

## “Bastard” and the Strong Contextual Felicity Constraint

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**Background.** A striking characteristic of expressives like ‘that bastard’ is that their expressive content *projects* out of semantic embeddings and becomes hard to address in conversation. In this paper we focus on the question of when one may felicitously refer to somebody using such a pejorative. Tonhauser et al. (2013) claim that pejoratives do *not* impose any strong contextual felicity constraint (SCFC); that is, they claim that an utterance in which a person is being referred to as ‘That bastard’ is acceptable regardless of how the other conversation participants feel towards the person at stake. If that were correct, then such pejoratives would not require the audience to share a certain perspective with the speaker. In our study we faced three research questions: (RQ1) whether expressives like ‘That bastard’ impose a SCFC and, if it is the case, whether (RQ2) the *that-* construction or/and (RQ3) ‘bastard’ alone are responsible of the activation of the SCFC. In this short abstract we address (RQ1) only.

**Our study. Participants.** 90 participants (Italian native speaker) participated as volunteers [MA= 23.59; SD=6.83; 59f; 31m]. The experiment was administered online.

**Stimuli and Method.** We created 8 written vignettes in Italian. Each story was composed of a *context scenario* composed of three sentences followed by a *target sentence*. The context scenarios presented a fictional circumstance introducing a conversation between two individuals speaking about a third person. The target sentence described an utterance of one of the two interlocutors expressing a judgment on the third person. Three independent variables were manipulated: two on the target sentences, one on the scenarios. First, target sentences could express a judgment including either the pejorative expression *stronzo* (Engl. tr. ‘bastard’) (*PEJ*) or a controller sentence including a non-pejorative expression (*CON*). The target sentences could also be realized either with or without a *that-* construction in both conditions *PEJ* and *CON*, for example: *PEJ*: “Marco is a bastard” (it. *Marco è bastardo*); *CON*: “Marco is a Sicilian” (it. *Marco è siciliano*); *That-PEJ*: “That bastard Marco” (it. *Quel bastardo di Marco*); *That-CON*: “That Sicilian Marco” (it. *Quel siciliano di Marco*). Moreover, the information provided in the second sentence of the context scenarios was manipulated in such a way that it generated either a m-positive (m-Pos) or a m-neutral condition (m-Neu). In the former, the second sentence provided the information expressed by either the pejorative or by the non-pejorative expression; conversely, in the latter, no information was provided (see Example 1). This experimental manipulation resulted in a 2x4 Latin square within-subject design where six experimental conditions were considered: m-Pos/*PEJ*, m-Pos/*CON*, m-Pos/*That-PEJ*, m-Pos/*That-CON*, m-Neu/*PEJ*, m-Neu /*CON*, m-Neu /*That-PEJ*, m-Neu/*That-CON*. The procedure consisted in reading the context scenarios. Participants were then asked to rate on a 5-points Likert scale the degree of acceptability of a list of 12 sentences describing utterances of one of the

two interlocutors about the third person of the story. The list contained 11 filler sentences plus the target sentence, presented in random order.

**Rationale of the study.** The study aimed at investigating whether the availability of the relevant contextual information (m-Pos vs m-Neu) is a predictor of the degree of appropriateness of an utterance containing a pejorative expression: a lower average rate in m-Neu condition as compared to m-Pos could be legitimately interpreted as the result of a contextual infelicity prompted by a strong contextual constraint. Note that our paradigm is designed in order to rule out any priming effect generated by the availability of the contextual information in the preceding context: if pejorative expressions impose a strong contextual constraint, then in condition m-Neu we should also observe lower average rates in That-PEJ as compared to That-CON.

**Results.** We analysed whether there are any differences in response combinations between (i) m-POS vs. m-NEU, (ii) That-PEJ vs. That-CON and (iii) PEJ vs. CON. We present only (and all) the significant results. However, we will discuss those related to RQ1 only. First, the two-sided Wilcoxon sum-rank test with Yates' continuity correction revealed that the responses in m-Pos/PEJ significantly differed from the responses in m-Neu/PEJ ( $W(1677)$ ;  $p < 0.0001$ ), with higher rates in m-Pos/PEJ than in m-Neu/PEJ; m-Pos/CON significantly differed from m-Neu/CON ( $W(3254)$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) with higher rates in m-Pos; m-Pos/That-PEJ significantly differed from m-Neu/That-PEJ ( $W(1422.5)$ ;  $p < 0.0001$ ) with higher rates in m-Pos and, finally, m-Pos/That-CON significantly differed from m-Neu/That-CON ( $W(2417.5)$ ;  $p < 0.0001$ ) with higher rates again in m-Pos – see Fig. 1. Second, two-sided Wilcoxon sum-rank test with Yates' continuity correction revealed that the responses in m-Pos/PEJ significantly differed from m-Neu/CON ( $W(1707.5)$ ;  $p < 0.0001$ ) with higher rates again in CON; m-Neu/PEJ significantly differed from m-Pos/CON ( $W(4901.5)$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) with higher rates again in CON and, finally, m-Neu/That-PEJ differed significantly from m-Neu/That-CON ( $W(5523.5)$ ;  $p < 0.0001$ ) with higher rates in m-Neu/That-CON. Interestingly, a significant difference was observed between m-Neu/CON vs. m-Neu/That-CON ( $W(4926.5)$ ;  $p < 0.009$ ) with higher rates in m-Neu/CON – see Fig. 2.

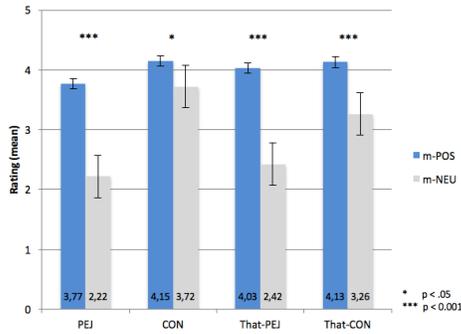
**Conclusion.** *Pace* Tonhauser et al., 'that bastard' (*quello stronzo*) does impose a strong contextual felicity constraint, as it is not really acceptable when uttered in a context neutral with respect to the question whether the target deserves to be regarded as a bastard. Although all sorts of expressions are less acceptable in m-neutral contexts than in m-positive contexts, pejoratives are so in a much stronger way (Fig. 2). Note also that the unacceptability of pejoratives in m-neutral contexts cannot be due to a 'taboo' effect of using a bad word, given that 'bastard' (*stronzo*) is perfectly acceptable in m-positive contexts (i.e. contexts where the person referred to deserves a negative attitude).

**Example 1. The context scenarios:**

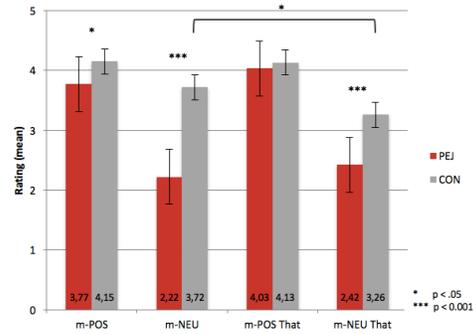
*Pos\_PEJ.* Sara and Luca are at a graduation party. The guest of honour has invited also Marco. Nobody stands him because of his arrogance. When Marco arrives at the party, Luca says to Sara:

*Pos\_CON.* Sara and Luca are at a graduation party. The guest of honour has invited also Marco. Marco is Sicilian and he brought a dessert typical of his place. When Marco arrives at the party, Luca says to Sara:

*Neu\_PEJ/CON.* Sara and Luca are at a graduation party. The guest of honour has invited also Marco. When Marco arrives at the party, Luca says to Sara:



**Fig 1.** Mean rates to the target sentences (PEJ and That-PEJ) vs. controllers in m-POS vs. m-NEU



**Fig 2** Comparison between PEJ and That-PEJ with the controllers in m-POS vs. m-NEU.

**References.** Tonhauser, J., Beaver, D., Roberts, C. and Simons, M. (2013), Toward a taxonomy of projective content, *Lang*, 89 (1): 66-109.