

**DEFAULTS IN UTTERANCE INTERPRETATION (811 words)**

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In the process of linguistic **communication**, not all of the intended **meanings** are uttered; some are assumed to go through unsaid. Among such pieces of information, there are salient, presumed, standard or default meanings that the addressee arrives at without the help of a conscious inferential process. For example, (1) and (2) normally communicate (1') and (2'), unless the **context** signals that this standard interpretation was not intended.

- (1) John dropped a vase and it broke.
- (1') John dropped a vase *and as a result* it broke.
  
- (2) Dickens' novels often portray an unhappy Victorian childhood.
- (2') *Novels written by Dickens* often portray an unhappy Victorian childhood.

Such salient, unmarked, presumed meanings arise independently of the particular context of utterance. In current pragmatic theory, approaches to default interpretations are often derived from **Grice's** (1975) concept of the **generalized conversational implicature** (GCI), standing for context-independent pragmatic **inference**. Such interpretations are frequently considered to be automatic and non-inferential (e.g. Recanati 2004). They are variously classified as implicatures (Levinson 2000), part of what is explicitly said (Recanati 2004; Jaszczolt 2005) or as an intermediate level of what is implicit in **what is said** (Bach 1994; Horn 2006).

The most influential post-Gricean approaches that acknowledge the presence of conversational defaults are as follows. According to Bach's (1984) default **reasoning**, in **utterance interpretation** we 'jump to conclusions', proceed to the first unchallenged interpretation, unless the context intervenes. According to Levinson's (1995, 2000) theory of generalized conversational implicature, default (presumptive) meanings are the result of rational, communicative behaviour and arise through three **heuristics**: 'What isn't said, isn't', 'What is expressed simply is stereotypically exemplified', and 'What's said in an abnormal way isn't normal'. Presumptive meanings arise at various stages in processing, are cancellable, and pertain to the social sphere of communication, being neither semantic nor pragmatic. **Optimality-Theory Pragmatics** (Blutner 2000; Blutner and Zeevat 2004) recasts Grice's principle of rational communication as an optimization procedure that is realized as a series of constraints operating on the underspecified output of **syntax**. Neo-Gricean heuristics (Horn 1984; Levinson 2000) are formalized as, among others, strength, consistency, and faithful interpretation. In truth-conditional pragmatics (Recanati 2002, 2003, 2004), default interpretations are pragmatic **enrichments** to the output of syntactic processing. They are free; they are not controlled by the **logical form** of the sentence. Such interpretations are considered to be automatic and unreflective. For Recanati, they are defaults for the processing of an utterance in a particular context. They justify the label 'default' in view of their automatic, unreflective, subconscious nature rather than context-sensitivity. For example, (3) may be automatically enriched to (3') in a particular situation.

(3) I haven't eaten.

(3') The speaker hasn't eaten breakfast yet.

In Default Semantics (Jaszczolt 2005, 2006), salient, unmarked interpretations are automatic and arise via two separate routes: the characteristics of human mental processes (cognitive defaults, CD) and the way the society and **culture** work (social and cultural defaults, SCD). The default, strong, referential interpretation of definite descriptions as in (4') is an example of a CD, and the culture-driven interpretation of (5) in (5') is an example of a SCD.

- (4) The best British chef wrote this recipe book.
- (4') The British chef whose identity the speaker knows wrote this recipe book.
- (5) The Mona Lisa was stolen yesterday.
- (5') The painting of Mona Lisa was stolen yesterday.

While they represent shortcuts through context-dependent, conscious pragmatic inference, there is no requirement that they be entirely independent of contextual information.

In more formal approaches to **discourse**, defaults derive from the research on nonmonotonic reasoning in computational linguistics and can be traced back to Humboldt, Jespersen, Cassirer, and more recently to Reiter's (1980) default logic (cf. also Thomason 1997; Veltman 1996). In Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT; Asher and Lascarides 2003), defaults are probable interpretations of a sentence accounted for by rhetorical structure rules. The rules operate on the

assumption that discourse is coherent and provide the fully formalized account of the logic of information structure.

Default interpretations are still the subject of heated debates in the **pragmatics** literature. The main differences between theorists arise on the following fronts:

- (i) defaults have to or need not be context-independent;
- (ii) defaults are or are not easily defeasible;
- (iii) defaults are or are not automatic and subconscious;
- (iv) defaults belong to the explicit or implicit content of the utterance;
- (v) defaults are a semantic, pragmatic, psychological, or socio-cultural phenomenon;
- (vi) defaults arise through one type of process or a variety of processes;
- (vii) defaults come from one source or a variety of different sources;
- (viii) defaults arise on the basis of a **proposition** (are 'global') or arise incrementally as interpretation progresses (are 'local');
- (ix) defaults do or do not necessarily arise quicker than non-default interpretations.

Different accounts of default meaning conform to different subsets of the above characteristics. Their common feature is that defaults constitute shortcuts in the communication process, exemplifying the rules of defeasible logic.

*See also:* Abduction; generalized conversational implicature, theory of; implicature; optimality-theory pragmatics; post-Gricean pragmatics; rationality; reasoning

***Suggestions for further reading:***

Jaszczolt, K.M. (2005) *Default Semantics: Foundations of a Compositional Theory of Acts of Communication*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Levinson, S.C. (2000) *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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Thomason, R.H. (1997) 'Nonmonotonicity in linguistics', in J. van Benthem & A. ter Meulen (eds) *Handbook of Logic and Language*, Oxford: Elsevier Science.

Veltman, F. (1996) 'Defaults in update semantics', *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 25: 221-61.