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Bless your heart: Constructing the ‘Southern Belle’ in the modern South’

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Abstract

Language and identity are intricately woven into the personal and public lives of social groups. Words and phrases may originate in a subculture morphing into mainstream culture on the comingled streams of interactions among the masses. These words and phrases have specific meanings within their original contexts in their home cultures, yet they vary and evolve as they travel on the above-mentioned comingled streams of interactions and conversations. In this paper, we explore the typified Southern expression, ‘bless your heart,’ examining the ways in which this phrase is used, understood and reinterpreted as it circulates within the South and outside of it. We examine data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and substantiate those findings through sociolinguistic interviews focusing on individuals’ experiences with this phrase. We first note that when this phrase is used, it is capable of accomplishing a range of meanings, but positive and negative; however, when it gets spoken about, a singular, negative connotation of the phrase and those who use it emerges, conjuring images of the ‘sassy Southern belle.’ Despite this dichotomy of how the phrase is used and spoken about, a third, and more nuanced, understanding of the phrase was often evoked by the interview participants. Our research highlights the complexity of this phrase for both cultural insiders (i.e. Southerners) and outsiders (i.e. non-Southerners) and the potential negative repercussions of the monolithic representation of white Southern women and the iconic link between this figure of personhood and the seemingly innocuous phrase, ‘bless your heart.’

Keywords: corpus linguistics, erasure, iconicity, identity, sincere/insincere

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1. Introduction

The phrase ‘bless your heart’ is often associated with Southerners, and more specifically white Southern women. It is a phrase that you will hear in the South on a regular basis, and one which cultural outsiders often struggle to interpret. A colleague recently shared a story with us in which she was leaving the grocery store, bicycle helmet in hand, when the clerk asked her if she had ridden her bike there. When she responded that she had, the clerk’s response was, “bless your heart.” Our colleague, relatively new to Southeastern Virginia, did not know what to make of this – was the clerk criticizing her? Was she being polite? This response was a mystery that she was unable to untangle. This kind of complexity associated with ‘bless your heart’ and its ubiquity in the South was the impetus for this research. We set out to disentangle the potential meanings and determine what the most common usages of the phrase are, how different people use and interpret the phrase, and whether or not it is possible to come to some comprehensive understanding of its meaning and use.

Linguistically focused research on the phrase, ‘bless your heart’ (herein BYH), has been scant. The one academic source that does address this phrase is Wolfram and Reaser’s (2014) book, *Talkin’ Tar Heel*, in which they describe the phrase as follows:

Bless your heart... is an explicit expression of sympathy or pity. A beloved elderly relative or friend, or an act of kindness, can be tagged with this phrase. But it is often—and more commonly now—used to veil a negative judgment of a person’s character or behavior: a polite excuse for making a rude remark. (p. 96)

As this description notes, BYH has a duality of meaning: an expression of sympathy or pity and a veiled criticism. They claim that while there exists this duality, it is the second, more negative connotation that has become more prevalent.

As stated above, linguistic focus on the phrase has been scant, and an exhaustive search for the origin of the phrase yielded similar results. Texts such as *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*, linguistic dictionaries, and library databases produced no documented history of the phrase; however, the term, bless, found in *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins*, provides an origin for “bless”:

As unlikely as it seems, our word bless derives from the Old English blod, blood. Blod yielded the Old English verb bledsian, which meant “to make sacred or holy with blood,” as when sacrificial blood of animals was used in religious ceremonies. Bledsian became blessen in Middle English and by Shakespeare’s time had become bless (Hendrickson, 2008).

A deep analysis of the potential evolution of the word “bless” into cultural speech is beyond the scope of this paper; however, since the history of Appalachia has Scotch-Irish lineage, it doesn’t seem unreasonable to conclude that BYH is a derivation in meaning from original religious and/or cultural beliefs that has developed into many uses and intended meanings which supports the claim that the phrase has multiple uses. Whether this phrase originally had a singular, sincere meaning that then morphed into something more complex is unclear. Because of this, we focus the paper on its more recent usage.

Outside of academia, BYH has garnered plenty of attention with many sources weighing in on the meaning of this phrase. For the most part, these popular culture discussions of BYH focus on the negative meaning of the phrase. Some, such as the 2017 broadcast (and subsequent podcast) of the public radio program, “A Way with Words,” acknowledge the phrase’s complexity in meaning. Co-host Martha Barnette describes the phrase as “the Southern belle’s Swiss army knife,” because of the various contexts in which it can be used. This discussion is in

response to a caller who claimed that he previously understood the phrase to indicate sympathy but then later had come to understand it as a mild form of criticism, something he describes as “you should have known that.” The other host, Grant Barrett, refers to BYH as “one of those markers of Southern speech that...sounds polite at first but there’s maybe a second- or third-layer underneath.”

Similarly, in an article for *Jezebel*, Faircloth (2015) refers to BYH as a “verbal stiletto” (para 1), aligning it both with women and the more biting, insulting version of the phrase. She offers a number of scenarios in which BYH might be deployed, highlighting its range of meaning, reminiscent of Barnette’s metaphor of the ‘Swiss Army knife.’ Faircloth further explains that in order for the insult to be deployed properly, it must be able to still carry the sincere meaning: “it requires the double meaning to work properly. It thrives in the space between what something could mean and what you can be absolutely certain it means” (para 11). Interestingly while still recognizing the potential sincerity of the phrase, she writes about it in terms of its potential for negative evaluation. This negative meaning of BYH is more clearly described in a number of entries in the Urban Dictionary. The Urban Dictionary, an open, online crowd sourced dictionary of commonly used words, phrases, and slang is an interesting place in which to find evidence of how the phrase is commonly understood. There are seven entries in the Urban Dictionary for ‘bless your heart,’ all of which solely describe the negative connotation, noting that it is a “polite way” of calling someone “an idiot” (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). Six of the seven specifically index the phrase with Southern speakers; two of these further identify the phrase with ‘Southern women’ specifically. These entries in the Urban Dictionary show a clear indexical link between the phrase BYH and Southern identity, and, more specifically, Southern women. The concept of BYH as cover for negative criticism is linked in these entries to a

particular persona, that of a Southerner who chooses to couch their critique behind a veil of politeness.

This polite yet critical persona is often associated with cultural notions of ‘the Southern belle.’ Smith (2013) describes the persona of the Southern belle as performing the following identity:

[A] lady never raises her voice; a lady never mentions money; a lady doesn’t tell everything she knows; a lady never lets a silence fall; talk real nice and then you can do whatever you want...if you can’t say something nice, say nothing at all. (p. 206-207)

Other descriptions of the Southern belle persona present an iconic figure of “an attractive young woman from the South of the US, who comes from an upper-class family” (Longman, 2020).

The Longman definition goes on to describe the term as mostly referencing the past; however, an apparent resurgence of the term can be seen in relatively recent television programs including “Southern Belles: Louisville” which aired in 2009 and TLC’s “Bama Belles” from 2010, both of which feature, young, wealthy women from the South. Additionally, many articles have appeared online in recent years including two entitled, “Redefining the Southern Belle” (Greenville News, 2014) and “Manners for the Modern Southern Belle” (Mayne, 2019), praising the qualities of the Southern belle. While it is not explicitly mentioned in online definitions or descriptions of the Southern belle, not only is she “attractive” and “young,” she is almost always white.

The concept of the Southern belle likely gained more widespread prominence with the book and film, *Gone with the Wind*, in which the wealthy females are expected to uphold certain characteristics and avoid displaying any displeasure or outward emotion. Instead, she would say quite sweetly, “bless your heart,” and only someone within the knowledgeable circle would understand her meaning. She wouldn’t violate that mythical Southern lady code and still be able

to express displeasure. This characteristic is possibly one of the originations for the phrase “Steel Magnolia,” suggesting an inner strength and emotional control that is another familiar Southern female stereotype.

Again, due to Southern literature like *Gone with the Wind* and more recently, films like *Steel Magnolias*, the stereotypes of Southern white women are presented as angelic images of quiet, clean, ladylike speech from supposedly empty-headed females only interested in beauty, fashion, and men, yet when faced with adversity, they are able to stand up to the challenge. Smith (2013) credits Reynolds Price as saying, “Southern women are Mack trucks disguised as powder puffs” (pg. 207), and according to Smith, “Therein lies the power of a Southern accent” (pg. 207).

Johnstone (1999) similarly addresses this when she situates the uses of speaking in a Southern dialect by subjects in her study: “[S]ounding Southern can be part of a display of gentility, it can indicate closeness and friendship, it can set a Southerner apart from others, it can be used to manipulate men, and so on” (515). It appears that through the use of a Southern dialect, many goals can be achieved. It follows that a phrase like BYH can act in many situations, not the least of these as a Southern belle stereotypical means of metaphorically cutting someone down or insulting them.

While much has been written about BYH in popular culture, these descriptions of the phrase are based on seemingly anecdotal evidence rather than an empirical, linguistic investigation of the phrase. In this paper, we explore the meaning of this phrase beyond the primarily folk understanding by utilizing multiple linguistic methodologies: corpus analysis and sociolinguistic interviews and seek to answer the following questions: 1) Are these anecdotal,

non-academic representations of BYH supported by a more empirical analysis? And 2) Is BYH primarily used and understood as a way to express negative judgment or is it more complex?

2. Methods

In order to examine the various meanings and uses of BYH, we chose to employ two methods of data collection. First, we examined tokens of use in the Corpus of Contemporary English (COCA); second, we conducted sociolinguistic interviews to find out how individual speakers use the phrase and what their impressions are of the phrase.

2.1 Corpus

We first chose to examine the COCA for instances of the phrase BYH to collect a somewhat large sample of how the phrase is used. While ‘bless your heart’ is the canonical phrase, and the one that gets referenced in popular culture, we examined four variants of BYH: ‘bless your heart,’ ‘bless her heart,’ ‘bless his heart,’ and ‘bless their hearts.’¹ We will refer to these collectively as BYH. We chose COCA because it is one of the largest corpora for American English, with over 500 million words, and because it includes different genres and mediums. We did not limit the search result in any way; instead, we included and analyzed the usage of BYH across both fiction and non-fiction and spoken and written mediums in order to collect the largest number of tokens. Although we recognize that uses in fiction do not represent the reality of usage, they do reveal how authors both interpret this phrase’s meaning and how they may use it to reveal some aspect of a character’s identity. Tokens of BYH span a 27-year span from 1990 to 2017.

¹ A search for ‘bless y’all’s hearts’ was also considered but yielded no results.

Our search resulted in a total of 199 tokens. Two tokens were eliminated because there was not enough information or context for any type of determination of meaning; one additional token was omitted because it was a duplicate. These remaining 196 tokens were classified into categories of either direct quotes of the phrase or speech referencing the phrase. We felt that this was an important distinction because we wanted to compare how an individual may use the phrase compared to how it may get talked about, or its metalinguistic understanding. An example of the reference to the phrase is “In Southern, bless your heart means you’re dead.” There were five references to the phrase, all of which were only found with the canonical ‘bless your heart’ variant.

We also categorized the tokens based on meaning. For meaning, we considered the binary categories of ‘sincere’ and ‘insincere’ based on Wolfram and Reaser’s definition of the term, discussed above. While we recognize that these terms are not nuanced enough to capture the likely intent, they do provide a general sense of the duality of the meaning that others have noted. We considered ‘sincere’ to be ones where the speaker is intending the phrase to be taken positively; ‘insincere’ would carry the more negative connotation. Categorization of direct quote and reference was straightforward and easy to determine; categorization of meaning is much more subjective. We discussed each token individually and where a consensus was reached, we assigned it a value. Meanings were assigned based on contextual factors, such as other positive or negative evaluative comments preceding or following the use of phrase (ex. ‘bless her heart, she was so brave’ or ‘bless your heart, you’re delusional’) or, in some instances, larger contextual knowledge such as a speaker’s relationship to the person being referred to (ex. a conservative commentator referring to President Obama’s policy decisions). One of the challenges of working with written documentation of spoken data, is that paralinguistic features

are not available. Intonation or facial expressions, for instance, may change the way the phrase is interpreted. Because we did not have that information, we relied on the linguistic context to make a determination. In a few cases, we were unable to determine speaker intent; in these cases, we marked them as 'indeterminate' rather than forcing them into a particular category. An example of each is provided below.

- a. Sincere meaning: "And last night when Bernie did what he did, bless his heart, he did the right thing"
- b. Insincere meaning: "Bless your heart, you're delusional."
- c. Indeterminate: "The FBI also videotaped McBee slipping longtime House Speaker Don Blandford a "thank you" \$500 for the speaker's help in blocking the bill (which was never actually introduced during the session). The speaker's reaction to the gift: "Well bless your heart."

Data were further analyzed across these categorizations, examining how reference to the phrase and use of the phrase corresponded to the sincere and insincere meanings. The cross-referenced analysis of use of BYH in COCA will be discussed in the analysis section as well as further description and examples of each type of usage.

2.2 Interviews

One of the challenges of working with corpora is that the analyst is limited to the context that the corpus captures and includes. As described above, the corpus data were categorized based on the meaning, but that meaning was determined by the two authors and not necessarily by the speakers themselves. For these reasons, we included sociolinguistic interviews in addition to the corpus data. For the purposes of this paper, we included six interviews for analysis. Interviews

were all carried out by the second author, who is a member of a shared community with each of the interviewees. We attempted to interview a range of people who might have different experiences with the phrase BYH, all of whom have some relationship with the South. Data on each interviewee along with their pseudonym is included in Table 1.

Name*	Relation to the South	Gender	Age	Relationship with Interviewer
Lily	Native/ resident	female	65	friend
Nadine	Native Southerner living outside the South	female	30	friend/ colleague
Jade	Native/ resident	female	50	relative
Bonnie	Non-native living in South	female	60	friend
Bill	Non-native living in the South	male	60s	dentist
Sharon	Native/ resident	female	50s	colleague

Table 1. Interview Participants

The interviews focused on 13 questions indicating the interviewees' background and affiliation to the South, their history—if any—with the phrase BYH, their understanding of the meaning of BYH, and whether or not they believed it to be used and/or interpreted differently outside of the South. Often one primary interpretation of the meaning was provided; in that case, a follow-up question as to whether the participant is aware of any other meanings was also asked.

The interviewees ranged in age from late 20s to the late 60s, with one male, the rest female. All interviewees had a least a bachelor's degree. All interviewees were white, native speakers of English. As Table 1 indicates, while all participants had some connection to the South, three were lifetime residents (native/resident), two were Northern transplants (non-native living in the South), and one identified herself as a Southerner even though she currently lives outside the region (native Southerner living outside the South). The diversity of voices is intended to capture the similarities and differences in meaning potential across different speakers with differing experiences. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using discourse analytic

methods. While some categories emerged that seemed to overlap with those in the corpora data, the interviews revealed a much more nuanced understanding of the term, which will be discussed in the Analysis section.

3. Analysis

In this section, we first discuss the findings from the corpus analysis, focusing on the distribution of the two uses, the various meanings invoked, and the examples in which the meaning is unclear. The second part addresses interviewees' interpretations and personal experience with BYH. Finally, we summarize the findings across the two data sets.

3.1 Corpus

3.1.1 Sincere/Insincere. Based on our analysis of BYH in COCA, it is apparent that it is primarily used in its sincere meaning. Of the 196 tokens analyzed, 139 carried the more positive, sincere meaning; 45 were cataloged as insincere, while a remaining 12 were left uncategorized (i.e. 'indeterminate') because of limited context or ambiguity of the speaker's intention. Table 2 illustrates the categorization of the sincere/insincere dichotomy.

	Bless Your Heart	Bless Her Heart	Bless His Heart	Bless Their Hearts	TOTAL (%)
Sincere use	37	50	40	12	139 (71%)
Insincere use	13	13	10	9	45 (23%)
Indeterminate	6	1	4	1	12 (6%)
TOTAL	56	64	54	22	196

Table 2. Categorization of BYH in COCA: Sincere vs. insincere meaning

In the case of those marked as sincere, we noted a range of overlapping but slightly different pragmatic functions including 1) an expression of gratitude (including responses to

compliments), 2) an expression of well wishes, 3) an expression of sympathy, empathy or acknowledgement of hardship, 4) an accolade or expression of admiration, and 5) an apology.

Examples of each are provided below.

Examples of BYH as an expression of gratitude are shown in Examples 1 and 2. In example 1, the meaning of gratitude is gleaned from the compliment in the prior turn, as compliments are often followed by expressions of ‘thanks’ or gratitude. Additionally, the explicit expression of gratitude that follows further supports this interpretation. In example 2, there is a similar sense of appreciation both for a “dear friend” and for his kind gesture.

Example 1

ZAHN: Best breakfast I've had in a long time.

Mr. GATES: Well, **bless your heart** for saying that. Thank you so very much.

Example 2

Redirecting my life all began when my dear friend Adisa (**bless his heart**) called me from California one blustery day in January.

The gratitude meaning of BYH is evident from other sources as well, including the multitude of ‘thank you’ cards which with this phrase on the front (including one received recently by one of the authors).

The second category, expression of well wishes, is shown in Example 3 and 4.

Example 3

KOTB: Yeah, she's something.

GIFFORD: Because this girl's got the real goods. **Bless your heart**, sweetie. All the best to you.

Example 4

KOTB# Okay. Well, our first lucky lady is Deborah Willingham (ph). She's turning forty-nine years old today.

KATHIE-LEE-GIFFORD# **Bless her heart.**

In example 3, BYH is accompanied by a second expression of well wishes; example 4 is less obvious but because the focus is on the age of the third party, an expression of well wishes seems the most likely.

The third category, expression of empathy or hardship, is the most common usage of BYH for the third person variants. Example 5 and 6 both illustrate this function. In both cases, there is either an accompanying statement that led to an empathic interpretation, as the case for Example 5 ('he has a lot on his mind right now'), or a context in which there was no reason to question a speaker's sincerity. In Example 6, the speaker seems to be acknowledging the hard work that his interlocutor has done and the fact that he stayed up late working; there is nothing to suggest a mocking or insincere usage since the situation does warrant sympathy; similarly, based on Tillotson's first turn, they seem to be working together to solve a crime, which is not a place where one would expect to find mock sincerity.

Example 5

He seems surprised but has little to say. **Bless his heart**, he has a lot on his mind right now.

Example 6

TILLOTSON: But by all accounts, he was so badly damaged by the gunshot wound to the head that that complicated the identification. It finally came from that one thumbprint left with the pawn shop?

ROBLES: I believe that's correct. My problem here is that I worked last until 2:30 and I actually haven't started my work today, so I'm not sure what developments have occurred during today.

TILLOTSON: Well, **bless your heart.**

Examples such as those shown in 5 and 6 in which the speaker seems to be acknowledging a hardship or expressing sympathy seem to be the ones that most similarly overlap with the insincere meaning in which a speaker may be mockingly expressing empathy. The blurry lines between sincere and mock empathy will be discussed in the following section.

The fourth category, identified as ‘expression of admiration,’ highlights how BYH can be used when a speaker is noting some admirable quality or action by another. Examples 7 and 8 provide two such cases in which BYH is used as an expression of admiration.

Example 7

Ms. NEWBERRY: No. I do The New York Times Sunday puzzle every week.

HANSEN: Uh-huh.

SHORTZ: Oh, **bless your heart**.

Example 8

To see her up there on the stand. **Bless her heart**. She was trying to save her dad.

Example 7 comes from an NPR morning program. In this example, a larger contextual knowledge of the speakers is key to the interpretation of accolade. In this excerpt, Ms. Newberry shares with Hansen and Shortz that she completes the *New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle, a notoriously difficult puzzle. Will Shortz, as the editor of the puzzle, knowing how difficult it is to complete, expresses admiration toward Ms. Newberry. Example 8, similarly, highlights an admirable quality or action on the part of another. In this example, the following statement, ‘she was trying to save her dad’ illustrates that the speaker admires the actions taken and the reasons behind those actions.

Finally, Example 9 illustrates how BYH may be used as a sort of apology. This example comes from a novel; the character seems to be apologizing to her daughter for misinterpreting

her daughter or criticizing her because she has misinterpreted the situation. The final part of the utterance, 'I can't be mad at you for that' aids in this interpretation as does the fact that one could easily substitute 'I'm sorry' in place of BYH here, while the other meanings discussed would not be an appropriate substitute in this context.

Example 9

Guess I should have asked you first about sit-ins, Momma, but we couldn't think of anything else to do! Now you're mad. You'll never let me sit on a stool by Sophie. "

Momma stared at me." **Oh, bless your heart.** I'm thinking about my pocketbook and you disobeying me. You're thinking about friendship. I can't be mad at you for that.

BYH as an apology only occurs with the second person 'bless your heart,' which is not surprising since an apology is a speech act that is directed at a listener rather than one that could be used in reference to a third party.

The use of BYH in what we have termed 'insincere' meaning has far fewer examples and a smaller range of potential meanings. In total, only 45 examples in the corpus were categorized as an 'insincere' meaning of BYH. Wolfram and Reaser note that the insincere meaning of the phrase can be used as a form of veiled politeness in which the speaker expresses negative evaluation through more seemingly polite means (2014). Unlike the case with the sincere meanings, we did not find a range of pragmatic functions with the insincere meaning. Instead, BYH seems to function in the way that it is often discussed in popular culture references such as those discussed in the introduction: as a critique or an expression of negative judgement.

In some cases, this negative judgement is much more explicit, as in the case of the following from a fictional work: "All this heat must have gone to your head," said Georgia. 'Bless your heart, you're delusional.'" The combination of BYH + a direct criticism of the hearer marks this

example a one of the clearest instances of the insincere uses. There were many of these in the corpus in which BYH preceded a critique. Two additional examples that follow this pattern are, “bless their hearts, they are a truculent bunch,” and “Obama, bless his heart, is on the wrong side of just about every issue.” Another example, also from a work of fiction, clearly marks the dialogue as being stated with sarcasm. In response to the prior turn, “I’ll give you a three-week extension” the author then writes “Nun: (sarcastic) Bless your heart.” This use of a stage note clearly indicates to the reader how Nun’s turn should be interpreted; additionally, by needing to include it, it illustrates that the phrase itself is ambiguous and could be interpreted as a sincere blessing without this added explanation.

Other examples of the insincere meaning are a bit more nuanced, but the context still makes it clear that the speaker is not intending to offer a sincere blessing, apology or accolade. For example, the following occurred on a television news program following a heated exchange. Dick Arme y, a US politician, responds to the host, Alan Colmes, with the following: “Alan, bless your heart, you can believe that if you want, but I wouldn’t believe it if my brother were telling me.” In this case, Arme y is clearly insinuating that Colmes is incorrect in his beliefs; the use of BYH could be interpreted as softening the force of his critique of Colmes through this seemingly polite phrase.

As the analysis of the corpus data indicates so far, BYH does carry both a sincere/positive meaning as well as an insincere/negative meaning. Within the sincere usage, we found that there was not a singular pragmatic function of BYH, but rather a range of overlapping yet distinct functions including offers of apologies and well wishes as well as expressions of empathy and gratitude. These various pragmatic functions highlight the versatility of the phrase. Perhaps the most interesting finding, considering the way that BYH is described in popular culture, is that the

sincere usage is far more common in the corpus compared to the insincere meaning. Of the 196 tokens analyzed, 139 were identified as having a sincere meaning, while only 45 were insincere. This distinction is even more disparate once the distinction between direct use and metalinguistic reference of the phrase is taken into consideration (see section 3.1.3).

3.1.2 Indeterminacy of In/sincerity

So far, we have focused on the duality of the meaning of BYH: the sincere and the insincere meaning. Classifying tokens into these two categories is sometimes clear; the examples provided in the previous section, we believe, are easily understood as having either one or the other of these two meanings. There are other tokens, however, in which the context was incomplete so that it was not possible to discern speaker intention. When it comes to determining sincerity, speaker intention is critical. This was particularly challenging for those examples that could fall into the category of ‘expression of empathy or acknowledgement of hardship.’ One example of this comes from a *USA Today* story. The excerpt reads, “Browning is ‘throwing darts at a calendar but I bless his heart for doing it,’ says company owner Frank Cici.” While one could interpret this as ‘good for him for trying,’ a second, and equally plausible interpretation would be ‘he is a fool for pursuing this futile effort.’ Without knowledge of the people in question and their relationship to one another, it is difficult to determine which meaning is intended. In this case, the question is whether or not the speaker is sincerely empathic or expressing mock empathy.

Another kind of indeterminacy was found in other examples. In the following excerpt, in which the word ‘jealous’ is included in the description of the context, it is still a bit ambiguous. We present a slightly longer excerpt from the corpus as it provides greater context.

Example 10

It was Ben who gave them their breakfast. It was to Ben Patty carried the garments with the tiny buttons she couldn't manage. Susan insisted to John she was just a little jealous of Ben Hutton, bless his heart. With him the twins were such angels and with her sometimes such tartars. Even the hour before dinner, which had a habit of slipping into howls and tantrums, was relatively calm with Ben around.

In this case, Susan's feelings toward Ben are presented as conflicting. She is both 'a little jealous' of him, and yet, this admission of jealousy is accompanied by a description of his praiseworthy behavior. In the description of Ben, there is nothing to suggest malice, ill-will or mock sincerity. Because of this, 'bless his heart,' can be interpreted as praise. Yet, despite his positive attributes, or perhaps because of them, Susan is described as being jealous. Even without the inclusion of BYH in this excerpt, the complexity of emotions is evident; BYH simply heightens this complexity.

We present this section to illustrate the challenges of cataloging each example and to show why some examples were marked as 'indeterminate.' As one reviewer noted, it may be possible to dig deeper into the source material in order to definitively categorize each example, and while that may be the case with some of them, such as the example from *The USA Today* story, Example 10 does seem to provide enough context; yet, the meaning still seems unclear. Rather than attempting to categorize all examples into the binary categories, we feel that it is important to show a general trend and to highlight that some uses of BYH may invoke the duality if it's possible meanings.

3.1.3 Direct Use/Reference to BYH

In addition to the distinction between the sincere and insincere meanings of BYH, we also coded the data for use of the phrase compared to reference to the phrase. For this, we categorized

tokens in terms of whether a speaker is using the phrase in context or whether it is being referenced by someone. All of the examples discussed in the prior section are direct use. There was a total of five occurrences in which the phrase is being referenced by the speaker. As mentioned, of the five metalinguistic uses of BYH, all of them occurred with the more canonical expression, ‘bless your heart.’ For comparison purposes, we include, in Table 4, below, only examples of ‘bless your heart’ to illustrate the disparity between the way the phrase is referenced compared to how it is used in the corpus.

Analytical Categories	# of Tokens
References to ‘bless your heart’	
Sincere	0
Insincere	4
Neutral	1
Total	5
Direct Quote of ‘bless your heart’	
Sincere use	37
Insincere use	9
Indeterminate	5
Total	51

Table 3. Cross listing of Sincere/Insincere & Direct Quote /Reference

As Table 3 illustrates, when the phrase is referenced, it is almost exclusively described as having an insincere meaning, this despite the fact that the corpus, as a whole, presents a different picture of the phrase. Four of the meta-linguistic references clearly index the insincere meaning. The fifth example, coded as ‘neutral’ provides no connotation, instead, simply asks the question, “What Does Bless Your Heart Mean?” but the context included fails to provide any answer to this question. The other four examples are included below and will be discussed in turn.

In the first example, the phrase BYH is clearly indexed with a Southern female identity.

Example 11

1. HUCKABEE: It's a tough job. Look, my daughter is up to anything. She's great at what
2. she does. I'm proud of her. She's a tough cookie. And don't ever underestimate a
3. Southern woman. Because when she starts the sentence with "**Bless your heart...** "
4. BOLLING: You know you're in trouble.
5. HUCKABEE: ...she's running (ph) to you like a deer.
6. BOLLING: Throw-down.
7. WILLIAMS; They don't call them steel magnolias for nothing, right?
8. HUCKABEE: I'm telling you.

In this example, we see reflections of previously reported popular culture understandings of the phrase as being a tool for a Southern woman to insult someone or exert her power. Lines 4-6 suggest that when this phrase is uttered a fight will ensue. Williams, in line 7 also invokes the metaphor of the 'steel magnolia,' likely a reference to the 1989 film, further solidifying the connection between this phrase and the figure of personhood of the simultaneously hard and soft Southern Belle.

In the second example, below, similar indexing to Southern women and the negative connotation of the phrase are invoked, this time with specific reference to former South Carolina governor, Nikki Haley.

Example 12

1. Trump said the people of South Carolina were embarrassed by her. And Haley said she was not a fan of Mr. Trump, even giving him the Southern brush off of, "**Bless**

2. **your heart.**"

In this excerpt from USA Today in 2016, Haley's response to Donald Trump via tweet, of 'Bless your heart,' is referred to as 'the Southern brush off,' indicating the way that the phrase is used dismissively.

The third example indexes the terms with Southern identity as well, although, in this case, it is not specifically associated with Southern women; instead, it is referred to as the 'backhanded compliment of the South' (line 1).

Example 13

1. TAMRON-HALL: It's like the backhanded compliment or in the South, when
2. someone says, **bless your heart.**
3. AL ROKER: Yeah.
4. WILLIE-GEIST# **Bless your heart.**
5. TAMRON-HALL# -- they really don't mean it in a good way.
6. AL ROKER: Yeah. It's like, you're an idiot.
7. WILLIE-GEIST# Yes.
8. TAMRON-HALL# You're pretty much doomed. Just pack your bags. All right.

As the conversation surrounding BYH continues in this exchange, Tamron Hall and Al Roker seem to be explaining the meaning of the term. Both Roker and Hall focus solely on the negative use of the phrase, suggesting that there is no positive or sincere use of BYH where someone could actually 'mean it in a good way' (line 5).

The final example, below, presents the same negative associations with BYH as what has been discussed in the previous three examples.

Example 14

1. PAULA-FARIS# I'm Southern, and I can be real kind, but I'm like, no, stand up for
2. what you believe in and know it. In Southern, **bless your heart** means you're dead.
3. No, but I mean, people pleasing is what women do, and it's poison at the negotiating table.

What is unique about this example compared to the others is that Paula Faris claims an identity as a Southerner while espousing the position of BYH as one dimensional, that is, as a Southern expression that is used to insult or verbally attack someone. Within her description of this phrase and her identity as ‘Southern’ (line 1), she also constructs her identity as the prototypical Southern Belle who is both ‘real kind’ (line 1) but also one to “stand up” for herself (lines 1-2).

3.1.4 Summary

The analysis of BYH based on examples taken from COCA suggest an already fraught and somewhat contradictory analysis of BYH. It does seem, as Wolfram and Reaser (2014) suggest, that BYH carries a duality of meaning- both sincere and insincere. However, as we have noted, the sincere meaning is more complex than previous accounts suggest as it can be used to perform a range of pragmatic functions that are recognized and understood within a particular context of use. Similarly, as we note, the complexity of human emotion, that is, feeling both empathy and jealousy can also be captured with this phrase. Finally, and perhaps most interesting is the finding that while discussions of the meaning BYH both in the corpus and in popular culture accounts, such as those discussed in the introduction, focus solely on a purely negative meaning,

the sincere use of BYH was far more common, yet never included in the metalinguistic discourse within the corpus creating a discrepancy between actual use and perceived meaning.

3.2 Interviews

The interview data suggests more nuanced interpretations of the phrase than the data from the COCA. Rather than the purely positive and negative connotations, our interviewees discussed the phrase in terms of its sincerity as well as something more complex, specifically, a sense of negative evaluation along with empathy or pity. We discuss this in terms of a potential, third category.

3.2.1 Empathy

Most interviewees noted the positive meaning of the phrase, citing the empathic meaning. The two non-native Southerners we interviewed both indicated that they originally only knew about the sincere meaning. Bonnie recounts the first time she encountered the phrase and misinterpreted as being overtly religious. The woman who used it explained to her that it was something like, “I feel for you.” Bill stated that he had never realized the negative connotation until he heard a comedian talking about it. He had been under the impression for some years that the phrase was only used in expressing empathy for others. Nadine also claimed that she often uses the phrase to express empathy for others, for someone who has had a hard day, for instance. This recurrence of ‘empathy’ as the positive meaning suggests that while BYH is used for a variety of positive pragmatic functions, expressions of empathy is the only salient one.

When it comes to what one might consider to be the more negative connotations, two recurrent concepts emerged in the interviews. The first is that BYH frontloads gossip; the second is that it is an expression of simultaneous critique and empathy.

3.2.2 'Juicy' gossip

As indicated in the predominately female interviewees' discussions, BYH was a means of engaging in "poking fun" or harmless gossip as indicated by Jade, stating that when she heard the phrase "bless her heart" she knew there was "something juicy" about to be revealed. She goes on to explain, "it's mostly in fun...when my sister and I get together and we're fixin to tell something we'll say, bless her heart...it's usually tongue-in-cheek." Jade's description of it as "fun" or "tongue-in cheek" suggests that she does not associate the phrase with a specifically negative connotation. Note that, unlike the meta-linguistic discussions of the phrase, BYH for her does not invoke a biting, cutting remark directed at someone but instead some form of harmless gossip.

3.2.3 'They can't help it'

The most commonly referenced meaning of BYH was collocated with the phrase "they can't help it," suggesting a tendency for native Southerners to exhibit a caveat of understanding for the target person in the form of a kind of excuse for the person in question. Four of the interviewees specifically invoked a form of the phrase 'they can't help it' in their explanation of BYH's meaning. In closely studying this caveat, an association with religious belief arose. The phrase is used by some Southerners in discussing some offender and a means of understanding that even though the person is behaving inappropriately, they are to be excused and forgiven for the behavior because they are somehow just unable to understand that their behavior is inappropriate. It correlates to some of the deep connection Southerners have with home, family, and the church, which is exhibited by the interviewee, Lily, saying, "Bless your heart, your mama didn't raise you right." This was a way of expressing displeasure for the behavior, yet also providing forgiveness for the person because he/she was not schooled in proper decorum, a

means of softening the criticism. The criticism is then not directed at the person, necessarily, but is transferred to someone else who should have been responsible for instilling values onto the target of the phrase.

Both Lily and Nadine are native Southerners, and both describe the usage of BYH as having dual meanings, but even more significant, both connect the phrase to religion. Lily's explanation:

When people, ah, couldn't see your point, and you knew they were wrong. Um, and you couldn't change them, um, they're mule-headed stubborn and you're not gonna change them, no matter what. Bless their little hearts, you know, and their little minds because some people have little minds...bless their hearts, they just, they can't see different, that they're never gonna change, but you just gotta accept them where they are, and just not try to change them...They're gonna be themselves and you gotta love them the way they are...Don't try to make excuses for them. That, that's who they are whether they're mean, mean-hearted, or say mean things, or they just can't see your point of view You can only do what you can do and uh, we have to continue loving them and accepting them because the lord created us all, and we have to do the best we can.

Here, Lily demonstrates the religious connection to the phrase when she states that the offender must be accepted and loved for who they are because "the lord created us all." This concept of "loving them and accepting them" despite their flaws is a part of Southern Christian identity as well.

Nadine is a native Southerner and much younger than Lily, but she also connects religion to BYH:

I am not gonna say, “You are an idiot.” I will say, (exaggerates a sigh), “Oh well...you know, just bless their heart. Cause they just can’t—they can’t help it just comes up—interesting—I think that is often paired with” Bless their heart.” Cause you wanna think like, even if you’re not Christian, or have any faith, you’re like...I hope that there is a lord up there who’s looking down on this idiot and protecting them from their own self. They may not be able to feed themselves they’re so dumb.

Another native Southern interviewee, Sharon, mentioned the “they can’t help it” characteristic, “Um, usually when you say that you mean, that this is something that is a characteristic of somebody they can’t seem to help.” At first, this may not appear to be a religion-based characteristic, yet people from the South tend to have deep familial and church-centered lives, which supports the earlier descriptions of the stereotypes around Southern women. So, unlike the ways in which the COCA data presented the negative interpretation of the phrase as a means of expressing distaste or disagreement with someone or their behavior, as demonstrated by Example 12, above, with Governor Nikki Haley, the interview data shows this negative connotation as being connected with demonstrating sympathy or understanding for someone who might be experiencing adversity.

3.2.4 Southern ‘Softness’

An additional common theme that emerged was with respect to the iconic link between the phrase and the Southern dialect that is often associated with it. Nadine made a comparison to how non-Southerners are unable to authentically utilize the phrase because they lack the “softness” that is required, even when using BYH as a critical observation:

I don't know, this is prejudiced of me, but it has to be said with a certain, a certain, accent, and a certain softness. It's the softness, the gentle condemnation. And I think

that's hard to do [laughing] if you're not from the South. You don't speak it. You're not fluent in it.

As she states the phrase, “gentle condemnation,” one of the nuances appears. The phrase is used to recognize some undesirable behavior, yet at the same time, there is an understanding or belief based upon the religious tenet of “Love thy neighbor” that is prevalent in the South, or at least what is expected from Southern women. In other words, the Southerner using the phrase is making a simultaneous condemnation, yet it is a “gentle” one, allowing for that facet of “they can’t help it” and “they’re momma didn’t raise them right.”

Referencing Smith’s (2013) observations about what was (and sometimes still is) expected of Southern women, the tendency to excuse improper decorum by using “they can’t help it” after BYH, is a means of recognizing, criticizing, and forgiving in one blow. This supports the nuances of BYH, as well as the Swiss Army Knife metaphor because of the many meanings folded into the one phrase.

This evidence from the female interviewees seems to point to Smith’s statement regarding how Southern women were traditionally expected to be soft-spoken, not show anger, and if nothing good could be said to say nothing (Smith 2013). Lily’s interview supported this when she was answering the question about any variations of BYH she had heard:

Yes. I do. Yes. I do. I also use, Bless the milk cow. I grew up in a family where using bad words were not ok. So, my grandmother, on my Dad's side would always say Bless the milk cow, when she was exasperated.

By using BYH or variations of it as Lily’s example shows, the phrase allowed the “Southern-Belle” persona to engage in the gossip, yet still stay within those unspoken rules of Southern lady mannerisms. One of the ways was through the caveat that “they just can’t help themselves.”

3.2.3 Summary/ Complexities of Meaning

As the interview data further illustrates, BYH does not carry a singular meaning. This is certainly true for the group as a whole, but many of the interviewees also discussed more than one meaning of the phrase. Time and age differences seem to be determining factors in subjects' comprehension of BYH. Older interviewees who hail from the South understand and explain the difference between a sincere use of the phrase in which it is used as a means of expressing empathy for someone in hardship or a negative circumstance, while also being aware of its use when expressing frustration or humor at someone demonstrating ignorance, inadequate or ridiculous responses/actions of some kind, or inappropriate behavior. Non-native Southerners, like Bill, may only understand the phrase to have a singular meaning until the other is pointed out to them.

A nebulous factor arose in considering insincere/sincere interpretations. For example, Lily gave examples from her childhood in which the offending person was corrected in their aberrant behavior by the phrase, "Bless your heart, your mama didn't raise you right" providing an excuse for the offender. With these two phrases, the unacceptable behavior is acknowledged, yet understanding is offered as the phrases are attached to BYH and can be used to correct the undesirable behavior with a softer approach.

BYH, in this respect seems to have a range of meanings from purely sincere, purely insincere to somewhere in between. Much like Kiesling's discussion of 'dude' (2004), the range of sincere meanings, while all slightly different, could be argued to index a similar stance, acknowledging some positive attribute of one's interlocutor. Further, invoking the phrase, no

matter whether the intention is to express empathy, critique or both, simultaneously, what gets indexed is someone who will not (directly) speak ill of someone else.

4. Conclusion

In our analysis of tokens of BYH in the COCA as well as reflections of the phrase as presented by interviewees, we sought to address the following questions: 1) are the anecdotal representations of BYH as presented in popular culture supported by an empirical, linguistic analysis? and 2) is BYH primarily used and understood as a phrase that expresses negative judgements or is it more complex?

Our analysis of the corpus data indicates that BYH is not primarily used to express negative judgements. In fact, the majority of tokens in the corpus suggest that speakers are using the phrase as a sincere way to perform the pragmatic functions of apologies, acknowledgements of hardship, expressing gratitude, admiration and as an expression of well wishes. Similarly, most of the interviewees acknowledged their own use of the phrase as having a sincere meaning, particularly as an expression of empathy or pity. Often the phrase was used alongside a claim that the action that was worthy of this phrase was something that was out of the person's control. Collocates of BYH such as "her mother didn't raise her right" or "he can't help it" clearly indicate that while there may be an act of transgression involved, it is not the person's fault and they should not take the blame for that action. So, while these interviewees seemed to invoke the negative connotations associated with the phrase, that is, that it somehow shines a light on some transgressive behavior, it is not as simple as the cutting, biting negativity that is often presented in circulating discourses. It is, in fact, much more complex and nuanced. There is both a sincerity in the blessing of that person as well as an acknowledgement of a wrongdoing in some respect.

Despite the complexity of meaning that was noted by the interviewees and the primarily sincere usage in the corpus, it seems that when the phrase is talked about, these discourses do not match its actual usage. Instead, a one-dimensional, negative evaluation of the phrase is presented. This is true both in the circulating discourses discussed in the introduction as well as metalinguistic examples in the corpus data. This reassignment of the meaning of BYH to have one negative, insincere meaning can be understood in terms of Irvine and Gal's (2000) semiotic processes of iconicity and erasure. The circulating meaning of BYH as an expression that allows one to hide a potentially negative evaluation behind a seemingly polite phrase creates an iconic link between the phrase and the 'Southern belle' figure of personhood, or "typifiable speaking personae" (Agha, 2005:39). References to the Southern woman as one who employs the "verbal stiletto" of BYH (Faircloth, 2015) against her detractors or the metaphorical 'steel magnolia' embody this persona. The way that BYH is often described is as a linguistic icon of this figure. In this way, BYH acts in a similar way as accent, which Lippi-Green describes as "a cultural shorthand to talk about bundles of properties which we would rather not mention directly" (YR: 215).

It is perhaps not surprising that the attitudes and impressions of BYH are presented in simplistic and uncomplicated ways. Harkening back to the references to the phrase in the corpus and the popular culture representations, the reproduction of BYH as the 'verbal stiletto' intended to harm could be understood as one more way in which reproductions of Southern speech is, as Johnston describes it, "selective and inaccurate" (Johnstone, 2018: 497), creating a monolithic portrait of what it means to be Southern. Johnstone further explains that "in laypeople's talk about dialect...all the forms adduced are stereotypes, by definition, since they are being talked about" (2018: 507). This seems to hold true not just for the more prototypical features of

Southern speech but also in the ways in which BYH is referenced – it is only the stereotyped definition that is invoked and any nuance that the phrase may carry gets erased. Images and associations with the South, and with the language of Southerners is often tied up with complex understandings of this region. However, as Cramer, Tamasi and Bounds (2018) note, “perceptions of Southernness often appear as unchanging and unquestionable” (445). This is

Further, because of this iconic link between the ‘Southern belle’ persona and the phrase, ‘bless your heart,’ other potential meanings and use are erased. As we have shown, the sincere meaning is both more commonly used in the corpora and often at the forefront of how Southerners describe their own understanding and employment of the phrase; however, this is rarely acknowledged. None of the instances of the phrase being discussed in the corpus acknowledge even a duality of meaning. Instead, it is described as a backhanded compliment, a brush off, and a phrase that is the equivalent to “you’re dead,” or “you’re in trouble.” Tamron Hall even explains that “they don’t mean it in a good way.” Nadine, an interviewee who currently lives outside the South, notes this erasure as well. She commented, “rumor has gotten out that we only use it in the pejorative...it’s always Southern people being rude to you, you know, behind your back. I don’t know when that happened, and I feel like that’s a caricature.” This erasure of the sincere, polite use of the phrase serves to further perpetuate the iconic link between the Southern belle persona who may be polite in her literal words but not in her intention. Additionally, what also gets erased through this link is the fact that others, besides white Southern women, may also use this phrase – in both the sincere, insincere and more nuanced meaning that many of our interviewees reference. It is certainly not our belief that only white women who typify the Southern belle persona use this phrase; it is our claim that when the phrase gets discussed, it is almost always this “caricature” that is invoked. While the phrase,

'bless your heart' is often presented in a light-hearted comical frame, the repercussions of continuing to associate the phrase with the 'Southern belle' and suggesting that it is solely used to insult or verbally injure someone is both inaccurate and an unfair representation of those who use the phrase.

4.1 Directions for future research

While we believe that the findings of this study are important and enlightening, they by no means provide a complete picture of BYH. Additional analysis of the corpus including a comparison of fictional and non-fictional uses of the phrase may reveal discrepancies in how authors employ the phrase to create characters (or caricatures) compared to how the phrase is used in more spontaneous speech. As we noted, we did not make this separation but were more concerned with understanding overall usage compared to discussions of the phrase. Further interviews in which corpus examples are discussed with interviewees may also provide insights. The fact that no one mentioned the other sincere functions, we believe, is likely because of the salience of the 'empathy' meaning rather than a reflection of their actual usage. We believe that interviewees would recognize these other functions and that discussion of them could be fruitful. Further, future research should certainly attempt to take into account more diverse viewpoints by including a larger and more diverse pool of interviewees.

Additionally, as one reviewer suggested, examining how the phonology may change the way that BYH is actually delivered may give insights into the speaker's intention. Does the vowel get elongated? In what ways does the intonation of the phrase and the surrounding linguistic context aid in the hearer's uptake? These questions are beyond the scope of this paper but certainly provide future avenues in which this quintessential Southern expression could be analyzed.

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