

The semantics and pragmatics of racial and ethnic slurs: Towards a psychologically real contextualist account*

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ABSTRACT In this paper, I support [Anderson & Lepore's \(2013a,b\)](#) claim that the meaning of racial and ethnic slurs cannot be accounted for either in semantic or in pragmatic terms, but I argue, in my search for cognitively real explanations, that there is more to say about slurs than the mere claim that they are prohibited words. By adopting speakers' main intended and successfully communicated messages as the object of my linguistic analysis, I extend the scope of application of [Jaszczolt's \(2005, 2010, 2016\)](#) Default Semantics and offer theoretical but psychologically plausible representations of slurring language meaning.

1 INTRODUCTION

[Anderson & Lepore \(2013a,b\)](#) rightly observe that racial and ethnic slurs cannot be adequately accounted for in traditional semantic or traditional pragmatic terms. First, no difference in meaning can be attributed to the predicative content that slurring terms and their neutral counterparts deploy. Denial statements, as I illustrate below, are taken to demonstrate that that is the case. Second, the authors propose, slurs' offensiveness cannot be taken to be presupposed, since offensiveness, unlike presuppositions, is not filtered out when speakers report racial and ethnic slurring utterances that other language users have uttered. Finally, Anderson and Lepore also claim that slurs cannot be taken to trigger conventionally implicated meaning, since, when a speaker utters a slur, the perpetrated offense cannot merely be taken as peripheral. If derogatory and/or offensive meaning was conventionally implicated, non-offensive uses of slurs could not actually be accounted for, and it is a fact that slurs are sometimes used in self-appropriated (non-derogatory and/or non-offensive) environments.¹ Based on these considerations, Anderson and Lepore assert that the most meaningful generalisation that can be made in connection with racial and ethnic slurring lexical items is that they are prohibited (offensive) words and that, as is the case with any other prohibition, there exist particular exempted (non-slurring)

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¹ [Anderson & Lepore \(2013a\)](#) also claim that the distinction between a slur and its neutral counterpart cannot merely be attributed to [Frege's \(1897\)](#) notion of tone. This is because Frege's tone is subjective, while a slur's offensiveness is not. I cannot but agree with such a consideration: dictionary definitions objectively reflect slurs' offensiveness and an unexpected utterance of a slur is apt to offend both target and non-target hearers alike.

uses. In-group speakers are taken not to violate culturally and socially determined prohibitions due to their own membership within the relevant race, ethnicity and/or nationality group.

While I entirely agree, as I further elaborate below, that slurs' derogation and/or offensiveness cannot be pinned down in purely semantic or in purely pragmatic terms, I aim to seek a psychologically real theory of natural language meaning which can reveal more than the fact that slurs are prohibited words. I thus propose, by extending the scope of application of Jaszczolt's (2005, 2010, 2016) Default Semantics, that speakers' main intended and successfully communicated messages (primary meanings) are to constitute the object of study of a cognitively real account of slurring language use and interpretation. My analysis of the contextualised meanings that speakers intend to communicate and that hearers actually recover yields an account of slurring language in which the semantic/pragmatic distinction loses its now long-standing predominance. It is a balanced interaction of language and context that leads to language users' slurring meanings.

Three methodological clarifications are in order before I focus on the structure of this paper. By acknowledging that slurs can communicate both a racial, ethnic and/or nationality-determined layer of meaning as well as an evaluative layer that bigoted as well as in-group speakers consider important to convey (e.g. Predelli 2013), I refer to the former as "descriptiveness" and to the latter as either negative or positive "expressiveness".² Furthermore, the terms "slurs", "slurring lexical items", and "slurring language forms" are to be interpreted to refer to strong and heavily emotionally loaded racial and ethnic slurring words. While different slurs can culturally be taken to comprise different degrees of negative expressiveness (Anderson & Lepore 2013a, Saka 2007), an in-depth analysis of stronger as opposed to weaker emotionally loaded terms remains outside the scope of this work and is left to sociolinguistics proper. Finally, in accordance with my theoretical objective, neither slurs nor their neutral counterparts are actually mentioned in this paper: I employ "[*(s)]" to refer to the former, following Richard's (2008) convention, and I employ "[nc(s)]" to refer to the latter. The rationale for this methodological move is that mentioning specific slurs (as well as their neutral counterparts) could distract readers from the universal semantic and pragmatic claims that I intend to make in this work.³

This paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I expand on Anderson and Lepore's view that racial and ethnic slurs cannot be accounted for in pure semantic or in pure pragmatic terms. I argue that slurs cannot be pinned down as triggers of either entailments or semantic presuppositions (Section 2.1) and I move on to claim, from a pragmatic point of view, that slurring meaning cannot be explained in terms of either implicatures (Grice 1975) or pragmatic presuppositional meaning (Keenan 1971, Schlenker 2003, 2007, 2012) (Section 2.2). In Section 3, I present arguments in favour of Jaszczolt's (2005, 2010, 2016) Default Semantics as a psychologically

² Since speakers who utter slurs can convey, in context, either racist or friendly layers of expressiveness, I refer to bigoted and self-appropriated scenarios as "negative" and "positive" contexts, respectively.

³ This "silencist" approach also emphasises my view that no human being is to be derogated and/or offended based on race, ethnicity and/or nationality considerations.

real theory of meaning which can adequately account for slurring language use and interpretation. Step by step, I defend the notion of primary meaning as my object of study (Section 3.1), explain how primary meaning is taken to arise within the Default Semantics framework (Section 3.2), and construct theoretical but psychologically plausible representations of slurring language meaning (Section 3.3). Lastly, in Section 4, I offer my concluding remarks.

2 RACIAL AND ETHNIC DEROGATION AND/OR OFFENSIVENESS: A SEMANTIC OR A PRAGMATIC PHENOMENON?

In this section I support [Anderson & Lepore's \(2013a,b\)](#) view that racial and ethnic slurring language cannot be accounted for either in pure semantic or in pure pragmatic terms. I argue that slurring meaning cannot be pinned down in terms of entailment or semantic presupposition, on the one hand, or in terms of implicature and/or pragmatic presupposition, on the other. The fact that this is the case does not necessarily mean that no current theory of meaning can adequately account for slurring language use and interpretation since, as I propose in Section 3, Jaszczolt's Default Semantics is in a position to provide comprehensive as well as cognitively plausible explanations.

2.1 *Slurs and an entailment and semantic presupposition analysis*

It is widely acknowledged in the literature ([Anderson & Lepore 2013a,b](#), [Allan 2015](#)) that while slurs are primarily used by bigots to deprecate individuals that they despise, they can also be mentioned by fully respectful speakers to discuss (and reject) racist and discriminatory practices, or even used by members of a certain group to communicate self-appropriated senses of pride, friendliness and/or camaraderie:⁴

- (1) (A bigot): "Rob is a [*]!"
- (2) (A non-bigot): "Rob is not a [*]! Rob is [nc]."
- (3) (An in-group member): "The [*] is so nice!"

From a semantic point of view, [Anderson & Lepore \(2013a,b\)](#) observe that it is not possible to distinguish the meaning of slurs, on the one hand, and their neutral counterparts, on the other, in content terms. They report that, according to their informants, the speaker in (5) is denying what the speaker in (4) has affirmed, which indicates that the slur in (5) and its neutral counterpart in (4) share the same predicative content:

- (4) "Rob is [nc]."

⁴ Unless otherwise required by context, in this paper I maintain [Quine's \(1940\)](#) use/mention distinction. While bigots and in-group members can be taken to "use" slurs to refer to individuals that they, respectively, despise and adore, fully respectful language users who discuss racist and discriminatory practices can be taken to merely "mention" such terms.

(5) “Rob is not a [*].” (adapted from [Anderson & Lepore 2013a: 28](#))

Nonetheless, in order to determine whether all aspects of slurring meaning can be accounted for in merely semantic terms, it is still necessary to investigate whether slurs’ descriptiveness and/or negative expressiveness can be taken to be either entailed or semantically presupposed. In this section, I conclude that that is not the case.

Entailment is generally defined as the semantic relation that holds between one sentence (S1) and another (S2) whenever the truth of S1 guarantees the truth of S2, the falsity of S1 allows S2 to be either true (T) or false (F), and the falsity of S2 guarantees the falsity of S1. Table 1 reflects all possible truth values of entailing and entailed natural language sentences.

S1	→	S2
T	→	T
F	→	T ∨ F
F	←	F

Table 1 Entailment truth table.

The logical relations in Table 1 clearly hold between the specific and generic sentences in (6) and (7), respectively:

(6) “I bought tulips.”

(7) “I bought flowers.” (adapted from [Jaszczolt 2002: 83](#))

(6) entails (7). If it is the case that a certain speaker bought tulips, it has to be the case that the same speaker bought flowers; if it is not the case that the speaker bought tulips, it may or may not be the case that the same speaker bought flowers, that is, she may have bought some other flowers, but not tulips, or, perhaps, no flowers at all; and if it is not the case that a certain speaker bought flowers, it cannot be the case that the same speaker bought tulips.

An analysis of the logical relations between (8) and (9) reveals that expressive (8) cannot be claimed to entail descriptive (9) in similar specific/generic terms, since the truth values that every speaker would assign to (6) and (7) cannot be claimed to necessarily hold should particular speakers assign truth values to the slurring examples under consideration. The analysis below reflects, to emphasise again, the truth values that certain particular speakers can be taken to attribute to the statements in question rather than the truth values of sentence-level propositions themselves as is typically done in formal semantics:

(8) “I saw a [*].”

(9) “I saw an [nc].”

If (8) entailed (9) in specific/generic terms, the truth values reflected in Table 1 suggest that if (8) were T, (9) would have to be T; if (8) were F, (9) could be either T or F; and if (9) were F, (8) would have to be F. However, for example, if (8) were T,

and a bigot or an in-group speaker saw an [nc] that the speaker, respectively, either despised or actually liked, (9) would be necessarily T; if (8) were F, and a bigot or an in-group speaker did not see a person to whom the slur contextually applied (respectively, a target that the speaker despised or that the speaker actually liked), (9) would be F; and if (9) were F, and a bigot or an in-group speaker did not see an [nc], (8), unless uttered metaphorically, would be F. As can be seen, the truth values in Table 1 do not necessarily hold in connection (8) and (9). As Table 2 reflects, if (8) were F (for example, for a bigot or an in-group speaker), (9) would be F rather than T or F.⁵

(8)		(9)
T	→	T
F	→	F T ∨ F
F	←	F

Table 2 Truth-value judgments attributable to bigoted or in-group language users for the situationally embedded utterances in (8) and (9) (entailment analysis).

An analysis of (8) with respect to the negative expressiveness of the slur, as reflected in (10), leads to a similar non-entailment conclusion. Slurs are so context-dependent that an entailment analysis of negative expressiveness does not hold:

(10) “I saw a despicable person (in virtue of her/his ethnicity).”

If (8) were T, and the speaker saw a “[*]”, (10) would be T only if uttered by a bigot, but not if uttered by an in-group speaker, for example, who adores members of her own group; if (8) were F, and the speaker did not see a “[*]”, (10) could be either T or F, that is, the speaker may have seen a person that she adores or a person that she despises; and if (10) were F, and it was not the case that the speaker saw a person that she despises, (8) would be F if uttered by a bigot, but not necessarily F if uttered by an in-group speaker who may have seen either a member of her own group that she likes or an individual from another ethnicity, for example, that she also respects. As can be seen, the truth values in Table 1 do not necessarily hold in connection with the expressive layer of meaning of the slur and it can be concluded that negative expressiveness is, therefore, not to be taken as entailed. As Table 3 reflects, if, for an in-group speaker, (8) were T, (10) would be F (and not necessarily T); and if (10) were F, (8) could be either T or F (and not necessarily F).⁶

⁵ In such a case, a non-bigot could always claim “you didn’t fail to see a ‘[*]’, you failed to see an ‘[nc]’”, but the fact remains that (9) continues to be F. Also, a non-bigot could say “You didn’t see a ‘[*]’, you saw an [nc]”. In such a scenario, (8) would be F and (9) would be T, but the fact remains that for a bigot or an in-group member, (8) and (9) would continue to be T.

⁶ My entailment analysis addresses negative expressiveness in every context of utterance. If the speaker is either a bigot or a proud in-group speaker, either negative or positive expressiveness, respectively, can be taken to be entailed by the slur. For example, in a positive scenario, if the speaker saw a “[*]”, it has to be the case that she saw a person that she likes; if the speaker did not see a “[*]”, she may have seen a person that she adores or a person that she dislikes; and if the speaker did not see a person that she likes, it cannot be the case that she saw a “[*]”.

(8)		(10)
T	→	F ⊥
F	→	T ∨ F
T ∨ F ⊥	←	F

Table 3 Truth-value judgments attributable to in-group language users for the situationally embedded utterances in (8) and (10) (entailment analysis).

In short, while slurs could be taken to be specific terms employed by bigots to refer to specific groups of (in their view) despicable individuals, it cannot be concluded that the relation holding between slurs, on the one hand, and their neutral counterparts or “despicable people (in virtue of their ethnicities)”, on the other, is the same as the one that holds between the specific term “tulip” and the more generic term “flower”.

Semantic presupposition, which developed from Strawson’s (1950) ideas on the presuppositions that statements can trigger⁷, can be defined as the relation that holds between one sentence (S1) and another (S2) whenever the truth or falsity of S1 guarantees the truth of S2 and the falsity of S2 makes S1 neither-true-nor-false (NTNF). Table 4 reflects all possible truth values of semantically presupposing and semantically presupposed sentences.

S1		S2
T	→	T
F	→	T
NTNF	←	F

Table 4 Semantic presupposition truth table.

The truth values in Table 4 can be assigned to the logical relations that hold between the sentences in (11) and (12):

(11) “Rob managed to open the door.”

(12) “Rob tried to open the door.” (adapted from Levinson 1983: 181)

(11) semantically presupposes (12). If it is the case that Rob managed to open the door, it has to be the case that he tried to do it; if it is the case that Rob did not manage to open the door, it still has to be the case that he tried to do so; and if it is not the case that Rob tried to open the door, (11) is to be regarded as NTNF.

Now, before I assess whether descriptiveness or negative expressiveness can be taken as triggers of semantic presuppositional meaning, it is important to contrast the notion of semantic (or logical) presupposition with the notion of pragmatic presupposition. While semantic presupposition is defined in the above-mentioned

⁷ In Strawson’s view, truth values are assigned to statements rather than to sentences.

logical (sentence-level) terms, the notion of pragmatic presupposition can be built, for example, either on the relation between utterances and culturally determined conditions of use (Keenan 1971), or on the contribution of speakers' non-asserted beliefs into the interlocutors' common ground (Schlenker 2003, 2007, 2012). For example, in Keenan's view, the French utterance in (13) presupposes that the addressee is very familiar with the speaker; if the speaker uttered (13) without such a condition being met, the utterance would not be recovered in a literal and/or felicitous manner:

(13) "Tu es dégoûtant." (Keenan 1971: 51)

According to Schlenker, on the other hand, the speaker of the utterance in (14) is asserting that the individual under consideration has arrived and, at the same time, presupposing, or adding to the interlocutors' common ground, that Rob has at least two brothers:

(14) "Rob's blond brother has arrived." (adapted from Schlenker 2012: 403)

I assess negative expressiveness as a trigger of pragmatic presupposition in Section 2.2.3⁸; at this stage, I return to an analysis of (8)-(10), repeated below for convenience, and reveal that slurs cannot be taken to semantically presuppose either descriptiveness or negative expressiveness:

(8) "I saw a [*]."

(9) "I saw an [nc]."

(10) "I saw a despicable person (in virtue of her/his ethnicity)."

If "[*]" semantically presupposed "[nc]", the truth values reflected in Table 4 suggest that if (8) were T, (9) would have to be T; if (8) were F, (9) would have to be T; and if (9) were F, (8) would have to be NTNF. However, the above analysis with respect to entailment relations shows that the truth values in Table 4 do not necessarily hold in connection with racial and ethnic descriptiveness. As Table 5 reveals, if (8) were F for a bigot or an in-group speaker, (9) would also be F (and not necessarily T); and if (9) were F, (8) would be F, rather than NTNF.

(8)		(9)	
T	→	T	
F	→	F ⊥	
F NTNF	←	F	

Table 5 Truth-value judgments attributable to bigoted or in-group language users for the situationally embedded utterances in (8) and (9) (semantic presupposition analysis).

⁸ In this paper, I assess descriptiveness and negative expressiveness as triggers of semantic or pragmatic presupposition independently of whether one notion or the other is to be preferred for the purposes of a comprehensive theory of natural language interpretation. My sole aim, in this regard, is to argue that neither descriptiveness nor negative expressiveness can be pinned down as triggers of backgrounded (presuppositional) meaning in every context.

An analysis of the statement in (8) with respect to the negative expressiveness of the slur leads to a similar non-presuppositional conclusion. Once again, the entailment analysis above in relation to the illustrations in (8) and (10) reveals that slurs are so context-dependent that the truth values in Table 4 do not necessarily hold. As Table 6 reveals, if, for an in-group speaker, for example, (8) were T, (10) would be F (and not necessarily T); if (8) were F, (10) could be either T or F (and not necessarily T); and if (10) were F, (8) could also be either T or F, rather than NTNF.⁹

(8)		(10)
T	→	F ⊥
F	→	T ∨ F ⊥
T ∨ F NTNF	←	F

Table 6 Truth-value judgments attributable to in-group language users for the situationally embedded utterances in (8) and (10) (semantic presupposition analysis).

My entailment and semantic presupposition analysis in this section indicates that slurring meaning cannot be adequately accounted for in such logical terms and that an explanatorily adequate approach to racial and ethnic slurring meaning needs to depart from mere semantic and/or logical considerations. The fact that negative expressiveness cannot be taken to be entailed or semantically presupposed does not necessarily mean that negative expressiveness is not recovered by hearers whenever slurs are encountered. As I explain in Section 3.3, negative expressiveness can still be taken to reside with slurs in the sense that language users are likely to recover negative expressiveness in both negative and positive contexts.

2.2 Expressiveness as a trigger of implicatures or pragmatic presuppositional meaning

2.2.1 Expressiveness as a trigger of conversational implicatures

In Section 2.1 I argued that negative expressiveness cannot be taken to be either entailed or semantically presupposed. Now, when dealing with pragmatic considerations, I claim that slurs' expressiveness cannot be pinned down (in every context of utterance) as a trigger of conversationally implicated meaning. The what is said/what is implicated distinction has been at the core of pragmatic linguistic analyses since Grice (1975). For Grice (1978), lexical meaning and the output of syntax, after disambiguation and reference assignment, contribute to the level of meaning which he identifies as what is said, while inferences which arise as a result of speakers' observance (or infringement) of the cooperative principle and the Gricean maxims of conversation belong to the level of what is conversationally implicated. In (15), B has "said" that there is a garage round the corner, but since B's utterance is assumed to be relevant to the situation at hand, B has also "implicated",

⁹ The truth values in Table 4 would not hold in relation to a bigoted speaker either. If, for a bigot, (8) were T, (10) would be T; if (8) were F, (10) could be either T or F; and if (10) were F, (8) would be F. See also footnote 6.

that is, B has led A to infer, that such a fact could actually help A to continue their journey:

(15) A: "I am out of petrol."

B: "There is a garage round the corner." (Grice 1975: 51)

For Grice, conversational implicatures display the following features or characteristics. First, conversational implicatures, except as stated below, do not entirely depend upon the specific language forms that speakers resort to and are, as a result, non-detachable. In connection with the context in (15), B's rephrased utterance in (16) would still trigger the above-mentioned implicated inference:

(16) B: "There is a shop five minutes away."

Second, conversational implicatures are interpreted as a result of the Gricean cooperative principle and maxims of conversation and are thereby calculable. In (15), A can calculate that the existence of the garage is the solution to her current problem as a result of her assumption that B is observing the maxim of relation. Third, conversational implicatures allow different contextual interpretations and are, as a result, indeterminate. By means of her utterance in (15), B may have intended to communicate, for example, either that she knows that such a garage is open or that the place is supposed, like most garages in the world, to have petrol on sale. And fourth, conversational implicatures can be cancelled either by context or by the addition of further specific linguistic material. In connection with (15), B could always continue her utterance by stating, for example, that it is a real shame that the garage is closed. Grice observes, nonetheless, that while relevance, quality and quantity conversational implicatures all display the above-mentioned features, manner conversational implicatures do not exhibit the non-detachable characteristic. As Grice explains, if a speaker replaced the convoluted language expressions in (17) with the more straightforward forms in (18), the manner conversational implicature in (19) would not arise:

(17) "Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of 'Home sweet home'." (Grice 1975: 55)

(18) "Miss X sang 'Home sweet home'." (Grice 1975: 55)

(19) "Miss X sang awfully."

As the following examples illustrate, slurring expressiveness can be taken to be, like manner conversational implicatures, detachable, calculable, indeterminate and cancellable:

(20) "They are [*s]."

Detachability: There is an alternative available to the speaker, namely, an utterance of "They are [ncs]", in which case, the message that the

individuals being discussed are, in the speaker's view, despicable (or nice, in a positive context) "may" not be communicated.¹⁰

- (21) A: "Do you like them?"
B: "They are [*s]."

Calculability: It is possible for A to calculate B's implicated meaning by assuming B's observance of the maxim of relation. B can assume, in context, that it is mutual knowledge that "[*s]" is an emotionally loaded term and, being cooperative, she does nothing to prevent the hearer from obtaining the message that she is being racist (or friendly).

- (22) "They are [*s]!"

Indeterminacy: Depending on context, the individuals being discussed may be considered, for example, to be either despised or well-liked by the speaker.

- (23) "They are [*s]. By the way, I do not mean to be offensive, as you know, I love [ncs]."

Cancellability: It is possible for the speaker, for instance, to linguistically cancel the derogatory and/or offensive expressiveness of the slur.

In spite of the facts that expressiveness presents itself as detachable, calculable, indeterminate and cancellable and that slurs can, indeed, trigger conversational implicatures, as in example (24), expressiveness cannot be taken to trigger conversational implicatures in every context of utterance:

- (24) A: "Do you like Rob?"
B (a bigot): "Rob's a [*]."
B's implicated meaning: "I don't like Rob."

Based on the descriptiveness and expressiveness of the slur in (25), the bigoted speaker in such an example can be taken to be "saying", rather than "implicating", that Rob is [nc] and that she finds him to be despicable. Unlike the linguistic expressions which trigger the manner conversational implicature in (17), the slur employed in (25) appears to evoke, in itself, a descriptive and an expressive layer of meaning which, in relation to strong derogatory and/offensive words, are nowadays even reflected in dictionaries:

¹⁰ Expressive messages can also be manifested, in certain contexts, by means of neutral racial, ethnic and/or nationality words. A bigot who says "What can you expect? Rob is [nc]!" is also derogating and/or offending members of the relevant race, ethnicity and/or nationality.

- (25) A: “What do you think about Rob?”
B (a bigot): “Rob’s a [*].”

It can be concluded, at this stage, that negative expressiveness cannot be pinned down as a trigger of conversationally implicated meaning in every context. This is because slurs’ negative expressiveness appears to be lexically encoded, and, in certain environments, to contribute not to what is conversationally implicated but to what is said.

2.2.2 *The conventional implicature assessment*

Within the Gricean framework, conventional implicatures arise not out of the cooperative principle and the maxims of conversation, but out of speakers’ use of particular conventionalised lexical items. In (26), the speaker has “said” that the person being discussed is both an Englishman and brave, but she has merely “implicated”, that is, she has invited her hearer to infer, that such a person is brave a result of his English nationality:

- (26) “He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave.” (Grice 1975: 44)

In Grice’s view, while conversational implicatures are non-detachable (apart from manner conversational implicatures), calculable, indeterminate and cancellable, conventional implicatures display exactly the opposite features. First, conventional implicatures entirely depend upon the specific language forms that speakers resort to and are, as a result, detachable. The rephrased utterance in (27) would not trigger the consequential inference that the term “therefore” generates in (26), although on the Gricean account (26) and (27) both have the same logical form:

- (27) “He is an Englishman and brave.” (adapted from Grice 1975: 44)

Second, as I anticipated above, conventional implicatures are not interpretable (calculable) as a result of the Gricean cooperative principle and maxims of conversation. For example, in (26), the consequential interpretation of “therefore” is determined by mere convention. Third, conventional implicatures do not allow different contextual interpretations and are, as a result, determinate. In the context of (26), the speaker’s use of “therefore” can trigger one and only one conventionally implicated consequential interpretation. And fourth, conventional implicatures cannot be cancelled, for example, by the addition of further specific linguistic material. The speaker in (26) is not in a position to cancel the consequential inference by stating, for example, that being brave is not at all related to being English.

There are three reasons to depart from the Gricean approach to conventionally implicated meaning in the context of this paper. First, following Anderson & Lepore (2013a), slurring expressiveness cannot be pinned down as a trigger of conventionally implicated information when it is a fact that slurs are employed in friendly and self-appropriated environments in which no derogation and/or offense are intended to be communicated. Second, the Gricean notion of conventional implicatures cannot adequately account for racial and ethnic slurring language use. As I evidenced in examples (21)–(23), expressiveness is, unlike Grice’s conventional implicatures, cal-

culable, indeterminate and cancellable. And third, although the Gricean framework neatly differentiates conversational from conventional implicatures, the existence of the latter class of inferentially triggered meaning has been historically challenged. When [Bach \(1999\)](#) argues against the existence of conventional implicatures, he claims that alleged conventional implicature devices (ACIDs), such as “therefore” and “but”, are not to be taken as triggers of conventionally implicated meaning and this is because, Bach asserts, they pass the indirect quotation test. According to Bach, if a lexical item is needed in order to provide a complete and accurate report of a statement, such a lexical item contributes to what is said rather than to what is implicated. Non-contrastive (29) is not, unlike contrastive (30), a complete and accurate report of what the speaker has said in (28) and, as a result, “but” cannot be claimed to trigger a conventional implicature which needs to be inferred:

(28) “Rob is huge but he is agile.”

(29) “Ron said that Rob is huge and that he is agile.”

(30) “Ron said that Rob is huge but that he is agile.”

(adapted from [Bach 1999](#): 339)

[Wilson \(2016\)](#) disagrees with Bach’s arguments and claims that “but” contributes not to what is said but to non-truth-conditional meaning. A salient argument is that when “but” is employed, for instance, in conditionalisation contexts, it can be replaced with “and” and the truth-conditional meaning of the utterance appears to remain unaffected.¹¹ Wilson explains, for example, that the conditions to cancel the picnic in (31) and (32) are merely that there has to be sun and that there have to be clouds:

(31) “If the sun is shining but there are clouds on the horizon, you should cancel your picnic.”

(32) “If the sun is shining and there are clouds on the horizon, you should cancel your picnic.” [\(Wilson 2016: 8\)](#)

Despite Wilson’s disagreement with Bach, there seems to be consensus that Grice does not develop a full theory of conventional implicatures and that rather, as [Potts \(2005\)](#) observes, Grice has decided not to comprehensively account for the separate class of meaning that “but” and “therefore”, for instance, are assumed to trigger and convey.

Although Potts agrees with Bach’s position on the Gricean notion of conventional implicatures, he still proposes that there is a separate class of expressions which does not trigger truth-conditional (at-issue) meaning but merely leads interlocutors to particular understandings. Potts purports, for example, that expressive words such as “damn” merely display speakers’ attitudinal evaluations towards the relevant targets. To exemplify, while the speaker of the utterance in (33) is likely to be neutral as to how she feels about the particular object under consideration, the speaker of

¹¹ It has to be noted that Bach does acknowledge that ACIDs can be used to convey non-truth-conditional meaning; he merely claims that ACIDs can contribute to what is said, as in (28) and (30), and not that they always make such a contribution.

the utterance in (34) conventionally implicates, as aside information, her heightened emotional state:

(33) “Rob bought that bike.”

(34) “Rob bought that damn bike.” (adapted from Potts 2012: 2532)

While each of (33) and (34) convey the independent at-issue message that Rob bought a particular bike, only the speaker in (34) conventionally implicates (by resorting to the conventional meaning of the expressive) that she holds a certain attitudinal evaluation towards the purchased object. As a result, in situations like (34), in which expressives are utilised in combination with descriptives, the expressive dimension of meaning is taken to guide the interpretation of the merely descriptive message and lead the hearer to recover the speaker’s heightened emotional state.

Interestingly, Potts claims that expressives are descriptively ineffable, in other words, that descriptive language cannot communicate the additional layer of expressive and non-truth-conditional meaning that emotionally loaded speakers may wish, in context, to convey. The derogating and/or offending speaker who utters the expressive utterance in (35) can be taken not to be satisfied by the more descriptive message that an utterance of (36) would, in the same context, convey:

(35) “You are a bastard.”

(36) *“You are a vile contemptible person.” (adapted from Potts 2007: 176)

I cannot but depart from an analysis of slurs as conventionally implicated meaning in this sense based on the observation that not all racial and ethnic slurring terms reveal such a descriptive ineffability feature. While it is true that the replacement of strong emotionally loaded slurs with their neutral counterparts will have a less derogatory and/or offensive effect, it has to be acknowledged that different slurring terms have different degrees of negative expressiveness (Anderson & Lepore 2013a, Saka 2007) and that less emotionally loaded slurring words can have, in certain contexts, exactly the same derogatory and/offensive effects as their corresponding neutral alternatives.¹²

2.2.3 Expressiveness and pragmatic presupposition

In Section 2.1 I demonstrated that negative expressiveness cannot be pinned down as a trigger of semantic presupposition. I shall now argue, after assessing Keenan’s (1971) and Schlenker’s (2003, 2007, 2012) expressive approaches to pragmatic presupposition, that slurring expressiveness cannot be accounted for, in every context, in such terms either. To begin with, Keenan proposes that there are two distinct types of presupposition: (i) semantic or logical presupposition, and (ii) pragmatic presupposition. He suggests that pragmatic presuppositions are inferences that arise out of the relations that hold between specific speakers and the appropriateness of their specific sentences in context (utterances). In Keenan’s view, the successful interpretation of certain contextualised sentences requires the existence of cultural

¹² See footnote 10.

conditions that allow hearers to understand speakers' utterances. If such conditions are not fulfilled, hearers are not in a position to interpret their interlocutors' messages or, if they are, they will understand them in either an insulting or in a joking manner. In connection with Keenan's illustration in (13), repeated below for convenience, the French speaker's use of the informal pronoun "*tu*" presupposes that the speaker's addressee is, for example, intimately related to the speaker, while the truth-conditional (foregrounded) meaning of such an utterance remains the same as in the more formal example in (37):

(13) "Tu es dégoûtant." (Keenan 1971: 51)

(37) "Vous êtes dégoûtant."

At first sight, Keenan's account of pragmatic presupposition presents itself as a possible explanatory tool to account for the interpretation of slurs' expressiveness both in negative and in positive contexts. While bigoted uses of a slur could be claimed to engender the presupposition that the speaker holds a derogatory and/or offensive attitude towards members of a certain race, ethnicity, and/or nationality, in-group uses of the same term could be taken to engender the presupposition that the speaker feels socially close to the relevant targets.

Keenan makes it clear that pragmatic presuppositions do not arise from, and should not be taken to be related to, speakers' personal beliefs. This is a feature that both semantic and pragmatic presuppositions have in common, as neither of them is defined in terms of (or triggered by) speakers' personal beliefs. In order to illustrate the fact that pragmatic presupposition is belief-independent, Keenan observes that speakers must not necessarily believe the presuppositions of the utterances that they make. If a child, for instance, utters (13), it is clear that she believes what she is communicating, that is, that the addressee is disgusting, even though she might not realise that her utterance presupposes, for example, familiarity with her interlocutor. The same could be claimed in connection with a child's use of a racial and ethnic slur. A child who employs a slur and is unaware of the term's derogatory and/or offensive layer of expressiveness could be claimed to be merely intending to communicate the descriptive layer of meaning of the slur. Nonetheless, my main concern with a presuppositional account of slurs is that it is evident that racial and ethnic expressiveness cannot always be taken to be presupposed or to remain in the background. As I explain and exemplify below, descriptiveness and expressiveness, in different contexts, can either be presupposed or be presented in the foreground.

Schlenker provides a specific attempt to account for slurs as a particular type of pragmatic presuppositional triggers. Basing his proposal on Stalnaker's (e.g. 2002) notion of common ground, Schlenker identifies pragmatic presupposition as the phenomenon that arises whenever speakers communicate a non-asserted idea and such an idea, once it is accepted by addressees, becomes part of the interlocutors' common beliefs. As I anticipated in Section 2.1, Schlenker suggests that the speaker of (14) is, on the one hand, asserting that Rob's blond brother has arrived and, on the other, presupposing that Rob has at least two brothers:

(14) "Rob's blond brother has arrived." (adapted from Schlenker 2012: 403)

According to Schlenker, racial and ethnic slurs trigger expressive pragmatic presuppositions since slurs involve the addition of speakers' own personal evaluations into the conversational common ground and the update of hearers' mental states. For example, after the bigoted speaker produces the utterance in (38), it becomes part of the interlocutors' common ground that such a bigoted speaker believes that the target individuals are to be despised. What is more, if the addressee also believes such a claim, it becomes common ground that the individual being discussed is a person who is to be despised as a result of her/his race, ethnicity and/or nationality background:

(38) (A bigot): "I met a [*]." (adapted from Schlenker 2007: 242)

Schlenker (2007) claims that the expressive presuppositions that slurs trigger are indexical, attitudinal, and shiftable. First, expressive presuppositions are indexical in the sense that they are assessed in a particular context or situation of utterance. In (38), the bigoted speaker, in that particular context, regards the slurred target as a despicable individual. Second, expressive presuppositions are attitudinal in that they reflect speakers' subjective assessments or evaluations. The speaker in the example can be taken to hold a derogatory and/or offensive attitude towards his target. And third, expressive presuppositions are shiftable because reporters of presuppositional utterances need not agree with the original speakers' evaluative attitudes and assessments. In this regard, Schlenker (2003) purports that whoever utters a racial and ethnic slur cannot be taken to be necessarily derogating the relevant target. While Rob, a bigot, is clearly derogating in (39), the reporter in (40) cannot necessarily be claimed to be doing so:

(39) Rob (a bigot): "He is the worst [*] I know!"

(40) "I am not prejudiced against [ncs]. But Rob, who is, thinks/claims that you are the worst [*] he knows." (adapted from Schlenker 2003: 98)

It has to be noted that the example that Schlenker employs to demonstrate slurs' shiftable feature is questionable. First, in (40), the speaker is manifesting, before she even proceeds to report the relevant slurring statement, a clear contrast between Rob's personal attitudes and her own, so the distance between the slurs' expressiveness and the reporter's attitude is conveyed not by the report itself but by the reporter's introductory statement. And second, as Anderson & Lepore (2013a) observe, it is questionable whether offensive attitudes remain with original speakers and cannot be attributed to reporters. In their view, any offense which is conveyed by a slurring report is supported solely by the relevant reporter.

Due to the claim that verbs of saying do not insulate reporters from offensive interpretations, Anderson & Lepore (2013a) and Langton, Haslanger & Anderson (2012) advocate that slurs cannot be pinned down as triggers of presuppositional meaning. Based on Karttunen's (1973) notion of presuppositional plugs, that is, verbs of saying which do not allow presuppositions to survive, Langton et al., for instance, claim that expressiveness, unlike presuppositions, cannot be blocked off in reported speech. While the speaker in (41), even in the absence of the second statement in her utterance, is not committed to the proposition that Rob has ever

beaten his wife, the reporter's insulation from the original speaker's expressiveness in (42) presents itself as a more complex matter:

(41) "Ron said that Rob stopped beating his wife. But Rob never beat his wife."
(adapted from [Langton et al. 2012: 756](#))

(42) "Ron said that [*s] are taking over London. But [ncs] are not despicable because of their nationality."
(adapted from [Langton et al. 2012: 756](#))

As I explained in Section 2.2.1, expressiveness is cancellable by the speaker's addition of further linguistic material. In this regard, it seems to me that the statements in (42) can be taken to successfully indicate that the reporter does not despise the relevant targets. While Langton et al. do not agree with this particular observation – in their opinion, (42) would not be felicitous and expressiveness, as a result, would not be shiftable – I acknowledge that their lack of insulation argument runs along the right tracks. In the absence of the speaker's second expressiveness cancellation sentence, the first statement in (42) is, indeed, apt to convey the message that either the original speaker or the reporter (or perhaps both of them) is a bigot who despises the relevant targets. In such a case, the slur's expressiveness does not appear to be isolated within the scope of "say" and can be attributed, in the absence of specific signals, such as relevant intonation or quotation gestures in the air, to the reporter. It seems to me, at this stage, that a distinction between derogating, offence-inflicting and offence-taking is required. On the one hand, [Schlenker \(2003: 98\)](#) suggests that the reporter in (40) cannot necessarily be claimed to hold a negative attitude towards the relevant targets, a claim with which I agree, while, on the other hand, [Anderson & Lepore \(2013a\)](#) and [Langton et al. \(2012\)](#) suggest that hearers might still feel offended by such an utterance, a claim with which I also agree. If, as [Culpeper \(2011\)](#) and [Haugh \(2010, 2015\)](#) suggest, expressions of derogation, offence-inflicting attitudes and offence-taking emotions are differentiated, both positions, I propose, can be reconciled. The reporter in (40) may not be derogating and/or intending to offend, but any hearer of such an utterance may still feel offended by it. Perhaps more importantly, it is the reporter's intonation in (40) that will determine whether that reporter is derogating and/or offense-inflicting or not. It might be the case, in a certain context, that the reporter is a fully respectful individual and that, as a result, she is not manifesting any derogation and/or offense-inflicting attitude herself. Conversely, it might be the case, in another context, that she is a confirmed bigot who, in fact, pervasively wishes to derogate and/or offend the target and takes pleasure in calling the addressee "the worst [*]" that Rob knows.

Now, the claim that presuppositional triggers update interlocutors' common ground cannot be denied. In (43), the speaker's mere use of the possessive noun phrase is apt to immediately add to the conversationalists' common ground the idea that Rob is actually married and the hearer is likely to proceed with the conversation with that piece of information in mind:

(43) "Rob's wife is arriving today."

Nonetheless, while presuppositions can be triggered by specific linguistic means, such as the possessive noun phrase in (43), the application of [Shanon's \(1976\)](#) "One

minute, I didn't know" test to slurring statements reveals that expressiveness cannot be taken to be a presuppositional trigger in every context. When differentiating assertive from presuppositional meaning, Shanon proposes that if a hearer can felicitously utter, in response to a certain utterance, the formulation in (44), the idea expressed by "Q" constitutes presuppositional rather than asserted meaning:

(44) "One moment, I did not know that Q." (Shanon 1976: 248)

Shanon's test is referred to in more recent literature (e.g. von Stechow 1994) and in the remainder of this section as the "Hey, wait a minute" test:

(45) A: "I met Rob's wife."

B: "Hey, wait a minute, I didn't know that Rob was married at all."
(adapted from Shanon 1976: 249)

(46) A: "I met Rob's wife."

B: "Hey, wait a minute, I didn't know that you met her."
(adapted from Shanon 1976: 249)

The fact that B can felicitously make the proposed reply in (45) demonstrates, according to Shanon, that the noun phrase "Rob's wife" triggers the presupposition that Rob is a married individual, while the infelicitous reply in (46) reveals that the fact that A has met the lady in question belongs to the message that A has asserted (following Roberts' (e.g. 2012) terminology, the question under discussion or QUD). When applied to racial and ethnic slurs, the "Hey, wait a minute test" reveals that expressiveness can engender either assertive (foregrounded) or presuppositional (backgrounded) information:

(47) A: "Do you like Rob?"

B (a bigot): "Rob's a [*]."

A: "Hey, wait a minute, I didn't know that he is [nc]."

(48) A: "Where is Rob from?"

B (a bigot): "Rob's a [*]."

A: "Hey, wait a minute, I didn't know that you despise [ncs]."

In (47), in a context in which B, a bigot, addresses the QUD and expresses her personal attitudes towards Rob, the "Hey, wait a minute" test reveals that what appears to constitute presuppositional (or backgrounded) information is the descriptive fact that Rob belongs to a certain race, ethnicity and/or nationality, while the foregrounded information is that the speaker finds the target to be despicable, which, in turn, triggers the implicature that B does not like Rob. Conversely, in (48), in a context in which B, also a bigot, focuses on the target's race, ethnicity, and/or nationality, what appears to constitute presuppositional (or backgrounded) information is the idea that the speaker despises individuals of the relevant background, while the foregrounded information is that Rob belongs to a particular race, ethnicity and/or nationality

group.¹³ The application of the “Hey, wait a minute” test to racial and ethnic slurs reveals that both expressiveness and descriptiveness can constitute either assertive (foregrounded) or presuppositional (backgrounded) information and that, as a result, expressiveness cannot be pinned down as a trigger of presuppositional meaning in all instances of slurring language use. What is more, there may be contexts in which both descriptiveness and expressiveness can be taken to contribute to foregrounded information. In (25), repeated below for convenience, A can be taken to be asserting that Rob is a member of a certain race, ethnicity and/or nationality and that he is, according to the bigoted speaker, a despicable person:

- (25) A: “What do you think about Rob?”
 B (a bigot): “Rob’s a [*].”

To recapitulate: racial and ethnic slurs can be claimed to carry not presuppositional meaning, as [Schlenker \(2007\)](#) asserts, but merely the potential to communicate backgrounded (and attitudinal) information in some (but not all) contexts of utterance. This presupposition analysis thus further supports my focus, in Section 3, on speakers’ main intended and successfully communicated meanings. If, as [Jaszczolt \(2005, 2010, 2016\)](#) purports, speakers’ main intended and communicated messages are to constitute the object of study of a cognitively real theory of meaning, the question as to whether slurs’ descriptiveness or expressiveness contribute, per se, to either backgrounded (presupposed) or foregrounded (asserted) meaning loses its overall importance. It is conversationalists’ QUDs that lead language users to speakers’ intended and communicated primary meanings.

3 TOWARDS A RADICAL CONTEXTUALIST PROPOSAL: RACIAL AND ETHNIC LANGUAGE IN DEFAULT SEMANTICS

I have, so far, argued that slurring meaning cannot be pinned down in terms of entailment, semantic presupposition, implicature and/or pragmatic presupposition and, in this section, I demonstrate that Jaszczolt’s Default Semantics can offer a psychologically real account of slurring language use and interpretation. Once the focus of semantic and pragmatic analysis is shifted onto cognitively real primary meanings, it becomes clear that no commitment is needed as to whether slurs trigger implicated, foregrounded or backgrounded aspects of meaning in every context of utterance.

3.1 *Primary meaning as a psychologically real object of linguistic analysis*

[Jaszczolt’s \(2005, 2010, 2016\)](#) Default Semantics is a contextualist approach to natural language interpretation in which speakers’ main intended and successfully communicated (primary) meanings constitute the basic object of study. In the search

¹³ The foregrounded/backgrounded distinction in (47) and (48) can also be observed in connection with positive (in-group) utterances of the slur. In such cases, the respective communicated meanings could be that the speaker likes Rob and that Rob is a person of a certain ethnicity that the speaker actually likes.

for a psychologically real account of natural language meaning, Jaszczolt departs from both minimalist and other prominent contextualist approaches. To begin with, Jaszczolt does not apply truth conditions to the level of the output of syntax and purports, instead, the application of truth conditions to the level of the main messages that speakers intend to communicate and that hearers, in context, successfully recover. This is the case regardless of whether such messages fully or partially coincide with, or are independent from, the linguistic expressions and/or syntactic structures that speakers employ.¹⁴ For minimalists, such as Borg (2004, 2012), the truth condition for the sentence in (49) is that the addressee must be immortal; by contrast, for Jaszczolt (2010), the truth condition for the communicated proposition in the example is the implicated meaning in (50):

(49) “You are not going to die.” (Bach 1994: 268)

(50) “There is nothing to worry about.” (Jaszczolt 2010: 196)

Minimalists do not disagree with the undeniable fact that (49) is apt to communicate the implicature in (50); minimalists solely claim that the purpose of semantics is not to design a comprehensive theory of natural language communication but merely to apply truth conditions to the level of the output of syntax with minimal input from context. As Borg (2004) and Jaszczolt (2009) suggest, minimalist and contextualist approaches to meaning can be taken to be compatible with one another, since either minimal or communicated propositions can constitute valid objects of linguistic analysis. Nonetheless, following Jaszczolt (2005, 2010, 2016), a psychologically real approach to natural language interpretation is to represent not sentence meanings and/or minimal propositions *per se*, but the main (primary) messages that speakers intend to convey and that hearers, in context, successfully recover. This is because, on the one hand, there is no empirical evidence that minimal propositions are necessarily recovered whenever speakers’ implicatures are communicated and, on the other, because successful communication evidences that one and only one main message is intended by speakers and recovered by hearers in context.

Default Semantics also departs from Carston’s (2002, 2009) and Recanati’s (2004, 2005, 2010) contextualist notions of explicated and modulated meanings. While the utterance in (49) can be taken to trigger, following Carston and Recanati, the linguistic or sentence-level proposition that the addressee is immortal, the explicated or modulated meaning that the addressee is not going to die from her wound, and the implicature that nothing serious will happen to the hurt child, the speaker’s communicated main message (or cognitively real primary meaning) is likely to be the above-mentioned implicature (Jaszczolt 2010). Within the Default Semantics framework, main intended and communicated primary meanings represent better candidates for the object of study of a cognitively real theory of natural language interpretation. Such primary meanings, which may either coincide with sentences’ logical forms, developments thereof or, as in (50), depart from the output of syntax,

¹⁴ Jaszczolt (2010, 2016) observes that speakers’ main messages are evidenced to be successfully recovered irrespective of their status as minimal, enriched or implicated propositions (see also Nicolle & Clark 1999).

are, undeniably, psychologically real: they do go through in successful linguistic interaction.¹⁵

Finally, Default Semantics also departs from late Wittgenstein's (1953) meaning eliminativism in that it supports a truth-conditional analysis of natural language meaning and rejects the view that all that there is to meaning is language in context or language in use. Within the Default Semantics framework, utterances are, indeed, apt to trigger context-driven inferential understandings, but they can also trigger, as I explain in the next section, default (automatically recovered) interpretations. Default Semantics involves, in a nutshell, a juxtaposition of default or inferential cognitive structures as its object of study (primary meanings) with the truth-conditional method of analysis.

3.2 *Default Semantics sources of information and processing mechanisms*

The fact that utterances may convey primary meanings which are independent from the logical forms of the sentences that speakers employ suggests that linguistic expressions (morphemes, words, phrases, sentences, and even whole discourses) do not constitute the only source of information that contributes to primary meanings.¹⁶ Primary meanings are then modelled, within Default Semantics, as conceptual, propositional representations which result from the merger of the output of both linguistic and non-linguistic sources of information.

Jaszczolt (2010, 2016) identifies five sources of information, whose outputs merge and contribute on an equal footing, though with different strengths in different contexts, to the construction of primary meaning. Because the output of each source of information is assumed to be merged into a mental representation which does not prioritise lexical meaning and syntactic structures over any of the other four sources, the sigma symbol " Σ " is utilised, as I illustrate in Section 3.3, to formally represent summation of sources. These sources are: word meaning and sentence structure (WS), world knowledge (WK), situation of discourse (SD), properties of the human inferential system (IS), and stereotypes and presumptions about society and culture (SC). To illustrate, consider (51):

- (51) A: "What's happened to Rob?" (Rob being the best footballer in the world)
B: "He's fallen."

¹⁵ Jaszczolt acknowledges that speakers and hearers may respectively convey and obtain not only one primary meaning but also potential secondary meanings. In relation to (49), for example, Jaszczolt does not deny that the addressee may also recover the proposition that she is immortal – say, for the purpose of a linguistic joke. Jaszczolt's main argument is, in this regard, that since there is no evidence that minimal propositions are necessarily recovered on the way to speakers' primary meanings, such primary meanings, which are, by definition, successfully retrieved, are to constitute the object of study of a cognitively real theory of natural language interpretation. The primary/secondary distinction is, within the framework, orthogonal to the what is said/what is implicated distinction.

¹⁶ Jaszczolt (2012, 2016) observes that the length of the linguistic unit that contributes to primary meanings is fluid; in other words, it can vary from context to context. In connection with "Some people say that you are arrogant" (Jaszczolt 2016: 47), for example, different primary meanings can be obtained, in different contexts, depending on where the speaker's stress falls.

The meanings of the words (WS) employed by B in (51) can be claimed to straightforwardly contribute to the primary meaning that she has tried to convey. In such a particular context, B's main intention is to communicate the fact that Rob has actually fallen down. As example (52) demonstrates, however, WS cannot be claimed to constitute the only source of information that contributes to speakers' intended and communicated meanings:

(52) A: "What's happened to Rob?"

B: "Rob's fallen and hurt his leg."

Based on her knowledge of the world (WK), the hearer of B's statement in (52) is likely to automatically retrieve the temporal and consequential meaning of the conjunction, that is, the proposition that the player in question has first fallen and that, later, and as a result, he has hurt his leg. However, as example (53) illustrates, an utterance of B's sentence in (52) can convey different primary meanings in different situations of discourse. In a context in which the interlocutors are not supporters of Rob's team and are glad that Rob has hurt himself, the primary meaning of B's utterance could be that the conversationalists' team are now likely to win; alternatively, if both speakers are devoted Rob's fans, the primary meaning of such an utterance could be that they will now lose. In other words, specific interlocutors, places, and times of utterances (SD) can also contribute to contextualised primary meanings:

(53) A: "Will we win?"

B: "Rob's fallen and hurt his leg."

The properties of the human inferential system (IS) can also play a role in utterance interpretation. As Jaszczolt explains, the ways in which the human brain operates can lead to automatic (non-inferential) or default understandings of linguistic expressions in the absence of evidence to the contrary. In (54), it is likely that the hearer will automatically understand that the speaker knows who the best player is¹⁷:

(54) "The best football player is a genius."

Finally, conversationalists' social and cultural backgrounds (SC) can also contribute to primary meanings. While a football fan who hears (54) will automatically recover the referential reading in (55), a hearer who is not interested in sports might merely obtain the attributive reading in (56):

(55) "Rob is a genius."

(56) "The best football player, whoever he is, is a genius."

As I anticipated above, Jaszczolt identifies not only the sources of information that contribute to primary meanings but also the processing mechanisms involved in meaning construction. To begin with, speakers' and hearers' social, cultural, and

¹⁷ Jaszczolt (e.g. 2005) observes that definite descriptions are not necessarily interpreted automatically or by default in such a way. The utterance in (54) can, in a certain context, trigger, for example, the reading in (56).

world knowledge backgrounds can lead to automatic, default interpretations. In (54), the specific social and cultural background of a football fan is likely to lead her to automatically (non-inferentially) interpret the term “best football player” as an expression referring to Rob, that is, in Default Semantics’ terms, as an automatic social, cultural and world knowledge default (SCWD). In a different context, however, if the hearer has forgotten, for example, who the best football player is, she could recover the meaning in (55) inferentially rather than automatically. In such a case, the hearer is likely to arrive at the speaker’s intended meaning by way of conscious pragmatic inference (CPI), that is, by consciously remembering that Rob is the best football player in the world. The idea is, within the Default Semantics framework, that any utterance which can be interpreted as a result of a SCWD process in one context can also be interpreted via a CPI process in another. While SCWD are assumed to be automatic (non-inferential) interpretations, CPI are obtained via an inferential process as a result of social and cultural assumptions, world knowledge, and the particular situations of discourse.

Apart from SCWD and CPI, [Jaszczolt \(2010, 2016\)](#) recognises two other processing mechanisms that allow hearers to obtain speakers’ intended meanings: the combination of word meaning and sentence structure (WS) and cognitive defaults (CD). In Default Semantics, WS (both a source and a process) contributes to the logical form of the sentences that speakers utter. Such logical forms can, in context, sometimes coincide with the primary meanings that speakers intend to communicate and that hearers recover, as in (51), or they can remain independent from them on other occasions, as in the implicated meanings identified in connection with (53). Finally, [Jaszczolt](#) explains that CD are non-inferential and automatic interpretations that are triggered by the functions and structure of the human brain, that is, by the way in which the human brain is designed to operate, as illustrated in the automatic (default) interpretation of (54).

It has to be noted that [Jaszczolt \(2010, 2016\)](#) further proposes that the sources of information, on the one hand, and the processing mechanisms, on the other, can be mapped onto one another in the following distinct ways. First, WK can trigger either SCWD or CPI interpretations. While an adult can be expected to automatically interpret the temporal and consequential conjunction in (57), a child may need to consciously remember one of her Physics classes at school in order to recover the temporal and consequential interpretation:

(57) “The temperature fell and the lake froze.”

(adapted from [Jaszczolt 2010: 197](#))

Second, SC can also trigger either SCWD or CPI. While, upon hearing (58), hearers are likely to automatically recover the idea that a painting was stolen via SCWD, a child, for example, may have to consciously remember her History of Art lessons at school and reach the speaker’s intended interpretation via CPI:

(58) “A Botticelli was stolen from the Uffizi last week.” [\(Jaszczolt 2010: 198\)](#)

Third, WS is, as I anticipated above, both a source and a processing mechanism. In other terms, WS contributes to the logical form of the utterances that speakers make

and can, on occasion, coincide with speakers' communicated primary meanings as illustrated in (51).

Finally, SD is taken to lead to CPI, as in (53), and IS is taken to map onto CD, as first illustrated in connection with the interpretation of (54).

It is important to point out, before I conclude this section, that Default Semantics is not concerned with an analysis of actual (neurolinguistically recovered) instances of utterance interpretation. Jaszczolt's concern is, in an attempt to theorise about meaning and not to explain particular instances of language interpretation, to model primary meanings as are intended by a model speaker and successfully recovered by a model hearer. In other terms, speakers and hearers can be assumed to intend and recover meanings, respectively, as a result of a combination of the output of specific sources of information which map, in context, onto different processing mechanisms.

Because Default Semantics takes primary meaning as the object of its linguistic analysis, cases of miscommunication remain, at this stage of its development, outside the remit of the theory. As Jaszczolt explains, while Default Semantics identifies the sources of information that contribute to primary meanings and the different processing mechanisms taken to be involved in utterance interpretation, the identification of the actual mappings of sources onto processes as well as instances in which such mappings do not take place falls outside the objectives of the theory and is left for experimental neuroscientists and psycholinguists to consider. The predictability force of the theory is, nonetheless, not compromised as a result of the above-mentioned considerations. Speakers can assume that given the interlocutors' common world knowledge (WK), specific situations of discourse (SD), shared social and cultural assumptions (SC), and normally-developed neural inferential systems (IS), their utterances of specific linguistic expressions (WS) will "go through" and be successfully recovered by their addressees. In other words, the conceptual merger representations that both speakers and hearers construct, which are based on the outputs of universally-shared sources of information and mapped onto universally-shared types of processes, can be claimed to lead to primary meanings which, in context, become unavoidable and can be successfully predicted.

While, to repeat, the aim of Default Semantics is not to account for cases of miscommunication, it has to be pointed out that such cases could be accounted for in terms of interlocutors' mismatching sources of information. With regard to slurring language interpretation, the lack of successful communication in each of (59)–(61) could be attributed, for example, to a mismatch in WS, SC or SD¹⁸:

(59) A(a bigot): "So this [*] came up to me and asked me the question."

B(not having heard the slur before): "Sorry, who? What's a [*]?"

¹⁸ Mismatching WK and IS can also trigger miscommunication. A child who is not aware that falls may cause broken legs will not recover the temporal and consequential interpretation in "The [*] fell and broke his leg", while an individual with an impaired inferential system may not recover the referential interpretation of the noun phrase in the subject position.

- (60) A (believing, for example, that [ncs] are easily intimidated):
 “You’re such a [*]!”
 B (not holding such a belief): “What do you mean?”
- (61) A (a bigot): “The best [*] player was sent out.”
 B (not realising or remembering that A is [nc]): “Great! They will lose!”
 A: “Are you mad? I’m [nc]!”

An important conclusion that derives from my considerations above is that a cognitively real theory of natural language meaning has to be semantic and pragmatic at the same time, and, in addition, capture the meaning of the main intended speech act irrespective of its relation to sentence structure. As [Jaszczolt \(2016\)](#) purports, the composition of meaning is not constrained exclusively by lexical items and the syntactic structures that comprise them; the composition of meaning can be taken to derive from a higher-level “grammar”, understood, following [Matthews \(2014\)](#), as the systematic patterns that a language deploys, which operates on linguistic and non-linguistic sources of information alike. In short, within Jaszczolt’s Default Semantics framework, the traditional semantics/pragmatics distinction loses its overall theoretical significance.

3.3 Allocation of processing mechanisms to different contexts of slurring language use

Heavily emotionally loaded slurs can be taken to be interpreted, I suggest, as a result of a straightforward descriptive/expressive WS understanding (which even dictionaries evoke). First, while two bigoted interlocutors clearly convey derogatory and/or offensive messages, fully respectful language users can also be taken to recover (and feel uncomfortable with) slurs’ negative expressiveness in both negative and positive contexts. And second, while in-group speakers may regularly use a slur to refer to other in-group members that they like, they are still able to recognise negative expressiveness when, for example, bigots derogate and/or offend them. In a nutshell, while in-group uses of slurs can be interpreted in non-derogatory and/or non-offensive ways, negative expressiveness can be taken to arise among bigots, in-group members (other than within self-appropriated scenarios) and bystanding hearers alike whenever slurs are encountered.

Let us now consider the following example:

- (62) (A bigot referring to Rob): “Rob is a [*].”

In the negative context depicted above, hearers can be assumed to recover the bigoted speaker’s main intended message (or primary meaning) as either the proposition that Rob is a despicable individual of a certain background, in the event that the interlocutors are commenting on Rob’s race, ethnicity and/or nationality, or the proposition that the speaker does not like Rob because of his despicable culture, in the event that the interlocutors are commenting, for example, on their personal attitudes towards the relevant target. In the remainder of this section, I refer to these contexts as expressiveness-backgrounded (ϵ -backgrounded) and expressiveness-foregrounded (ϵ -foregrounded) scenarios, respectively. In the former, the target’s

race, ethnicity and/or nationality is presented in the foreground, while, in the latter, the target's race, ethnicity and/or nationality remains in the background.¹⁹

Now, as I indicated in Section 3.2, primary meaning is analysed in Default Semantics as a conceptual representation which derives from the merger of the output of five different (linguistic and non-linguistic) sources of information and the mapping of such sources onto four different processing mechanisms. In order to metalinguistically represent primary meaning, Jaszczolt (2005, 2010, 2016) follows the basic formalisation principles of predicate logic and Kamp & Reyle's (1993) Discourse Representation Theory (DRT) and further extends them so as to make them applicable to an object of study that is often removed from the level of sentences and/or discourse structures. Like her DRT predecessors, Jaszczolt sets out to construct the process of utterance interpretation by first identifying the discourse referents, in the case at hand, the individual involved in the relevant conversational exchange²⁰, and a set of conditions, each condition encoding the information being predicated of each of the referents in the discourse. In connection with the representation of an ε -backgrounded utterance of (62), for example, "x" can be utilised to introduce the relevant discourse referent (in the example, Rob), while two interpretative conditions can be identified: first, the discourse referent's identity, in the example, "Rob (x)", and second, whatever is predicated of "x", in the example, the bigot's primary meaning that "Rob is a despicable [nc]". Nonetheless, as anticipated above, Jaszczolt takes a step further and attempts to identify which processing mechanisms can be allocated to the interpretations of different instances of contextualised language use. This is the reason why Default Semantics can be taken to offer a more comprehensive explanation of natural language interpretation than predicate logic and/or DRT formalisations of meaning. Within the framework, merger representations do not merely identify discourse referents and sets of conditions but they also reflect how primary meanings, speakers' intended and successfully communicated messages, can be taken to be processed in context.

Before I construct Default Semantics merger representations of slurring meaning, three further methodological clarifications need to be made. First, in all merger representations, I assume, following Jaszczolt (2005, 2010, 2016), that speakers and hearers are aware, via CD, of the referents involved in each conversational exchange. In other words, I assume that both speakers and hearers know who they are talking about. Second, in the following examples, slurring language forms which are uttered in negative contexts are employed by bigots who do not belong to the racial and/or ethnic group being derogated and/or offended, while those which are uttered in non-derogatory and/or non-offensive environments are, with the exception of the ones being interpreted via CPI, employed by members of each relevant target group. In this regard, my purpose has been not to identify every possible scenario in which slurring language forms can be employed, but

¹⁹ I maintain the backgrounded/foregrounded distinction that I discussed in Section 2.2.3 solely for methodological reasons; as I explain below, some interpretative alternatives do not appear to be available in certain ε -foregrounded contexts.

²⁰ Discourse referents are, for Kamp & Reyle (1993), not only individuals but also events, states, time, and utterance time. In this paper, I only apply the notion of discourse referents to individuals.

merely focus on situations in which speakers and hearers hold derogatory and/or offensive attitudes, or communicate non-derogatory and/or non-offensive messages. In each of such cases, I allocate the automatic processing mechanisms that can be associated with each type of contextualised slurring language form (WS or SCWD) and present the contexts in which each class can be interpreted via the Default Semantics inferential processing mechanism (CPI).²¹ Third, in the representations below, I initially present the context of utterance, I then display the proposed merger representation(s), and I finally explain how the primary meaning in each representation can be taken to be constructed.²²

By proposing that heavily emotionally loaded slurs are processed in derogatory and/or offensive environments as a result of a descriptive/expressive WS, the ε -backgrounded and ε -foregrounded merger representations for the primary meaning of the utterance in (63) could be constructed as in Figures 1a and 1b. As I anticipated above, the following merger representations are organised in terms of discourse referents, interpretative conditions, and the Default Semantics processing mechanisms which can be taken to be involved in primary meaning recovery:

(63) (A bigoted speaker is talking to a bigoted hearer about Rob): “Rob is a [*].”

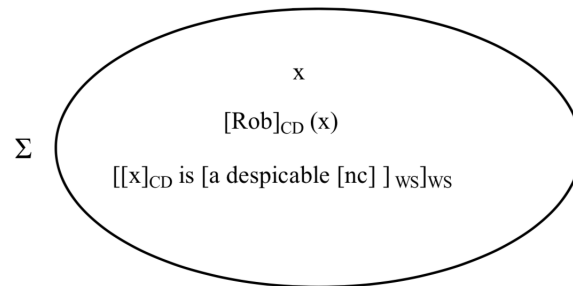


Figure 1a Merger representation for example (63) in a WS negative ε -backgrounded scenario (as an answer to “Where is Rob from?”).

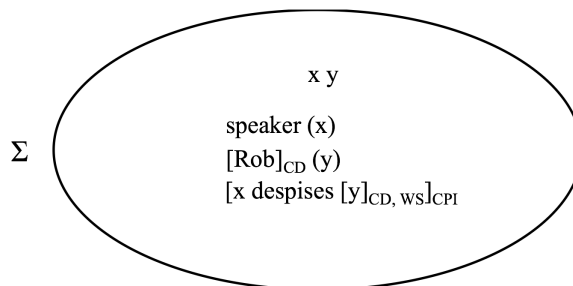


Figure 1b Merger representation for example (63) in a WS negative ε -foregrounded scenario (as an answer to “Do you like Rob?”).

²¹ For the purpose of my analysis in this section I assume that interlocutors are familiar, in the relevant contexts, with the lexical items in each of the illustrations. Clearly, if language users have forgotten the meanings of certain terms and have to inferentially remember them, any WS interpretation could also be taken to be obtained via CPI.

²² Default Semantics merger representations reflect primary meanings and processing mechanisms, not the full derivations as to how primary meanings are constructed.

In the ε -backgrounded and ε -foregrounded scenarios represented in the figures above, the slur can be assumed to acquire its WS meaning. In the ε -backgrounded scenario, once the hearer recovers the CD interpretation of the target and the WS of the slur, the primary meaning of the bigoted utterance can be claimed to be interpreted via WS (“Rob is a despicable [nc]”). In the ε -foregrounded scenario, once the hearer recovers the CD interpretation of the target and the WS of the speaker’s slurring expression, the primary meaning can be claimed to derive from CPI (“the bigoted speaker despises Rob because of his despicable race, ethnicity and/or nationality”).²³

Now, conversationalists can resort to slurs in neutral contexts as well. In this regard, if two in-group individuals speak to each other and regularly use a slur interchangeably with its neutral term, the slur can be claimed to lose, among those particular interlocutors, its default derogatory and/or offensive layer of expressiveness and can be taken to be, as a result, interpretable via SCWD. In other words, between such particular speaker and hearer, the social and cultural assumption remains that they (and their friends) are all “[*s]” who employ the term in order to refer to members of their race, ethnicity and/or nationality group. Figure 2 illustrates an SCWD neutral interpretation:

- (64) (An in-group speaker is talking to an in-group hearer about Rob. Both the speaker and her interlocutor always refer to themselves as well as members of their own group as “[*s]”): “Rob is a [*].”

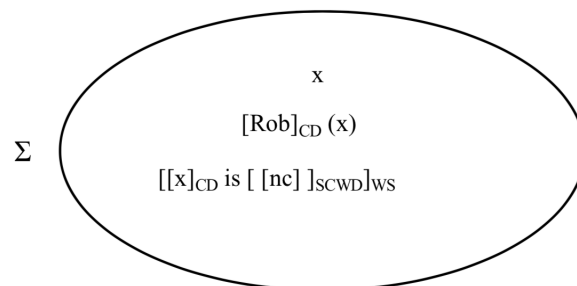


Figure 2 Merger representation for example (64) in an SCWD neutral ε -backgrounded scenario (as an answer to “Where is Rob from?”).

In the ε -backgrounded scenario represented in Figure 2, the slur can be taken to lose, among the interlocutors, its layer of derogatory and/or offensive expressiveness and to acquire an automatic (and neutral) SCWD interpretation. The primary meaning of the utterance can be claimed to be interpreted, within the Default Semantics framework, as a result of WS (“Rob is [nc]”), while bystander hearers in such a neutral context can still be taken to recover the descriptive/expressive

²³ The fact that a speaker can be taken to recover the WS meaning of the slur in CPI scenarios does not contradict Jaszczolt’s (2010, 2016) observation that minimal propositions and/or developments thereof are not evidenced to be cognitively real whenever implicatures are communicated. It is also worth pointing out that if the utterance in (63) is uttered as an answer to the question “What do you think about Rob?”, the interpretation of the slur can also be taken to take place via WS as illustrated in Figure 1a.

WS interpretation of the term. No ε -foregrounded neutral interpretation of the slur appears to be plausible in such a context. If the speaker, as an answer to the question “Do you like Rob?”, uttered “Rob is a [*]”, such an utterance, in such a neutral context, would be likely to lead the hearer to reformulate her question and ask: “Do you like Rob or not?”²⁴

Now, conversationalists can also employ well-entrenched slurring language forms in positive environments. If two in-group individuals customarily use a slur interchangeably with “nice [nc]”, the slur can be taken to lose its negative expressiveness among the interlocutors and be interpretable, as a result, via SCWD. In other terms, such particular conversationalists can be taken to hold the social and cultural assumption that they (and their friends) are all “[*s]” who use the term in order to maintain a healthy relationship and a shared and sought-after spirit of camaraderie. Figures 3a and 3b illustrate plausible positive SCWD interpretations:

- (65) (A proud in-group speaker is talking to a proud in-group hearer about Rob. Both the speaker and her interlocutor always refer to members of their own group, who they love, as “[*s]”): “Rob is a [*].”

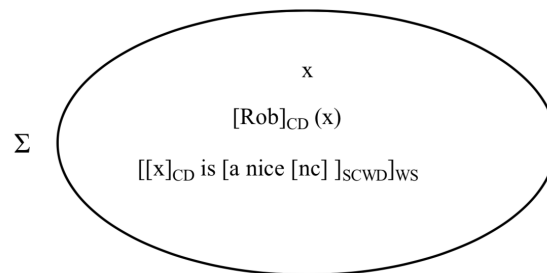


Figure 3a Merger representation for example (65) in an SCWD positive ε -backgrounded scenario (as an answer to “Where is Rob from?”).

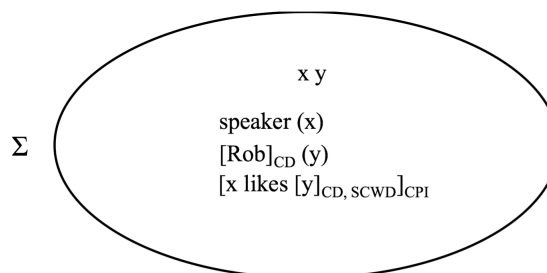


Figure 3b Merger representation for example (65) in an SCWD positive ε -foregrounded scenario (as an answer to “Do you like Rob?”).

²⁴ As I mentioned in Section 3.2, Jaszczolt’s (2005, 2010, 2016) Default Semantics focuses on accounting for successful communication, that is, instances of communication in which the primary meaning intended by the speaker is successfully recovered, in context, by the hearer. Because (64) cannot be successfully recovered as neutral in an ε -foregrounded scenario, such an utterance, in such a scenario, remains outside of the remit of Default Semantics. In other words, Default Semantics does not concern itself with situations in which a speaker’s intended meaning is not successfully recovered.

In each of the scenarios represented in Figures 3a and 3b, the slur can be assumed to lose, among the interlocutors, its layer of negative expressiveness and to acquire an automatic (and positive) “nice [nc]” SCWD interpretation. The primary meaning of the utterance can be taken to be interpreted, in the ϵ -backgrounded scenario, as a result of WS (“Rob is a nice [nc]”), and in the ϵ -foregrounded context, as a result of CPI (“the speaker likes Rob because he is a member of the nice [nc] population”).²⁵

At this juncture, the question arises as to whether slurs can also be interpreted via CPI. Based on Jaszczolt’s general observation that any interpretation which is reachable via SCWD in one context can also be recovered via CPI in another (Section 3.2), the answer has to be affirmative. In the context of Figure 2, I showed neutral SCWD interpretations and, as Figure 4 illustrates, slurs can also be neutrally interpreted via CPI. It is worth pointing out that the CPI scenarios depicted below are rather unlikely; nonetheless, I include them in order to demonstrate how interpretations recoverable by SCWD can also be recovered by CPI in particular contexts:

- (66) (The speaker and her hearer had previously held a long conversation about an acquaintance’s bigoted comments against “[*s]” and, on that occasion, the speaker had made it clear that she has nothing against such individuals. On this occasion, the speaker wishes to communicate that a certain person (Rob) is a member of the [nc] group and, in addition, remind the hearer that, in the past, their acquaintance had behaved in a racist and unacceptable manner): “Rob is a [*].”

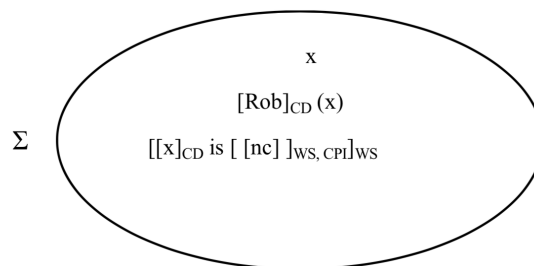


Figure 4 Merger representation for example (66) in a CPI neutral ϵ -backgrounded scenario (as an answer to “Where is Rob from?”).

In the ϵ -backgrounded scenario represented in Figure 4, the slur can be assumed to acquire, on this particular inferential occasion, a neutral (descriptive) CPI interpretation which overrides the WS understanding of the term. In order to obtain such an interpretation, the hearer would have to remember the past conversation with the speaker in which no bigotry was upheld, a secondary meaning of the utterance being, for example, the implicated proposition that their acquaintance had been unacceptably racist.²⁶ The primary meaning of the utterance can then be claimed to

²⁵ The analysis would remain the same if the speaker and the hearer of (65) were not in-group members but still regarded the target individuals as nice friends and comrades to have around. As was the case in connection with the neutral SCWD interpretation of the slur, bystander hearers in the positive contexts of (65) are likely to still recover the WS negative interpretation of the slur.

²⁶ It is important to bear in mind that CPI interpretations in this possible but unlikely example requires common knowledge, contextual clues, specific intonational patterns, quotation mark gestures in the

be interpreted as a result of WS (“Rob is [nc]”). It is interesting to note, as was the case in connection with the illustration in Figure 2, that no ϵ -foregrounded neutral interpretation of the slur appears to be plausible in this particular context. If the speaker, as an answer to the question “Do you like Rob?”, uttered “Rob is a [*]”, the hearer would be likely to reformulate her question and say: “You mentioned you have nothing against [ncs], do you like Rob or not?”²⁷

What is more, in Figures 3a and 3b I showed positive SCWD interpretations” and, as Figures 5a and 5b illustrate, slurs could also be positively interpreted via CPI:

- (67) (The speaker and her hearer had previously held a long conversation about an acquaintance’s bigoted comments against “[*s]” and, on that occasion, the speaker had made it clear that she loves [ncs]. On this occasion, the speaker wishes to refer to Rob as a nice member of the group and, in addition, remind the hearer that, in the past, their acquaintance had behaved in a racist and unacceptable manner): “Rob is a [*].”

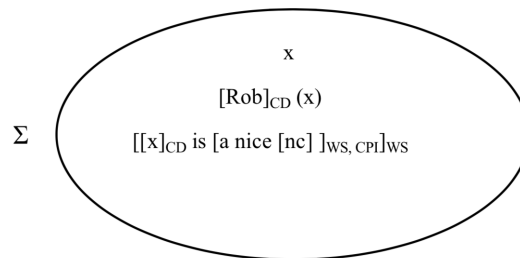


Figure 5a Merger representation for example (67) in a CPI positive ϵ -backgrounded scenario (as an answer to “Where is Rob from?”).

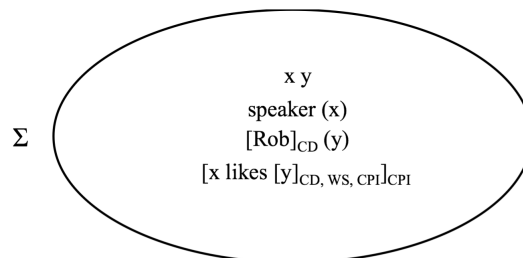


Figure 5b Merger representation for example (67) in a CPI positive ϵ -foregrounded scenario (as an answer to “Do you like Rob?”).

In each of the scenarios represented in Figures 5a and 5b, the slur can be taken to acquire, on these particular inferential occasions, a positive “nice [nc]” CPI interpretation which overrides the WS interpretation of the term. In order to obtain such positive interpretations, the hearer would have to remember the past conversation with the speaker in which, for example, affection and/or camaraderie

air and/or other gestures capable of leading hearers to infer speakers’ intended primary meanings. Furthermore, bystanding hearers in such a neutral context can still be taken to recover the WS interpretation of the term.

²⁷ See footnote 24.

to the target individuals were conveyed.²⁸ In such a case, a secondary meaning of the utterance could be, for instance, the implicated proposition that a bigoted acquaintance had, in the past, unreasonably manifested racist attitudes. The primary meaning of the utterance can be claimed to be interpreted, in the ϵ -backgrounded case, as a result of WS (“Rob is a nice [nc]”), and in the ϵ -foregrounded scenario, as a result of CPI (“the speaker likes Rob because he is a member of the nice [nc] population”).

4 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I argued, following [Anderson & Lepore \(2013a,b\)](#), that slurring language meaning cannot be accounted for either in pure semantic or in pure pragmatic terms. I claimed that slurring expressiveness cannot be pinned down as a trigger of entailment or semantic presupposition, on the one hand, or implicated or pragmatic presuppositional meaning, on the other. However, I departed from Anderson and Lepore’s view that the most meaningful generalisation that can be made about slurs is that they are offensive, prohibited words and I proposed, by extending the scope of application of [Jaszczolt’s \(2005, 2010, 2016\)](#) Default Semantics, that both descriptiveness and expressiveness can contribute to primary meaning, the extent of such a contribution varying from context to context. My Default Semantics move from the overall importance of the output of syntax to an identification of contextualised intended and communicated slurring primary meanings guarantees, as [Jaszczolt](#) purports, a focus on psychologically real units of semantic and pragmatic analysis. What is more, the departure from the more traditional semantics/pragmatics distinction and the identification of five sources of information which map onto four different processing mechanisms in the construction of primary meanings can comprehensively account for slurring language use in a variety of contexts. It is the language system, but also world knowledge, social and cultural assumptions, situations of discourse and properties of the human inferential system that lead interlocutors, in context, to either inferential or automatic (default) understandings of slurring lexical items.

An interdisciplinary analysis of the sources of information identified in Default Semantics which are taken to contribute, in context, to primary meanings, would further support the predictability force of the slurring language framework that I have proposed. In this respect, neuroscientific and/or psycholinguistic studies could be carried out, for example, to gather more evidence that given speakers’ and hearers’ common world knowledge, similar situations of discourse, shared social and cultural assumptions, and typically developed inferential systems, utterances of specific slurring linguistic expressions can be guaranteed to proceed along predictable lines.

²⁸ Bystanding hearers in such a positive context can still be claimed to recover the WS interpretation of the slur. See also footnote 26.

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