

Storm in a Teacup: What Exactly Are Default Interpretations?

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1. Introduction

The development of pragmatics in the last forty years has been unsurpassed by that of any other area of linguistics in that since the 1970s pragmatics has undergone a transformation into a discipline with clear theoretical foundations and interesting interface issues with semantics, syntax, as well as various areas of cognitive and social sciences. Grice opened up the possibility of building a theory of speaker's meaning and intentions that is compatible with formal methods of truth-conditional semantics. Ideas from anthropology and sociology permeated linguistics in the form of various approaches to politeness. Speech act theory gave rise to considerable advances in cross-cultural pragmatics, as well as to attempts to formalize illocutionary force. The list can be continued. As Jacob Mey (2001: 4) put it, 'The "pragmatic turn" in linguistics can thus be described as a shift from the paradigm of theoretical grammar (in particular, syntax) to the paradigm of the language user'. It can be safely said that without Jacob's immense effort and, most of all, infallible intuition in publishing new ideas in *Journal of Pragmatics* the field would not be as rich and as buoyant. Jacob is partial to no particular school of pragmatics, he welcomes what is new and interesting. As a young post-doc, fresh from Oxford, I benefited from his open-mindedness when my default semantics was born and was in need of some publicity. I have also observed and admired his open-mindedness during the many years that followed. Jacob, thank you, and many happy returns!

In what follows I am arguing, in the example of one controversial issue in post-Gricean pragmatics, that some arguably important debates that divide that field are in fact apparent in that they stem from mutual misunderstandings of theoretical assumptions. When one delves into these assumptions and the terminology used on each side, what divided the theories begins to look like variants of the same idea. This paper attempts to spell this out in the example of a concept which some embrace, others fiercely reject, but no one can pass over in silence: defaults in utterance interpretation.

It can hardly be contested that in the process of utterance interpretation some readings are more salient than others. When the speaker utters (1), the inference in (2) normally follows.

- (1) Ned Kelly lived in Australia or New Zealand.
- (2) The speaker does not know for certain that/whether Ned Kelly lived in Australia.

But the process through which the hearer arrives at meanings such as that in (2) has been the subject of an ongoing controversy between those who remain closer to Grice's (1975) concept of a generalized conversational implicature and defend them as salient, unmarked, 'presumed' meanings (Horn, e. g. 1984, 1988, 2004; Levinson 1987, 1995, 2000, also more recently Recanati 2003, 2004; Jaszczolt, e. g. 1999a, b, 2005, 2006a), and those who attempt to classify them with context-dependent inferences (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Carston, e. g. 1988, 1998, 2002a). In this paper I discuss various versions of the so-called 'default model' of interpretation and identify characteristic features of defaults that are shared by some of the default views but rejected by others. I also briefly compare them with relevance theory which does not make use of this concept but instead assumes broadly understood pragmatic inference. I conclude that the notion of salient interpretation is common to all post-Gricean approaches and the polarization of the debate into supporters and critics of defaults is less of a polarisation than it appears to be: there are salient interpretations, as all agree there are, but they are neither Levinson's 'local', highly cancellable presumptive meanings, nor are they always results of pragmatic inference when the latter is understood as a conscious process. In the concluding remarks I point out the benefits of departing from the polarization of the 'default' – 'non-default' models, moving towards a middle-ground solution.

2. Defaults and Their Properties

There is considerable confusion in the literature concerning the term 'default'. The differences pertain to the acceptance, or the lack thereof, of the following properties: (i) cancellability (defeasibility) of default interpretations, (ii) their availability without resorting to pragmatic inference; (iii) the shorter time required for their arrival as compared with interpretations arrived at through inference; (iv) their local, pre-

propositional status in processing; and (v) functioning as a development of the logical form of the uttered sentence. I shall begin with a very brief overview.

Bach (1984, 1987a, b) discusses ‘default reasoning’ or ‘jumping to conclusions’. The hearer assumes that this defeasible leap in reasoning is compatible with the speaker’s intentions. His defaults have never been developed into a full theory of default interpretations but the principal idea is that of standardization which is facilitated by precedents of similar use of the particular expression. Standardization *shortcircuits* the process of inference and the hearer draws the inference without being conscious of the process (see e.g. Bach 1995: 683; 1998: 713).¹ Next, Levinson’s (1995, 2000) default interpretations, called ‘presumptive meanings’, are generalized conversational implicata (GCIs) produced by the principles of rational communicative behaviour summarized in his three heuristics. Assuming that the interlocutors are co-operative, the hearer does not always have to go through the process of recovering the speaker’s intentions but instead can take a ‘shortcut’. Presumptive meanings are defeasible: they can be cancelled. Local, word-based or phrase-based defaults are necessarily subject to frequent cancellation. Further, defaults and nonmonotonic reasoning are also well acknowledged in logic and computational linguistics but I shall not discuss them here.² Suffice it to say that computational linguistics makes frequent and successful use of default rules of utterance processing and the best representatives among current forerunners are Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (SDRT, Asher and Lascarides, e.g. 2003) with its rhetorical structure rules and Optimality-Theory Pragmatics (e.g. Blutner 2000; Blutner and Zeevat 2004) with formal constraints modelled on Horn’s and Levinson’s heuristics. Recanati (2002, 2003, 2004) also makes use of default meanings. He claims that enrichment in utterance interpretation, such as going from the uttered (3) to the intended (4), is automatic: it takes place sub-doxastically, that is below the level of consciousness, and is not inferential.

- (3) Everybody likes Paris.
- (4) Everybody *I know* likes Paris.

¹ For an account of how such interpretations produce meanings that are implicit in what is said (implicatures) see Bach 1994 and a discussion in Horn 2006.

² See Jaszczolt 2006b for an overview.

In Default Semantics (Jaszczolt, e.g. 2005, 2006a), the meaning of an utterance is a product of the merger of information which comes from four different sources: (i) word meaning and sentence structure, (ii) conscious pragmatic inference, and (iii) two kinds of defaults: cognitive, pertaining to the properties of the operations of the mind/brain, and socio-cultural, pertaining to the customs and rules of the communities. They cut across the generalized/particularized implicature distinction in that they can arise either without, or with, the help of the context.

The common, shared definition is a general one: default interpretations are shortcuts through the laborious process of inferring the speaker's intentions. As to their particular characteristics, there are many different hypotheses, putting forward different combinations of characteristics with respect to the properties (i) –(v). For example, default interpretations are construed as post-propositional, in agreement with Grice's traditional GCIs, or as 'local', sub-propositional, based on the relevant expression, be it a morpheme, word or a phrase, as in Levinson's presumptive meanings. Naturally, if they are highly local, they have to be highly defeasible: the very next word in the incremental processing of the utterance may cancel the presumed interpretation. In (6), the default interpretation of the indefinite 'a man' as 'a man who is not a close relative or friend of the speaker's' can be immediately cancelled.

- (5) I spoke to a man who knows all about laptop computers.
- (6) I spoke to a man who is an old friend of mine who knows all about laptop computers.

In addition, defaults are sometimes construed as a uniform category, as on Recanati's account of free enrichment, or are the result of several different rules of utterance processing, as in Asher and Lascarides' SDRT where there is a set of rhetorical structure rules responsible for such shortcuts, or in my Default Semantics where defaults are ascribed either to the operations of the brain or to cultural and social standards. Also, they either combine with the output of the syntactic processing of the sentence as for example on Recanati's approach or they can also override it, as in my Default Semantics.

In short, there is no ‘*the* default model’ of utterance interpretation. Instead, there are many different hypotheses concerning the properties of the shortcuts through the reasoning process.

3. Food for Experiments

The properties of defeasibility and locality of defaults have been subjected to experimental testing, either by measuring the processing time or by tracking eye movements in subjects reading pertinent sentences. The development of the ability to arrive at default meanings can, and has, also been tested (Noveck 2001; 2004; Papafragou and Musolino 2003; Musolino 2004; Bezuidenhout and Morris 2004; Katsos 2007). By demonstrating that such interpretations are not faster to achieve and are not displayed in the behaviour of five-year olds, one can allegedly obtain a strong argument against defaults in processing.³

Noveck says,

“These developmental findings do not favour one account over another because both could explain it. From the Default perspective, it could be claimed that scalar inferences become automatic with age and that our results are simply revealing how such inference-making matures. In contrast, Relevance Theory would suggest that children and adults use the same comprehension mechanisms but that greater cognitive resources are available for adults, which in turn encourages them to draw out more pragmatic inferences.” Noveck (2004: 307).

The problem is this. The experimental design assumes Levinson’s notion of automatic, local highly cancellable defaults and rests on the assumption that testing the relative time it takes to produce a default meaning as opposed to the inferentially derived meaning is going to provide a compelling argument for or against defaults.

³ The argument from language development is particularly applicable to Levinson’s presumptive meanings because this is the most radical, so to speak, type of default. When the child judges that the sentence with a weaker meaning is a correct description of a situation in which the stronger version would be applicable, such as (i.a) and (i.b) respectively, then the automatic, time-free, inference-free, competence-based, highly defeasible defaults have to appear dubious. See Papafragou and Musolino 2003.

- (i.a) Some of the horses jumped over the fence.
- (i.b) All of the horses jumped over the fence.

But as I pointed out, there is no ‘*the* default view’ or ‘Default Model’ of pragmatic processing: there are many different models, each with its own understanding of default interpretations. Experimental support for the default or inferential view of utterance processing has to be confined to a particular set of properties ascribed to default interpretation. At present there are many such sets and extreme localism and frequent cancellability are not among the characteristics in most of them. For example, rhetorical structure rules of SDRT ‘glue’ whole sentences together in a standard, default way. In (7), the relation of Narration captures the fact that the normal, default reading is sequential, ‘and then’.

(7) Tom came into the room. He approached the group of people at the window.

In Default Semantics, defaults are salient interpretations in the context, predicated of entire propositions, allowing for the enrichment to take place at the moment at which the situation facilitates it. When defaults are understood in this more standard way as shortcuts through the reasoning process, and as interpretations that normally occur given certain properties of the context, rather than as meanings rigidly attached to words or phrases in a cancellable but context-free way, the tests that address Levinson’s model clearly do not apply.

4. Automatic or Inferential?

I have established that there is no unique concept of default that could be contrasted with a ‘non-default view’ of utterance interpretation. I am now moving to the following set of properties that are frequently predicated of defaults: *automatic*, *unconscious*, and *non-inferential*. The main point of contention in the current debates is the conscious-subconscious distinction: defaults are supposed to be automatic and unconscious, while inference is normally understood as a conscious or at least *reflective* process, a process which we can reconstruct when asked to do so. But it seems that what looks like a polarised disagreement between supporters of automatic enrichment and supporters of inference proves to be a cline that reflects the different understandings of the term ‘default’.

Let me spell this out in more detail. Recanati (2004: 40-41) differentiates between (i) truly unconscious, automatic, unconscious, associative process and (ii) spontaneous inference which is labelled as conscious because it can be reflected upon,

reconstructed by the person performing it. He puts forward a hypothesis that speaker's meaning is normally reconstructed in 'a blind, mechanical process, involving no reflection on the interpreter's part' (2004: 32), although occasionally the input to the process may be available to consciousness (Recanati 2007: 53). On the other hand, spontaneous inference of the reflective kind pertains to the derivation of implicatures (a point of contention with relevance theory). But it seems that the automatic status of default interpretations such as for example the free enrichment in (4) does not necessarily warrant classifying them as qualitatively different components of meaning from those arrived at through pragmatic inference. Meanings arrived at in this way are salient because they are entrenched in our culture and society, or because they reflect the mechanism of the human thought. Although defaults are always salient meanings arrived at spontaneously and unconsciously, they are not necessarily oblique to retrospective awareness: when asked, the addressee may be able to retrace the steps from the judgement pertaining to the uttered sentence as in (3) to the intended, enriched one, as in (4).

Relevance theory (e. g. Sperber and Wilson 1995; Carston 2002a, b) emphasises the speed and efficiency of human communication and yet shuns defaults. Instead they opt for a rather broad notion of pragmatic inference that includes spontaneous inferring which is modular and sub-personal (subconscious): 'comprehension system is a mental module: it is fast and automatic' (Carston 2002b: 132). It is, however, inferential and is guided by the cognitive principle of relevance which says that human cognition is normally geared towards the maximization of relevance.⁴ Meaning, including lexical meaning, is recovered by the addressee in the process of the so-called mutual adjustment (e. g. Carston 2002b; Wilson and Carston 2007), taking into account available contextual clues, including the reconstructed intentions of the speaker's, and '[t]he processes involved are claimed to be entirely a matter of (non-demonstrative) inference' (Carston 2007: 21). This inference is automatic and is normally unreflective, although the addressee may on some occasions be able to reconstruct the premises. As Carston (2007: 42) argues, in the examples taken from experimental evidence, in many instances the addressee is aware of the literal meaning of an utterance and of the steps taken to enrich it to the full,

⁴ For examples of non-inferential accounts of lexical processing see Wilson and Carston (2007: 243). For a discussion of Recanati's non-inferential account of what is said see Carston 2007.

intended meaning.⁵ This form of inference is only replaced with conscious, reflective inference (reasoning) when the outcome of the former type of inferring is obviously wrong.⁶

Now, because inference is construed as predominantly automatic, on the preferred sense of default interpretation relevance theory is a default model through and through. It makes use of shortcuts in processing in that the interpretation module combines information coming from various sources in a fast and automatic way. Default meanings are in principle compatible with this model of interpretation. All it takes to take this step is adopting the common sense definition of default interpretation as *a salient meaning arrived at through a shortcut in conscious reasoning*. On this construal, widely adopted in the default literature (*pace* the post-Griceans' current preoccupation with presumptive meanings), relevance theory turns out to be a default view that has an added advantage in that it leaves the unit in which this automatic process operates flexible as to its length and one does not need to end up with frequent, albeit unwelcome, cancellations of presumed senses that we encounter on the extremely-local-default view by Levinson. The main drawback of Sperber and Wilson's construal is easy to fix in that it seems to be largely terminological. The term 'inference' is normally associated with reasoning and it would be more intuitive to construe it in this way, abandoning the concept of 'automatic inference' and employing a flexible notion of 'automatic interpretation' instead, where the inferential steps are or are not available retrospectively, as occasion dictates. Nothing is to be lost and a lot is to be gained: the default/non-default dispute fades away, making way for a much less interesting dispute between local presumed meanings and more flexible automatic interpretations, the latter made non-inferential by decree and winning in virtue of their flexibility.

⁵ Noveck (2001, 2004) investigated the acquisition of modal and quantificational constructions and his most interesting finding was that when presented with (i), only 41 per cent of adult subjects regarded it as true, while 85 per cent of children were happy with it. Most adults understand (i) as (ii) and judge it to be false. In other words, their understanding of 'some' is 'some but not all'.

(i) Some elephants have trunks.

(ii) Some but not all elephants have trunks.

⁶ See Carston 2002a, b, and for discussion Recanati 2004. Recanati (pp. 38-44) maintains the distinction there between automatic enrichment of what is said (the equivalent of the relevance-theoretic explicature, the development of the logical form of the sentence) and truly inferential generation of implicatures. See also Carston (2007: 25-26) and Recanati (2007: 49-50) for a discussion of the handling of referential mistakes in their respective theories.

5. Summing Up

What I have said so far clearly demonstrates that just as there is no unique concept of default interpretation, so there is no unique concept of inference. More interestingly, it demonstrates that when we delve beneath the surface we end up in one, post-Gricean teacup with futile storms in it. My modest aim was to show that when we analyse discourse interpretation on the sub-personal level, the common-sense notion of default is equally applicable to inferential and non-inferential accounts. Then, instead of asking whether *The Default View* or *The Inferential View* is correct, we can sensibly ask (i) at what stage do spontaneous meanings arise; (ii) is their construction retrospectively available to the thinking subject; and a plethora of other genuinely interesting and unprejudiced questions.

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