What The F***?
Pragmatics On The Case

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(**Note:** this post discusses analysis of a scene from a TV drama where detectives are investigating a murder. There is repeated swearing in the scene and reference to that swearing here. The scene itself also contains photographs of a murder victim's naked body with bullet wounds).

In a recent book chapter, Erica Gold and Dan McIntyre consider how the interpretation of utterances is affected by the phonetic (acoustic) details of how we say words as well as the words themselves and the context in which we say them. They do this by considering a scene from the TV drama series *The Wire* where the two main characters in the scene, William 'Bunk' Moreland (played by Wendell Pierce) and Jimmy McNulty (played by Dominic West), mainly utter only the word *fuck* and some of its variants (such as *motherfucker*, *motherfuck, fuckity fuck, fuck me* and *fuckin A*) and utter these many times. The scene (with swearing and images of a murder victim's body) is currently viewable at: https://youtu.be/tY_EN4Maobc

In this episode, Bunk and McNulty are going over 'Old Cases' (the title of the episode) and visit a murder scene. As they enter the apartment, Bunk produces photographs of the victim and the scene. As he looks at them, Bunk's first utterance is *'Aww, fuck!'*. McNulty looks at the photographs and says *'motherfucker!'* The two detectives then move around the apartment (mainly the kitchen where the body was found), looking at angles, taking measurements, and reimagining events, watched throughout and in silence by the building super (superintendent). They work out where the bullet must have travelled to and, as a result of this, find a discharged and flattened bullet behind the lining of a fridge door. They then find the bullet's casing outside, behind where the gun was fired. At the end of the

scene, we can infer that the detectives have been successful in working out what happened and that the previous investigation had been bungled.

As Gold and McIntyre point out, this scene can be a useful one for pragmatic stylistic analysis (it's a classic case for a pragmatic stylistic detective!) More specifically, we can consider both how characters in the scene understand each other and how viewers make inferences about what is happening and what is being communicated.

What does it suggest if two characters repeatedly use variants of an attitude-expressing expletive and say very little else? Many examples discussed in work on pragmatics focus on examples like this, considering the effects of not saying things which would have been more informative in particular contexts. If a speaker does not say something we would expect, then there must be a reason for that. In some cases, the hearer will decide that the speaker is suggesting that what they might have said is not true:

| *Adam:* | Is Calum hard-working and talented? |
| *Bella:* | He's hard-working. |

| **Suggests that:** | Calum is not talented. |

In other cases, speakers leave things out because they are confident that their hearers can work out what is missing and infer it, for example:

| *Adam:* | How's Dani getting on with her swimming? |
| *Bella:* | Calum gave her some coaching and she's doing really well |

| **Suggests that:** | It is as a result of Calum's coaching that Dani's swimming is going well. |

The difference between what Bunk and McNulty say in this scene and what we might expect is more significant. Viewers will expect detectives on the case to talk about what they are doing, to advise each other, and so on. Instead, they mainly say *fuck* and variants of that. Most of the few other things they say are arguably not really communicative, e.g. Bunk says *huh* to himself, McNulty makes an onomatopoeic sound to represent the path of a bullet, McNulty says *pow* when imagining the gun firing from outside. Examples which seem to be communicative are a mumbled *uh-uh* when ruling out a hypothesis about where the bullet was fired from and an *mmhm* from Bunk when confirming a different one (although even this is not clearly directed at McNulty). There is some nonverbal communication, including questioning facial expressions and one nodded head. Overall, the content of Bunk and McNulty's utterances is very much less than we would expect.

So what do we infer from the absence of communicated content? Perhaps the main things are that Bunk and McNulty are very experienced and competent, and that they understand each other so well that they don't need to spell things out.

We could also go further and think about weaker implicatures (things we infer which are less clearly the responsibility of the communicators and for which evidence is not so strong). These include inferences about each of the detectives, such as that they are used to seeing horrible things, that they are nevertheless angry and upset about them, that they still carry on and carry out their duties, and so on. We can also make inferences about what the super is thinking as he follows them around, wide-eyed but silent. The super is, of course, partly functioning as an intermediary for the TV audience as we share his position as an onlooker focused on what Bunk and McNulty are doing. To some extent, he supports particular lines of interpretation of the scene.

Gold and McIntyre go further than this, and further than most pragmatic analyses, by considering also the details of the phonetic realisations of utterances. As they point out, when analysts do talk about the ways things sound, they usually focus on intonation (pitch placements and movements) and rhythm. Gold and McIntyre, by contrast, focused on the phonetic details of the sounds themselves.

Like the detectives, Gold and McIntyre were very systematic in carrying out their analysis, identifying each occurrence of *fuck*, assigning it to a pragmatic category, and considering the acoustics of each realisation of the word. They counted and classified each utterance according to what they assumed the effects of the utterance were (inferring this from the context each time). Their classifications were: **disbelief** (e.g. *fuck me* when the bullet is found in the fridge door), **insult** (e.g. *motherfucker* where we assume this is referring to the killer), **functional** (modifying another word or expressing pain, e.g. when McNulty hurts his thumb using the tape measure), **surprise/realisation** (saying *motherfuck* when realising the trajectory of the bullet), and **idiomatic** (used in a fixed phrase like *fuckin A*).

It is clear that there is variation in the exact articulation of the /f/ and the /k/ sounds at the end of each *fuck*. For example, in Bunk's first utterance, where he says *'aw fuck!'* the /f/ is drawn out with stronger frication than other examples and the /k/ has both aspiration and frication which makes it sound a bit like the (uvular fricative) sound at the end of a traditional Scots pronunciation of *loch*. However, Gold and McIntrye focused only on the vowel /ʌ/ (pronounced as in *cup* or *duck* in most Southern British English varieties) for practical reasons, i.e. because the details of /f/ and /k/ in the recording are harder to identify clearly.

After categorising the pragmatic effects of each utterance and analysing each vowel acoustically, the next step was to consider what correlations or correspondences there were between acoustic realisations and pragmatic effects.

Their first finding was that, while there were slight differences between the speakers, the vowel quality did not vary significantly across utterances and for both speakers it always sounded like /ʌ/ and never, for example, like /ɑ/ (as in Southern British English *father*) or /ɛ/ (as in Southern British English *dress*).

Next, they considered vowel duration (the amount of time that elapsed between the beginning and the end of each vowel). McNulty's vowels tended to be shorter than Bunk's

and to vary less in their duration. With some exceptions, they identified a tendency for surprise and disbelief durations to be longer than those for other functions.

Gold and McIntyre had difficulty in agreeing on how to distinguish their category of 'disbelief' from 'surprise'. They also noticed that the other three categories ('functional', 'insult' and 'idiomatic') could be seen as having something in common. So their next step was to divide the realisations into two groups rather than five and to compare these. This led to a sharper distinction between the 'disbelief/surprise' category and the 'functional/insult/idiomatic' one. (One utterance cut from the final version of the scene involved the super, otherwise silent, saying *well I'll be fucked* when the detectives found the casing outside; this would have been another disbelief/surprise token).

Overall, Gold and McIntyre show that the phonetic details of how we produce utterances play a role in how they communicate and that it is useful in analysing texts to look at things other than just which words have been produced in each context.

This is a digest of:

Gold, Erica and Dan McIntyre. 2020. What the /fʌk/?An acoustic-pragmatic analysis of implicated meaning in a scene from *The Wire*. In Siobhan Chapman and Billy Clark (eds.) Pragmatics and Literature. John Benjamins: 73-91.

Activities for students:

1. There are, of course, lots of ways to introduce and explore ideas from pragmatics. Sometimes, students do not share the intuitions of pragmatic theorists and we often disagree about exactly what an utterance intends. One way to begin to explore things is to imagine how interpretations would be different if things were phrased differently. Students could start by imaging a speaker saying more or less, e.g. saying *'That's very nice of you but I've just had one thanks'* when offered a cup of coffee rather than *'No'* or vice versa. Students can look through texts and try this out on particular parts of them, e.g. replacing a very long sentence such as the opening sentence of *A Tale of Two Cities* with a very short one or replacing a very short one, say the opening sentence of *A Christmas Carol,* with a very long one.

2. Students can experiment with written texts by reading them aloud in different ways. Having done this, they can then categorise the differences, e.g. into intonational differences (rising vs falling intonation, very stylised as opposed to fairly flat, and so on), differences in stress placement, different regional accents, differences in voice quality (whispering, creaky voice, and so on).

3. Students can look at this scene and other recorded dramatic performances, identify things other than words which actors do, and discuss their effects. In this scene, students could focus on how far eyes are open at certain times, where characters are looking, body movements and so on, as well as how they articulate different occurrences of *fuck,* consider the effects of these, and experiment by performing the texts themselves with or without similar accompanying behaviour. A specific question

might be about what the effects would have been of including the part which was cut where the super said *Well I'll be fucked.* Why might the makers of the show have decided not to include this?

4. A further study might build on thoughts developed in the previous exercise by developing hypotheses about the effects of particular nonverbal features and looking at further texts to see whether these ideas are confirmed or disconfirmed. (An example of work like this is mentioned in the further resources below).

Further resources:

Bousfield, Derek and Dan McIntyre. 2011. Emotion and empathy in Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas.* A case study of the 'funny guy' scene. In Roberta Piazza, Monika Bednarek and Fabio Rossi (eds.) Telecinematic Discourse. John Benjamins: 105-123. (A discussion of how the emotion fear is created in a scene from Scorsese's 1990 film using a number of ideas, including some from im/politeness theory).

Chapman, Siobhan and Billy Clark (eds.) 2014. Pragmatic Literary Stylistics. Palgrave Macmillan. (A collection chapters applying ideas from pragmatics in analysing literary texts).

Chapman, Siobhan and Billy Clark (eds.) 2020. Pragmatics and Literature. John Benjamins. (The chapter digested above is in this collection which contains examples of the latest research on pragmatics and literature).

Clark, Billy. 2016. Pragmatics. In Marcello Giovanelli and Dan Clayton (eds.) Knowing About Language: Linguistics and the Secondary English Classroom. Routledge: 64-76. (On applying ideas from pragmatics in secondary teaching).

Tabacaru, Sabina and Maarten Lemmens. 2014. Raised eyebrows as gestural triggers in humour: the case of sarcasm and hyper-understanding. The European Journal of Humour Research. 2.2: 11-31. (Explores the effects of raised eyebrows in the TV series *House M.D.* and *The Big Bang Theory*).

Wharton, Tim. 2009. Pragmatics and Nonverbal Communication. Cambridge University Press. (Explores the pragmatics of nonverbal communication from the perspective of relevance theory).