

Juggling multiple perspectives when interpreting epithets: Who’s the crazy genius?

Johanna Klages¹, Elsi Kaiser², Thomas Weskott¹, Simone Gerle¹ & Anke Holler¹

¹Courant Research Centre “Text Structures”, University of Göttingen/XPrag.de, Project Pro-ProCon; ²University of Southern California

Language contains many expressions whose interpretation depends on knowing whose opinion/viewpoint is being referred to. With epithets (e.g., *that idiot*, *the poor girl*), we need to know whose opinion/viewpoint the epithet reflects (e.g., Who thinks Bob is an idiot?). Although earlier work claimed epithets reflect speaker opinion, recent work (Harris & Potts 2009, Kaiser 2015) showed epithets can reflect the opinion of a character in a narrative.

However, although narratives standardly contain multiple characters, it is not known whether/ to what extent comprehenders consider multiple (non-narrator) perspectives/attitude-holders for epithets. Understanding viewpoint-attribution in multi-character contexts is crucial for models of perspective-taking. We investigated sequences like (1), with/without the initial sentence. Whose viewpoint/attitude does the epithet reflect (attitude-holder: Nina/Rachel/Narrator)?

- (1) (*Nina glanced into the classroom.*) Rachel was studying with Stephanie. *That crazy genius*; she was a straight ‘A’ student!

RESULTS. Epithets are mostly interpreted from the perspective of a character, not the narrator. If two potential attitude-holders are present (Nina/Rachel), they compete as potential attitude-holders for the epithet, though the first-mentioned one (presumably interpreted as topic) is preferred. Without the first sentence, the subject (Rachel) is preferred.

SUMMARY. In multi-character narratives, comprehenders activate multiple perspectives when resolving epithets, and consideration of these perspectives may be modulated by topicality.

REFERENCES. HARRIS, Jesse & POTTS, Christopher (2009): Perspective-shifting with appositives and expressives. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 32, 523–552. KAISER, Elsi (2015): Perspective-shifting and free indirect discourse: Experimental investigations. *Semantics and Linguistic Theory*, 25, 346–372.