dichotomy between expressives and descriptives, arguing that Potts's traits of 'descriptive ineffability,' 'independence property' and 'nondisplaceability' in expressives are unnecessary.² Along with that, Geurts (2007) states that the distinction between propositional versus non-propositional information is expendable in Potts's framework of expressives/descriptives.

Blakemore (2019) altered her position from the analysis using procedural coding (see

Blakemore (2011)) to ad-hoc concepts in Relevance Theory. In Relevance Theory, ad hoc concepts are the socio-temporal interpretation of a word, which involves lexical narrowing and loosening.³ As Blakemore (2019) acknowledges the conceptual meaning that the epithets have, the approach has the same distinction as Potts's (2005) approach of Conventional Implicatures.⁴ Namely, the approach adopting ad-hoc concepts to epithets is identical to Potts's (2005) approach of CIs.

In the previous analyses, the various arguments against Potts's (2005) approach of CIs are proposed. The following section will examine the approach of CIs by Potts (2005), which I will argue can lead to more accurate analysis, compared to the other approaches presented in Section 2.

3. Conventional Implicatures (CIs)

Among the varieties of other approaches presented above, the use of *fucking* is best analysed based on Potts's (2005) approach of Conventional Implicatures.

The notion of CIs was originally articulated by Grice (1989). CIs are derived from a conventional (lexical) meaning of a word used non-truth-conditionally. The function of them is to lead and regulate processes of a hearer apprehending an implication. Grice's (1989) CIs were only applied to limited cases of conjunctions such as *but* and *moreover*. Note that Bach (1999) denies the fact that *but* is a CI, as it is a literal meaning (what is said) which is interpreted semantically. This position is adopted in the approach of Potts's (2005) CIs.

3.1. Potts (2005)

The concise definition of Potts's (2005) CIs is as follows:

- (8) a. Arise from conventional meanings of words (hence are not 'calculable' from conversational maxims), and they are not cancellable
- b. Are 'logically and compositionally INDEPENDENT of what is said (in [Grice's] favoured sense) unlike presuppositions
- c. Speaker-oriented

d. Non-truth-conditional (note that Potts's independence condition replaces Grice's stronger condition (1975/1989: 25) that the falsity of a conventional does not affect the truth of the entire utterance)

(Bach 2006: 2 modified by the author)

Now (9) considers the use of *fucking* in (3), which is an intensifier of a speaker's negative intent aligned with the approach of Potts's (1989) CIs in (8).

- (9) a. Derived from the conventional (lexical) meaning of a word —verb, *fuck*: to have sexual intercourse
- b. Independent from what is said logically and compositionally
- c. Speaker-oriented
- d. Used non-truth-conditionally

(9) exhibits all constituents to be classified as a CI, hence *fucking* is a lexical element encoding negative connotation as a conventional implicature. Accordingly, Potts's CIs are able to explain the negative emotions and attitude of a speaker towards the noun that *fucking* qualifies.

In the previous section, I alluded to the limitations revealed in Bach (2006) and Blakemore (2011). Bach (2006) fails to successfully denote a speaker's feelings conveyed to a hearer whereas Blakemore (2011) is unable to describe the negative meaning registered in *fucking*. However, such weaknesses unveiled in the previous analysis cannot be unearthed in the approach of CIs of Potts (2005). Thus, the CIs in Potts (2005) appear to be the approach that can best portray the phenomenon, in which a speaker's negative intent implied in *fucking* is interpreted by a hearer unlike the other approaches. To further examine the validity of Potts's approach of CIs toward *fucking*, 3.2 and 3.3 explore empirical evidence in depth.

3.2. Merit 1: Similar role of interchangeable words

Empirical evidence can be drawn on to substantiate the validity of the approach of Potts's (2005) CIs. The following compares the lyrics between (10a) the explicit version (original lyrics) and (10b) the clear version (in which epithets in the lyrics are erased and revised for

children) from the same song ‘Payphone’ by Maroon 5.

(10) a. One more *fucking* love song, I’ll be sick (02:00-, “Payphone (Explicit)” Maroon 5.)

b. One more *stupid* love song, I’ll be sick

(01:22-, “Payphone (Clear version)” Maroon 5.)

The epithet, *fucking*, in (10a) is replaced by *stupid* in (10b). Namely, *fucking* and *stupid* are taken to be a set of interchangeable words. The lexical meaning of *stupid* is defined as ‘[only before noun] (informal) used to emphasize that you are annoyed with somebody/something’ (*Oxford Learner’s dictionary*, 2020). In other words, it possesses a negative connotation based on the lexical meaning. Now a similar pragmatic role played by a set of interchangeable words has reassured. That is, in the set of interchangeable words, *fucking* and *stupid*, the negative connotation which *stupid* has is shared by *fucking*. This guarantees the fact that *fucking* is a word in which the negative meaning is encoded. Simultaneously, this evidence affirms the validity of the approach of CIs by Potts (2005).

3.3. Merit 2: Informant check 1 -Negative use of *fucking*

Informant interview data also endorses Potts’s (2005) perspective. The profile of two respondents in the interview is X; a male native Australian English speaker, and Y; a female native American English speaker. Although the interview was conducted individually to minimise the influence of the opinions from another informant, the responses from each informant will be arranged in abreast according to the question, for the convenience of discussion. The interview was structured around discussions regarding six sets of scripts adopted from music, TV series, and real-life communications, including both written and spoken discourses. While the first three scripts contain the utterances with *fucking* as an intensifier of negative meanings, the other three include an intensified positive meaning of *fucking*. Namely, the respondents are asked to answer the interview in regard to both positive and negative usages of *fucking* as intensifiers. Note that, at this point, we are going to only address the use of *fucking* as an intensifier of the negative aspect only. A close examination of the interview concerning the positive facet will be later covered in Section 4.

The interview starts with the respondents agreeing with the understanding that a set of words, *stupid* and *fucking*, seem to be used as almost interchangeable in (10a) and (10b). That is, the informants believe that *stupid* and *fucking* can interchange one another in the case of (10). (11) is the actual responses of the two informants.

(11) X: It's implied to be the same.

Y: To me, I think (10a) sounds angrier that he keeps hearing the love songs. (10b) sounds less angry, but he is also annoyed from love songs... So, in this situation, I think it is interchangeable.

In order to provide similar instances of such interchangeable words, I asked the informants to examine two cases and consider the possible lexical elements that can interchange *fucking* (in which a negative connotation is embedded). Here I asked the informants whether the utterances still convey a similar meaning from the original, if we change each italicised word, *stupid*, to *fucking*.

(12) is a script extracted from a popular America sitcom, *That '70s Show*. Kelso, Donna, Eric and the other friends are at a fancy restaurant since Kelso won money and promised to treat them to dinner. In (12), *Mom* and *Dad* refer to Kelso's friends, Donna and Eric, respectively. Kelso thinks that the idea of 'dine and dash' is something to which parents would object (which is indeed the case).

(12) Kelso: Gee, what a surprise. Mom and Dad don't want to do it.

Donna: We are not Mom and Dad. And we're not leaving without paying, young man.

Kelso: Fine. Fine. I'll pay for the *stupid* dinner. Now just give me your *stupid* keys so I can get my money out of your *stupid* car. Stupid.

(10:00-, "Dine & Dash," *That '70s Show*, Season 3.)

Aligning with (10), both informants confirmed the interchangeability of a set of lexical items, *fucking* and *stupid* with a caveat that *fucking* being angrier or (perhaps excessively) aggressive than *stupid*.

Despite the agreement of their interchangeability between *fucking* and *stupid*, (13) presents a differentiated perspective. (13) is a conversation between a mum and her son about their dinner plan, and (14) is the responses from the informants.

(13) Mum: And you can have a salad.

Son: I don't need the *stupid* salad! Salad is for losers.

(Private communication, 2020)

(14) X: This cannot be interchanged 1) since it's mum. 2) According to Son, in this case, *stupid* salad's *stupid* actually refers to the salad as *stupid*. *Stupid* as in the lexical meaning.

Y: Yes, I think the same thing as well.

With some reservations, we can say that *fucking* and *stupid* are interchangeable. The implications suggested from X's response are two-fold. First is to do with social relationship. Communication is as much as a work of negotiating one's relation with others. Thus, in this case, the power dynamics of the parent-child relation deters the use of *fucking*. Here the idea of 'appropriate' language, namely, a specific desirable register directed according to social conventions becomes salient.

The second is to do with subjectivity. X's understanding of the use of *stupid* as in the lexical meaning suggests that, by using the word, *stupid*, Son can provide a less subjective opinion about salad compared to employing lexical items such as 'yucky', 'not delicious', or even 'shitty' (though the latter is inappropriate to use in this context, as highlighted above). All those lexical items encode negative connotations. Accordingly, one can propose that *stupid* is recontextualised in the narrative where a less straightforward/negative use of language is appropriate/desirable. This utterance can be analysed as a violation of Grice's (1989) Maxim of Quality in the Cooperative Principle, resulting in a weak implicature (see further discussion below). The utterance successfully provides less subjectivity by exploiting *stupid*, allowing Son to exhibit his hatred towards salad more euphemistically. Moreover, the evaluation by X foregrounds the less likelihood of utilising *fucking* instead of *stupid* in this case with respect of social conventions, the modest interchangeability of these two words has been confirmed with Y subscribing to the view.

In Section 3, ample empirical evidence attests to the interchangeability of *fucking* and lexical items which comprise a negative connotation. These pieces of empirical evidence indeed authenticate the validity of Potts's (2005) approach of Conventional Implicatures.

4. Further question

Nonetheless, there is more to discuss. The ground of Blakemore's (2011) argument is that the use of *fucking* is not limited to emphasising negative meanings. This leads to one question: can *fucking* be analysed when it is used as an intensifier of positive meanings?

(15) is a scene from the American TV drama, *Sex and the City*, in which Charlotte tells her friends about Michael, her new boyfriend, as an ideal man.

(15) Carrie (v.o.): And Charlotte, Charlotte was practically engaged. They met the day after I dropped off the edge of the earth... His name was Michael Conway, he was from a good New York family and he absolutely adored Charlotte.

Charlotte: I think this might be it, I think this might be the one.

Samantha: We've met him, he's perfect.

Miranda: Even his *fucking* dog is perfect.

(02 : 00-, "The Monogamists," *Sex and The City*, Season1.)

In the portrayal of Michael, Samantha and Miranda, who have met him in person before, describe him with a solid compliment. In response to Samantha's utterance 'He's perfect,' Miranda utters 'Even his *fucking* dog is perfect' with an intended emphasis on 'his dog.' In this scene, the negative meaning of *fucking* is dismissed. Instead, it expresses a speaker's neutral but intensified baring of emotions.

4.1. Grice's (1989) Maxim of Quality

I claim that the difference between the negative use of *fucking* and the neutral/positive one can be deciphered in terms of the Cooperative Principle advanced by Grice (1989). The Cooperative Principle consists of four maxims: 1) Maxim of Quality, 2) Maxim of Quantity, 3)

Maxim of Relation (relevance), 4) Maxim of Manner. Grice (1989) argues that violating one of these maxims leads to generation of an implicature.

In the utterance ‘Even his *fucking* dog is perfect,’ *fucking* which is supposed to be used primarily in a negative context is consciously deployed. Therefore, the analysis of (15) can be recapitulated as; the violation of the Maxim of Quality (16) creates an implicature (of a positive meaning) based on the meaning of *fucking* as a CI (which encompasses a negative connotation).

(16) Maxim of Quality:

Under the category of Quality falls a supermaxim—“Try to make your contribution one that is true”—and two more specific maxims:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (Grice 1989: 27)

By disobeying the Maxim of Quality, ‘*fucking* dog’ no longer conveys a hearer the literal meaning of *fucking*, which makes the whole utterance to be a false proposition. Then as a hearer recognises that the proposition is false. In this fashion, the true intention of the speaker is conveyed to the hearer as a weak implicature; to express a compliment. Such breaches of Grice’s (1989) Maxim of Quality, in which weak implicatures are fabricated, allow a hearer to infer a speaker’s neutral (sometimes even positive) but emphasised emotions implied in *fucking* beyond the context with negativity.

4.2. Informant check 2 -Positive use of *fucking*

As mentioned previously, this section probes the rest of the informant interview conducted which concerns the usage of *fucking* as an intensifier of positive meanings. A good example of such *fucking* used to put emphasis on the positivity is (15), highlighting Michael’s perfectness including his dog. The question asked is as follows: In this case, possible alternatives of *fucking* seem to be *very* or other neutral intensifiers such as *super* and *so*, not *stupid* as we have seen in (10), (12) and (13).⁵ What do you think?

(17) X: It’s elevating the dog more with *fucking/super* or *so*. It could mean different if it is

stupid, though. ‘EVEN his *fucking* dog is perfect’ could mean ‘*stupid* or *dumb* dog’ if it’s PG (Parental Guidance). ‘Dog’ is referred to as an inferior creature in the context. ‘Even’ implies that the dog is inferior.

Y: Yes. *Fucking* kind of boosts it up, like especially when you are speaking. Americans definitely use *fucking* to emphasize.

The informants approved that *fucking* is used to intensify the meaning as an accentuated alternative of neutral intensifiers. Meanwhile, X further provided an insight into another potential contextualisation scenario in which the context plays a fundamental role. That is, such usage of *fucking* can be also understood as a violation of Grice’s (1989) Maxim of Quality. As such, the utterance produces a weak implicature in which *fucking* functions as a temporal but positive intensifier. This allows *fucking* to discard its negative connotation originally encoded.

(18) is a message sent to the best friend when he heard his best friend got a great job. As the last question, the respondents are again asked to assess whether the utterance can still convey a similar meaning from the original if we change *fucking* to *very* or *super* (although it is grammatically incorrect). (19) are their precise responses.

(18) Friend: OH HELL *FUCKING* YES!!! Congrats boo, so proud of you! Can’t wait to see y’all soon! (Private communication, 2018)

(19) X: Yes. *Hell* is also elevating as it is a swear word.

Y: Not the same? I think because it’s so grammatically incorrect that it doesn’t sound the same to me. For me, I think even saying ‘OHHH HELLLL YEAAAAAAAA’ would convey a similar meaning, instead.

By putting extra emphasis in the prosody on *hell*, Y offered the alternative suggestion to substitute *fucking* while maintaining the same referential meaning. As X remarks, *hell* is also a swear word which plays a similar function as *fucking*. Nonetheless, what needs to be highlighted here is that epithets which emphasise positive meanings could be interchanged with other neutral intensifiers, as confirmed by X.

(20) is another example where *fucking* emphasises a positive meaning in an utterance, extracted from *13 Reasons Why*. Justin is having leftover cut steaks preserved in a food storage container at his friend, Alex's house when he is starving.

(20) Alex: Hey, man, you could choke, so...So, like, don't choke.

Justin: This steak is the shit. Your dad cooks?

Alex: My mom cooks. My dad, he grills.

Justin: I mean it's so *fucking* good!

Alex: Yeah.

(25:20-, "Tape 6, Side A," *13 Reasons Why*, Season1.)

The question here is: if we change *fucking* to *very* or *super* (although it is grammatically incorrect), do you think the utterance still conveys a similar meaning from the original one?

(21) X: Yes, it does. *So fucking* could be *super-duper* if it's PG.

Y: Maybe *super* I think can be almost the same.

As with the previous examples, the interchangeability of *fucking* as an intensifier of positive meanings and the other proximal intensifiers is ratified with the suggestion that *super-duper/super* could be the best alternative in the case of (20).

Furthermore, the follow-up question for Y and the response (22) concern the interchangeability between *fucking* and *stupidly* under the condition of them foregrounding the positive referential meaning. Her feedback correspondingly indicates that *stupidly* itself violates Grice's (1989) Cooperate Principle, creating a weak implicature.

(22) Question: What if we change *fucking* into *stupidly*, do they convey a similar meaning?

Y: Ummm, oddly I think yes. Sometimes people do use *stupid* to emphasize how good things are too.

In reference to Grice's (1989) Maxim of Quality (16), such use of *stupid (stupidly)* as an

intensifier of positive meanings can be analysed. If we contextualise the meaning of the proposition, ‘I mean it’s so *stupidly* good!’ as in the lexical meaning of *stupidly*, it contradicts the truth since the steak tastes scrumptious. Thus, the utterance defies the Maxim of Quality becomes self-evident. Precisely, it is the violation of Maxim of Quality that enables a hearer to infer the weak implicature in which a speaker neatly contributes the truth condition, when a word originally contains a negative connotation (e.g. *fucking*, *stupid*) is utilised to intensify a positive meaning.

To sum up, the usage of *fucking* as an intensifier of positive meanings is a product of violating Grice’s (1989) Maxim of Quality in the Cooperative Principle. The informant interview assured the interchangeability of the use of *fucking* and other neural intensifiers. Moreover, it offered another perspective that not only the epithets but also other lexical elements which encompass a negative connotation can become an intensifier by ostensibly violating the Maxim of Quality in Grice’s (1989) sense.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, among the approaches reviewed, Potts’s (2005) paradigm of Conventional Implicatures is the one that most accurately explains the use of the epithet, *fucking*. The empirical evidence including the informant interview verifies its appropriateness as it corroborates the interchangeability of the *fucking* and other lexical items when *fucking* is used to intensify a negative meaning. Furthermore, to describe the use of *fucking* as an intensifier of positive meanings, I propose to draw on Grice’s (1989) Maxim of Quality in the Cooperative Principle. The accuracy of which was confirmed by the informant interview.

It is beyond the scope of this study to further develop the taxonomy to distinguish when *fucking* is used as its conceptual meaning, conventional implicature, or implicature that can be inferred from violation of the Cooperative Principle (see Hirata (2020) for some discussion on the issue). In order to do so, a closer investigation taking an account of sociolinguistic perspectives may be warranted because the use of swear words is highly differentiated by cultures.⁶ I therefore invite other researchers to conduct further investigation.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Note that, in a dictionary, *fucking* is defined as a word utilised by a speaker to intensify their utterances regardless of its positivity or negativity.

- (i) *fucking*/adjective, adverb (taboo, slang): A swear word that many people find offensive that is used to emphasize a comment or an angry statement (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2020).

The way of interpreting *fucking* prescribed in dictionary meaning is circumscribed only as an intensifier. Hence, it fails to explicate a speaker's negative intent demonstrated though *fucking* in (3) conceived as racism.

² Geurts (2007) is sceptical about Potts's (2005) strict dichotomy of 'expressives' and 'descriptives,' and claims '[d]escriptive ineffability' doesn't draw the line between descriptive and expressive language (Guerts 2007: 210). He also mentions that, the criteria of propositional versus non-propositional information when classifying those two types of words, is seemingly unnecessary.

³ 'Lexical items give access not to ready-made prototypes (assignable by default rules) but to a vast array of encyclopaedic information which varies in accessibility from occasion to occasion, with different subsets being selected ad hoc to determine the occasion-specific interpretation of a word' (Sperber and Wilson 2002: 266). Ad hoc concepts 'warrant the derivation of the cognitive effects required to satisfy the hearer's expectations of relevance' (2002: 266). See more discussion for Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995).

⁴ '[T]he expressive interpretation recovered from the use of epithets such as *the bastard*, *the weird*, *the poppet*, or *the big softy* is derived via the conceptual content they are taken to communicate on a given occasion' (Blakemore 2019: 142).

⁵ Regarding the adjectival use of *fucking* as an intensifier, Holmes (2013: 298) discerns that 'we can generally substitute a word such as *really*, *just* or *absolutely*.'

⁶ Trudgill (1999) argues that informal words including swear words are not the Standard variety of English. The implication here is that a different use of such words signals varied speech styles among different speech communities.