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

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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.