

Discussion note

# Defaults and inferences in interpretation

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## Abstract

The notions of inference and default are used in pragmatics with different meanings, resulting in theoretical disputes that emphasize the differences between the various pragmatic approaches. This paper is aimed at showing how the terminological and theoretical differences concerning the two aforementioned terms result from taking into account inference and default from different points of view and levels of analysis. Such differences risk making a dialog between the theories extremely difficult. However, at a functional level of analysis the different approaches to interpretation can be compared and integrated. At this level, the standardization of pragmatic inferences can be regarded as the development of a specific type of presumptions, used to draw *prima-facie* interpretations.  
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In his paper *Default Semantics and the architecture of the mind* (Capone, 2011), Alessandro Capone points out the possibility of drawing some interrelations between Jaszczolt's Default Semantics and Relevance Theory. Capone claims that the two theories, despite their differences, can be integrated, as the cognitive defaults that are the ground of Jaszczolt's theory can be regarded as specializations of the application of the Principle of Relevance (Capone, 2011, p. 1746). He underscores the crucial difference between the two models. RT focuses on processing (the relationship between cognitive effects and processing efforts) and "aims at a psychological plausible theory in which Relevance is part of a broad picture of the way the mind works and of its cognitive architecture." On the contrary, "Default Semantics focuses on types of sources from which addressees draw information and types of processes that interact in providing it" (Capone, 2011, p. 1748). However, Capone regards the goals of the two theories as compatible, as they can provide different perspectives and contributions to the twofold problem of attempting to describe how the mind processes utterances and how the speaker's intention is reconstructed.

According to Capone, Jaszczolt's approach can be represented as "a system in which one stores default interpretations in an archive and such interpretations are automatically activated in a default context, unless there are visible clues that militate against the default interpretation and, thus, favor contextual modulation" (Capone, 2011, p. 1744). Defaults are considered as "short-circuited inferences", instructions to interpret a certain fragment of language use in a certain way in a default context, which are defeated by other defaults arising from different (cognitive, social, cultural or world-knowledge) sources. For this reason, this model is based on a "cognitive principle of basic rationality" aimed at minimizing efforts and promoting contextual effects, namely the principle of Relevance. This principle is regarded as one that the mind recruits "for the purpose of creating cognitive defaults which, if implemented

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as simple instructions, are even more frugal and faster than the application of the Principle of Relevance each time a certain input occurs” (Capone, 2011, p. 1746).

Against this position, Zhang and Zhang argue that the differences between RT and Default Semantics make a unified picture of the two theories inherently impracticable (Zhang and Zhang, 2016). According to them, the fundamental divide between the two approaches to utterance interpretation results from the notions of default and inference (Zhang and Zhang, 2016):

Default Semantics does not belong to inferential pragmatics: default meanings in this approach are non-inferential in nature. In post-Gricean pragmatics, there are two opposing views on whether or not pragmatic determination of truth-conditional content involves inferences. Relevance theorists take the inferentialism stance and argue that linguistic communication should involve inferences, so the recovery of explicatures involves inferences. But Jaszczolt (2005) holds the anti-inferentialism position, that is that default meanings are generated without involving inferences.

On this view, RT provides an inferential model for the study of meaning that excludes the notions of default meaning or default inference, as all implicatures must be warranted by context (Carston, 2004). On the contrary, defaults are described as “effortless, automatic enrichments involving no conscious pragmatic inferences” (Zhang and Zhang, 2016).

This debate concerning the possibility of combining or conciliating the two theories brings to light the crucial importance for pragmatics of the allegedly contrasting concepts of default and inference. Drawing some distinctions can be helpful for better understanding where the conflict really lies.

## 1. Defaults

The notion of default is clearly described by Jaszczolt in terms of salience. According to her, the interpretation of an utterance is frequently driven by the salience of some of the possible interpretations, caused by frequency of meaning, social and cultural conventions, or cognitive principles. Such interpretations are conceived as cognitive defaults (Heine et al., 2015; Jaszczolt, 2010, p. 128). On her view, interpretation is driven by default reasoning, namely a defeasible inference to the first unchallenged alternative: “we reason by default, unless we have evidence that we should not.” On this view, a default is regarded as an automatic, effortless conclusion drawn in lack of contrary evidence and until contrary evidence is provided. Default reasoning is thus contrary to systematic and critical inferences (Jaszczolt, 2005, p. 46):

Hearers do jump to conclusions, and, more importantly, speakers assume that hearers will jump to conclusions, thereby overcoming the problem of the slow speed of speech production as compared with the speed of the recovery of meaning. This jumping to conclusions is most effective when it proceeds along the path of preconceived beliefs in the form of defaults that do not require pragmatic inference. And this default reasoning is both intended and recognized as being intended. This notion of belief- and intention-based default is adopted in Default Semantics.

In order to analyze the problem of default and its relationship with inference, it is useful to address first the notion of default reasoning. Default reasoning can be described based on its common understanding in logic, artificial intelligence, and argumentation, in which it is commonly defined as a type of reasoning based on patterns of plausible and defeasible inference having the form “in the absence of any information to the contrary, assume...” (Reiter, 1980, p. 81). Such defeasible and non-monotonic patterns or rules, called defaults, lead to conclusions that are only plausible, as they are based on less than conclusive evidence in the absence of any information to the contrary (Moore, 1985; Reiter, 1978a). The defeasible rules of inference, or defaults, are closed world assumptions (Reiter, 1978b), i.e. assumptions that all the relevant and positive knowledge is listed (Walton, 2005, p. 101).

This account of default reasoning represents defaults as assumptions concerning specific issues (lexical information, world knowledge, social habits, see Asher and Lascarides, 2003), namely rules of inference from which non-monotonic conclusions can be drawn in lack of contrary evidence, or rather in “normal cases” (Asher and Williams, 2006). However, since defaults are defeasible rules of inference, they can interact and conflict with each other, and thus a monotonic principle has to be introduced in order to select the rule that applies in case of conflicts (Asher and Williams, 2006). In the Segmented Discourse Representation Theory, this monotonic principle is the principle of Maximising Discourse Coherence (Asher and Lascarides, 2003, pp. 20–21; Lascarides and Asher, 2008).

Default reasoning is thus based on rules of inference and leads to defeasible, non-monotonic inferences (Jaszczolt, 2005, p. 45). Jaszczolt applies the notion of default and default reasoning to (post-propositional) interpretations, and provides a system in which different sources contribute jointly to the representation of the speaker's meaning. Such sources are the following (Jaszczolt, 2011, p. 13, 2007, pp. 50–52):

1. Sentence structure and word meaning.
2. Conscious pragmatic inferences.

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