

# Contexts, Biases, and Reflexivity<sup>1</sup>

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## 1 Introduction

In a recent, welcome contribution, Predelli (2013) presents a fruitful and powerful framework on how truth-conditional semantics can deal with non-truth-conditional meaning. One of the gifts of Predelli's contribution is that it presents a unifying theory dealing with seemingly various phenomena often relegated to the pragmatics dustbin. Thus, nicknames, slurs, answering machines/post-its, vocatives, etc. get captured within the semantic framework, the theory of biases, presented.

In this paper I will briefly explain Predelli's theory in section 2. In section 3, focusing on slurs, I will argue how Predelli's theory of bias cannot be explained away using Grice's notion of conventional implicatures. In section 4, I will show how Predelli's theory of biases may be explained in appealing to Grice's generalized conversational implicatures. Finally, in section 5, I will propose an utterance-bound

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pluri-propositionalist outline (inspired by Perry 2002/12 and Korta & Perry 2011) of a theory of communication. I will show how such a theory can handle various biases in quite a straightforward, possibly cognitively more plausible, way.

It may turn out that the proposal I will sketch is but a notational variant of Predelli's theory of bias. If so, then Predelli's theory is a valuable addition to the pluri-propositionalist theory of communication, or so I will try to argue.

## 2 Predelli's Theory of Bias

Predelli's main strategy is that we can deal with what is traditionally characterized as non truth-conditional meaning by putting some constraints on use. That is, a linguistic expression, on top of coming equipped with a Kaplanian character (see Kaplan 1977), comes equipped with what Predelli characterizes as bias.<sup>2</sup> The utterance of a sentence like

(1) I am busy

said by John, expresses the (singular) proposition that John is busy in virtue of the character of the first person pronoun 'I' selecting the speaker as its value. The very same sentence, uttered by Jane, expresses the proposition that Jane is busy. On the Kaplanian account, the character of 'I' is represented by a function that takes as argument the *agent*, and gives as value the referent (agent). Were this sentence written on a post-it (or registered on an answering machine), though, 'I' would not necessarily select the writer and/or speaker as its value—one may well use a pre-recorded answering machine playing "I am busy" or borrow a post-it written by

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kaplan's (1977) content/character distinction. The character (or linguistic meaning) of an indexical can be represented as a function taking as its argument the context and delivering as its value the content or referent. Thus, the character of 'I' can be represented as 'the agent of this utterance', the character of 'you' as 'the addressee of this utterance', the character of 'today' as 'the day of this utterance', etc..

someone else. In such a scenario, 'I' would not select the writer or speaker as its agent.<sup>3</sup> This helps us to stress how the notion of *use* needs to enter the scene. For, a sentence like (1) when used in a given context may not pick up its producer. In a face-to-face linguistic exchange, or face-to-face context of use, (1) picks out the speaker as the agent and, thus, as the referent entering the proposition expressed (roughly, what is said). In a post-it situation, or text-message context of use, for instance, (1) need not pick up the producer (e.g. the writer) as the agent of it. The changes in interpretations do not rest on a change in the character of the expressions used ('I' is neither ambiguous nor a case of polysemy), but on a change in the relevant feature of the context of use. Predelli's theory of bias attempts to handle cases like this, for in the context of a will (or a letter) the signature is considered as a device of obstinacy. That is to say, the audience is removed from the task of identifying the pertinent contextual aspect fixing the reference of the indexical expression. The contextual aspect (e.g. the agent, time or location) is settled by the context of use, so that the indexical expression can only be correctly used to refer to a particular individual time or location that is fixed in the context of use.<sup>4</sup>

The general moral seems to be that a plausible theory of communication needs a theory of use. For, it is the latter that helps us to distinguish how the production of a given sentence can mean different things according to the type of use it is embedded into. Following Predelli (2013: 9-7), an expression *e* and a context *c* can be characterized as a use only if *c* is a context of use (there are contexts, e.g. *silent* contexts, that are token-free and, as such, cannot count as context of use).

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<sup>3</sup> The literature on these phenomena is now rich. Cf., for instance, Sidelle 1991, Smith Q. 1989, Vision 1985, Predelli 1998, Corazza et als. 2001, among others.

<sup>4</sup> A different way to handle these kinds of problems (what Predelli characterizes as obstinate uses) would be to argue that in such scenarios the indexical expression comes close to working as an anaphoric pronoun coindexed (and, thus, coreferential) with the term (e.g. date, signature) settled by the context of use. (Cf. Corazza 2002, 2004).

Furthermore, a token presupposes the existence of *intentional* agents—the movement of an ant on a dusty desk giving the impression “I am busy” is not classified as a token.<sup>5</sup> To summarize:

- A context  $c$  belongs to a context of use  $CU$  only if there exist (have existed, or will exist) tokens of expressions in  $c$

and

- A context  $c$  belongs to a context of use  $CU$  only if there exist (have existed, or will exist) intentional agents in  $c$

To put it into a nutshell, for any expression, there is a class of contexts of (appropriate) use of that expression.

Consider utterances of sentence like:

(2) I exist

(3) I am here now

Every time one utters them one makes a trivially true statement. Yet one is not necessarily a being and an utterance of (2) is not necessarily a truth. For instance, one may begin one's will by writing (or recording) “I do not exist” or “I am not here now”. When read or heard by the heirs, they are true. Their truth is not determined by a change in the character of the indexicals ‘I’, ‘now’ and ‘here’; whether uttered in a face-to-face context or written and/or recorded in a will, the character of ‘I’ and ‘now’, for instance, is the same. That is, (2) and (3) are not true in virtue of their character alone. Their truth (or falsity) depends on the context of use. In the face-to-face context of use they are self-verifying. If we switch the context of use, e.g. the text-message context (as it would be if they were uttered or recorded in a will) they

<sup>5</sup> As Putnam once claimed, an ant impressing with her movement on the sand what we take to be a picture of Churchill does not count as a picture of Churchill for the ant did not intend it to be interpreted this way.

would be false, not because the character of 'I' or 'now' changes, but because of the change in the context of use.

One of Predelli's main points is that to deal with non-truth-conditional meaning we must take on board constraints on appropriate contexts of use. For, on top of coming with its truth-conditional profile (roughly, a Kaplanian character), expressions are encrypted with what Predelli characterizes a *bias*, i.e. a condition in which a context counts as an appropriate context of use for that expression. The *conventional* meaning of an expression can thus be considered as a pair comprising the character of the given expression *and* the bias it conveys:

[I]t is part and parcel of the meaning of 'hurray' that it may appropriately be used only by speakers favorably disposed toward a certain event. As a result, the class of contexts of use for 'hurray' may contain only contexts with at least occasionally elated agents, not for reasons deriving from the properties of the type of use in question, but as a result of features encoded within the conventional profile of that interjection. (Predelli 2013, p. 62)

Thus, a context *c* belongs to the context of use of 'hurray', CU(hurray), only if the agent of *c* is favorably disposed toward something or other. In the case of 'hurray', like 'alas', the expression has a null character, yet it constrains the context of use for it settles the speaker's (agent's) attitude *vis-à-vis* the event expressed by the utterance embedded within it. To borrow from Frege (1892) we can say that it pertains to the coloration (or tone) of the relevant utterance.<sup>6</sup> That is to say, the coloration conveyed by an expression directs us toward the context of use. The same, or similar enough, story can be told about expressions such as 'tummy', 'abdomen', 'stomach', and

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<sup>6</sup> Speaking about translation Frege claims that "the possible differences here belong also to the coloring and shading which poetic eloquence seek to give to the sense. Such coloring and shading are not objective, and must be evoked by each hearer or reader according to the hints of the poet or the speaker" (Frege 1892, p. 61). Very roughly, like Frege's notion of coloration Predelli's theory of bias must be dealt with at the non-truth-conditional level. Yet, unlike Frege's notion, the truth value of the proposition semantically expressed depends on aspects pertaining to coloration, for the latter enters the context of use.

'belly'. Though coextensive, they differ in their coloration. If one uses 'tummy' one indicates a child-directed speech, while if one uses 'abdomen' one indicates a professional (e.g. medical)-directed speech. Within the framework proposed by Predelli (cf. 2013, p. 84 ff.) these terms come out to be biased inasmuch as they indicate the appropriate context of use. Roughly, a context *c* belongs to the context of use for 'tummy' if the addressee in that context is a child. This is, Predelli claims, a case of non-denotational bias.

In summary, while the character of an expression can be represented (along the lines of Kaplan's theory of demonstratives) by a conventionally assigned function that determines the content entering the proposition expressed, the bias of an expression is a constraint conventionally assigned to a term that fixes its relationship to the context of use of that expression, be it a token world or an utterance.<sup>7</sup> The picture emerging is that expressions have both a bias and a character: though some expressions, like 'I', 'now', 'house' or 'water', have a null bias, others, like the interjections 'hurray' or 'alas', have a null character.

Predelli's theory of bias provides the framework upon which a general theory of communication can be proposed. Another example worth mentioning is the use of derogatory language. If we consider, for instance, slurs like 'wop' or 'kraut' and their correspondent neutral (bias-silent) 'Italian' and 'German', we can say that 'wop' and 'kraut' determine a context of use where the speaker expresses a negative attitude regarding the class of individuals singled out by the word, in our example Italians and Germans, respectively. To illustrate this let us consider:

(4) Hitler was a German Nazi

(5) Hitler was a kraut Nazi

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<sup>7</sup> While the bias introduced by 'alas' operates on the whole utterance, the one introduced by a slur (e.g. 'fag', 'wop', 'boche', etc.) operates on the word/slur.

With (5), independently of the fact that Hitler was, without doubt, a despicable person, one also manifests one's xenophobic attitude *vis-à-vis* Germans in general (and not only Hitler), that would not be manifested if one were to utter (4) instead.<sup>8</sup> A German audience need not be a neo-Nazi, let alone a sympathizer of Hitler's crimes, to feel offended on hearing (5). Similarly if an Italian hears "Fritz is not a wop", she is likely to feel offended even if the slur is embedded within a negation. On the other hand, our Italian audience would not feel offended in hearing: "Fritz is not Italian". This seems to suggest, at least at the intuitive level, that there is a difference in meaning between the slur 'wop' and the neutral 'Italian'. The question that springs to mind is how to account for this difference. Predelli's theory of bias attempts to capture this intuition. Since the *bias* is *conventionally* conveyed, i.e. associated with the term, it follows that utterances of sentences like (5) conventionally convey the negative (racist and xenophobic) attitude—the negative bias—of the speaker. Yet, at least at first sight, one can utter:

(6) Fritz is German, he is *not* a kraut

without contradicting oneself.<sup>9</sup> What the speaker would express is his/her unfavorable attitude toward the use of the slur 'kraut'. In replying that Fritz is not a kraut, one is not denying the fact that Fritz is German. What one objects to is the use of the slur 'kraut'. In other words, for this to be considered an acceptable and appropriate utterance in the mouth of a non-racist speaker, it ought be understood in an echoic way, as a refutation of the use of the slur-word. If so, it should be cashed out as a case of metalinguistic negation, and treated in the way we would treat "Jane

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<sup>8</sup> Following Predelli the bias is conventionally conveyed, i.e. associated with the term. Yet it isn't determined by the character of the term. 'German' and 'kraut' have the same character. What differentiates them is the context of use. While the former is bias-silent, the slur points toward a context of use suggesting that the utterer has a negative bias regarding Germans.

<sup>9</sup> In uttering a sentence like this, the slur-dismissing speaker is likely to put the voice stress on the negation and, in so doing, to trigger a meta-linguistic interpretation.

is not a doctor, she is a cardiologist” meaning that Jane is better characterized as a cardiologist than as a doctor or “Jane is not intelligent, she is a genius” meaning that Jane is better characterized as being a genius rather than merely intelligent.

### 3 Biases *qua* Conventional Implicatures

If we focus on the negative connotation and/or attitude triggered by slurs, a natural way to deal with them (and possibly with all of what Predelli characterizes as biases) would be to adopt Grice’s (1967/87) distinction between conventional implicatures and conversational implicatures. One could claim (cf. e.g. Potts 2007 and Williamson 2009, among others) that slurs trigger conventional implicatures. Although ‘and’ and ‘but’ are truth-conditionally equivalent (and can be represented by ‘&’), utterances of sentence containing ‘but’, unlike sentences containing ‘and’, conventionally trigger that there is a contrast between the two conjuncts. In hearing “John is rich but he is honest”, on top of computing that John is rich and that he is honest, one computes that there is a contrast between being rich and being honest, i.e. that rich people are not usually honest.

If the negative attitude conveyed by a speaker uttering a slur is characterized as a conventional implicature, in hearing (4) one would thus compute that Hitler was a German Nazi and conventionally implicate that the speaker of it has a negative attitude toward Germans. This seems, no doubt, a promising strategy: while ‘German’ and ‘kraut’ are coextensive, utterances containing the slur conventionally implicate that the speaker has a negative attitude toward Germans. Like a conventional implicature triggered by ‘but’, the one triggered by ‘kraut’ is not cancellable, inasmuch as it is triggered by the meaning of the term used. Furthermore, like a conventional implicature, the implicature triggered by ‘kraut’ is not calculable. One cannot successfully deny one’s negative attitude toward Germans by saying, e.g.: “Fritz is a kraut but Germans are my favorite/preferred people”.

Besides, *qua* conventional implicature, it is neither context-dependent, nor dependent on the intention of the speaker.

There is, though, a difference between a slur and a device for conventional implicatures, say, 'but'. Following Grice a conventional implicature is encoded, *viz.* it is triggered by the conventional meaning that the utterance inherits from the sentence (the type) uttered. At first sight, this seems to support the view that the implicature triggered by a slur is a conventional one insofar as the slur-word *conventionally* encodes the information that it is a contemptuous word. Yet, a conventional implicature, unlike a conversational one, cannot be cancelled (or defeated). One cannot say "John is rich but he is honest and all rich people are honest" without contradicting oneself.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, while a competent speaker using or hearing a sentence containing 'but' *knows* that there is a contrast between the first and the second phrase, a competent speaker may not know exactly what the negative meaning conveyed by slurs like 'wop' or 'kraut' is. One who knows that 'wop' is a negative term to characterize Italians may not be classified as incompetent with English if she does not know that it derives from 'without papers', let alone that the targeted individuals characterized as 'wop' are associated with the negative stereotypes of being lazy and having a relaxed attitude toward the moral dictates. In other words, one may be competent with 'wop' being a slur without knowing all the stereotypes it may convey. If one is asked why 'wop' is a negative term for Italians, one may not be aware of all the negative features or stereotypes concerning Italians it may carry.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> One could argue that conventional implicatures can be cancelled as could be the case in the following discussion-fragment: A: "All rich people are dishonest"; B: "No, John is rich but honest. In fact, all rich people are honest". If this is the case, though, alleged conventional implicatures turn out to be conversational implicatures. If so, then the treatment of slurs as generalized conversational implicatures that I will defend turns out to be the right one.

<sup>11</sup> As Vallée suggests, in discussing Williamson's (2009) account: "In learning a slur, however, we do not learn a very specific negative feature conventionally implicated by that word. Moreover, hearing a

Another question, more important for the purpose of this paper, that comes to mind is whether a theory treating slurs as cases of conventional implicatures generalizes so as to account for the many other cases of biases presented by Predelli. As I stated, one of the main gifts of Predelli's theory of biases is that it is a *unified* theory. Could, for instance, the positive bias introduced by 'hurray' (or the negative one introduced by 'alas') be treated as a conventional implicature? Can the analysis of:

(7) Hurray, John has been promoted

(with 'hurray' having, as Predelli claims, a null character) be cashed out in the way Grice analyzes 'but'? That is, does the speaker say (truth-conditionally convey) that John has been promoted and conventionally implicate that s/he has a positive attitude toward John being promoted?

Furthermore, if one (like Bach 1999, cf. also Corazza 2012) argues that conventional implicatures are a myth, one is tempted to resist the treatment of slurs as conventional implicatures.<sup>12</sup> Bach claims that a speaker of:

(8) John is rich but he is honest

ends up saying two things (expressing two propositions), i.e.:

(8) a. That John is rich and that John is honest

b. That being rich contrasts with being honest

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slur, we do not try to identify the single negative feature conventionally implicated by that term. It is unclear to me, and it is not backed by any arguments in the literature, whether 'boche', or any slur for that matter, semantically conveys a well-defined, specifiable content as is the case with what 'but' conventionally implicates" (Vallée 2014, p.88).

<sup>12</sup> Carston (2004) also express skepticism regarding conventional implicatures.

According to Bach, there is a simple test we can apply to decide whether something belongs either to what is said or to some other pragmatic feature, i.e. the *Indirect Quotation* (IQ) test.

### *IQ*

An element of a sentence contributes to what is said in an utterance of that sentence if and only if there can be an accurate and complete indirect quotation of the utterance (in the same language) which includes that element, or a corresponding element, in the ‘that’-clause that specifies what is said. (Bach 1999, p. 340)

The IQ test “only excludes elements that do not contribute to what is said in the sense of propositional content” (Bach 1999, p. 340). Since alleged conventional implicature devices, ACIDs, contribute to what is said, they are not devices of conventional implicature.<sup>13</sup> To illustrate this, Bach invites us to consider:

- (9) a. Jane: “Shaq is huge *but* he is agile”  
 b. Jane said that Shaq is huge but that he is agile<sup>14</sup>
- (10) a. Jane: “*Even* Shaq can make some free throws”

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<sup>13</sup> For a defense of the IQ test cf. also Cappelen & Lepore (2005). If one, following Perry (1986; see also Korta & Perry 2011) accepts the presence of unarticulated constituents into the proposition expressed (the Gricean what is said) one would likely reject the IQ test and possibly argue that conversational implicatures would contribute into the proposition expressed, i.e. that the minimal proposition gets enriched via alleged conversational implicatures. Although this move may seem, at first sight, plausible, I do not see how it could deal with biases in general. In saying, e.g. “Fritz is a kraut”, would one express the proposition that Fritz is German and that he has a negative (xenophobic) attitude toward Germans? This runs against our intuitions for, strictly speaking, all one says is that Fritz is German; one does not also say that he dislikes Germans. In other words, can an alleged conventional implicature enter, as an unarticulated constituent, the proposition expressed? This debate, as interesting as it may be, transcends the scope of the present paper. As I will argue, biases can be explained in appealing to reflexive contents without having them enter the official content.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noticing that for the IQ test to work, ‘but’ must be understood as appearing within the scope of the that-clause. If it were to take wide scope, Bach’s test would not work. People’s intuitions may differ on whether ‘but’ takes narrow or wide scope. Yet, insofar as the narrow scope reading is not ruled out, the IQ test is still reliable.

b. Jane said that *even* Shaq can make some free throws

In (9) the contrastive part of ‘but’ contributes to what is said. The alleged conventional implicature belongs, *de facto*, to what has been said by Jane. In (9a) Jane actually said two things:

- (9)       c. That Shaq is huge and that Shaq is agile  
             d. That being huge contrasts with being agile<sup>15</sup>

If Bach is, as I believe, right concerning (alleged) conventional implicatures passing the IQ test, then biases conveyed by slurs like ‘kraut’ or ‘hurray’, as devices of conventional implicature, should pass the IQ test as well. Yet reports like:

- (11)   John said that Fritz is a kraut  
 (12)   \* John said that hurray Fritz got promoted

do not seem to pass the IQ test. With (11) the narrator does not automatically report John’s negative attitude toward Germans. Yet, it guarantees the offense by the reporter, i.e. the latter endorses/expresses the negative attitude toward Germans (cf. Anderson & Lepore 2013). The slur scopes out of the report. A non-racist narrator would prevent him/herself from using the slur in his/her report. She would rather say something like: “I do not endorse any prejudice against Germans, but John said that Fritz is a kraut”. Yet, Anderson & Lepore (2013) claim that even in a report like this the negative attitude toward Germans slips out of the report. As such, a report may be transparent concerning the way the attributee referred to the relevant class picked out by the slur appearing within the context of a report; it could thus fail to attribute the use of the slur to John. I leave to the reader to decide whether the N-word in John Lennon’s famous “Women are the niggers of the world”, or in some

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<sup>15</sup> The semantic contribution of ACIDs can thus be compared to the semantic contribution made by parentheticals or non-restrictive relative clauses like e.g.: “John (Jane’s husband) has been promoted” and “John, Jane’s husband, has been promoted”.

other metaphorical uses, comes out to be interpreted as a derogatory word. Be that as it may, the important lesson to bring home is that, since slurs do not pass the IQ test, they cannot be treated as conventional implicatures. As for the bias introduced by ‘hurray’ in (7) [Hurray, John got promoted] it cannot be reported as attributing to the attributee a favorable disposition or attitude toward John’s promotion. As it stands, (11) is ungrammatical and, therefore, (7) does not pass the IQ test. Notice that if in a report ‘hurray’ scopes out, as in

- (13) a. Hurray, John said that Fritz got promoted

it would express the positive bias of the reporter, not the one expressed by John in his uttering of (7). It would express, in other words, the narrator’s positive attitude toward John saying that Fritz got promoted, not toward Fritz being promoted. Expressions like ‘hurray’ and ‘alas’—that, following Predelli, have a null character—can be viewed as utterance modifiers like ‘moreover’ and ‘in other words’. Like the latter, they do not pass the IQ test.<sup>16</sup> Hence, they do not contribute to what is said (they are merely communicational devices):

- (14) a. Jane: “*Moreover*, Jeff is honest”

b. \* Jane said that *moreover* Jeff is honest

- (15) a. Jane: “*In other words*, Fritz is honest”

b. \* Jane said that *in other words* Fritz is honest

Additions like ‘moreover’ and ‘in other words’ are vehicles to perform second-order speech acts (cf. Bach 1999). And since they do not pass the IQ test, they do not contribute to what is said, they do not affect the proposition expressed, i.e. what I will characterize in the next section, following Perry (2002/12) and Korta & Perry (2011), as the official content of the utterance.

<sup>16</sup> The IQ test may be a good strategy to characterize what Predelli considers expressions with null character.

In short, it seems that slurs (and biases in general) cannot be dealt with by characterizing them as devices triggering conventional implicatures.

#### 4 Biases *qua* Generalized Conversational Implicatures

One way to characterize slurs would be to adopt yet another important distinction proposed by Grice, *viz.* the distinction between particularized and generalized conversational implicatures, and treat them along the lines of the latter (cf. Vallée 2014). In this way, we can argue that biases, being *conventionally* conveyed by the word used can be accommodated as instances of generalized conversational implicatures:

Sometimes one can say that the use of a certain form of words in an utterance would normally (in the absence of special circumstances) carry such-and-such an implicature or type of implicature. Noncontroversial examples are perhaps hard to find, since it is all too easy to treat a generalized conversational implicature as if it were a conventional implicature. ... Anyone who uses a sentence of the form *X is meeting a woman this evening* would normally implicate that the person to be met was someone other than X's wife, mother, sister, or perhaps even close platonic friend. (Grice 1967/87, p. 37)

Following Grice, a generalized conversational implicature can be presumed or presupposed independently of a particular context of the utterance.<sup>17</sup> It constitutes, so to speak, the *default interpretation* a speaker would associate to an utterance. As such, it constitutes information that a competent speaker, *ceteris paribus*, computes given the linguistic input. Yet, being a *conversational* implicature, a generalized conversational implicature is cancelable:

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<sup>17</sup> For a book-length, detailed discussion of generalized conversational implicatures, see Levinson (2000). See also Huang (2000). Among some (relatively) clear examples of generalized conversational implicatures we can mention that "Jane thinks there is a meeting tonight" implicates "Jane *does not know for sure* that there is a meeting tonight"; "Jane has two children" implicates "Jane has *no more than* two children"; "Jeff broke a leg" implicates "Jeff broke *his own* leg".

Since, to assume the presence of a conversational implicature, we have to assume that at least the Cooperative Principle is being observed, and since it is possible to opt out of the observation of the principle, it follows that a generalized conversational implicature can be canceled in a particular case. It may be explicitly canceled, by the addition of a clause that states or implies that the speaker has opted out, or it may be contextually canceled, if the form of utterance that usually carries it is used in a context that makes it clear that the speaker is opting out. (Grice 1967/87, p. 39)

If, at his garden party, John asks Jane “Should we bring out more beer?” and Jane replies: “Most of the guests already left” the particularized conversational implicature is that they should not bring out more beer, while the generalized conversational implicature would be that not all the guests left.<sup>18</sup> Both implicatures can be cancelled. To cancel the particularized conversational implicature Jane could add “But all the beer-drinkers are still here”. To cancel the generalized conversational implicature that not all the guests left she could add “Actually all the guests left”. To be sure, to cancel the generalized conversational implicature Jane must somewhat flout the maxim of quantity, for she would say more than is required. If biases are classified as devices triggering generalized conversational implicatures they should be cancellable as well. Yet, with the utterance of a sentence like “I have no prejudices against Germans but Fritz is a kraut” one does not seem to be cancelling his/her negative bias toward Germans. If someone utters “I love wop ” or “Wops are my favorite people” one fails to erase the negative attitude she manifests *vis-à-vis* Italians. The least we can say is that the negative attitude conveyed by a slur cannot be cancelled without difficulties. We need strong contextual inputs or quite articulated clauses to convey the fact that the speaker does not endorse the generalized conversational implicature usually triggered by the slur. It is open to question whether in a humorous sketch an actor dressed like an Italian pimp distributing

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<sup>18</sup> If in the very same situation Jeff asked “What time is it?” and Jane replied “Most of the guests already left” the generalized conversational implicature would be the same, i.e. that not all the guests left, while the particularized one would be that it is late.

drugs to the clients of his protégées, using ‘wop’ conveys a negative attitude toward Italians (Anderson & Lepore 2013 would claim that even in such a situation the slur slips out of the play and conveys a negative attitude toward Italians). A possible way to consider slurs (and other biases) along the lines of generalized conversational implicatures is to consider the latter as belonging to a theory of utterance(-type) meaning:

The theory of GCI [generalized conversational implicatures] is not of course a theory of conversational idioms, clichés, and formulae, but it is *a generative theory of idiomacity*—that is, a set of principles guiding the choice of the right expression to suggest a specific interpretation and, as a corollary, a theory accounting for preferred interpretations ... The theory thus belongs to the intermediate level of a theory of communication, the layer of utterance(-type) meaning. (Levinson 2001, p. 24; italics in the original)

The basic idea underlying this theory of communication focusing on generalized conversational implicatures must admit “the general contribution of a level at which sentences are systematically paired with preferred interpretations” (Levinson 2001, p. 27) Translated into Predelli’s terminology this may amount to stating that we need a theory of biases where a given expression comes equipped with its character and the bias selecting the context of use. The theory of use would thus come close to the theory of generalized conversational implicatures *qua* a theory that systematically pairs expressions with preferred interpretations. To illustrate this, let us consider an utterance of:

(13) Alas, Jane is a whore

A competent speaker of English will compute, without further information (linguistic and/or contextual), that the speaker has *both* (i) a negative attitude toward female sex-workers, triggered by the slur-word ‘whore’ instead of the neutral ‘sex-worker’ *and* (ii) a negative attitude regarding Jane being a sex-worker, triggered by the interjection ‘alas’. That is, an utterance of (13) encompasses two biases, one

triggered by the slur 'whore' regarding sex-workers and the other triggered by the interjection 'alas', regarding Jane being one of them. These are cases of alleged non-truth-conditional meaning. If instead of (13) the speaker or writer had produced:

(14) Jane is a sex-worker

she would have said (in Grice's sense) the same thing, i.e., she would have expressed the same proposition (or Kaplanian content), i.e. that Jane is a sex-worker. Yet, in expressing this content the speaker/writer conveys different attitudes. While (14) is neutral, (13) conveys the speaker/writer's biases; the latter triggers two generalized conversational implicatures.

## 5 Biases and Reflexive Contents

I now turn to the pluri-propositionalist theory of communication that, if I am right, encapsulates the gifts of Predelli's theory of use and the ones of a theory of generalized conversational implicatures. The theory of communication I have in mind attempts to take into account the different motivations guiding a speaker's selection of a given utterance over another expressing the same content, i.e. what motivates a speaker to say something in a particular way instead of another way. The proposal I have in mind is Perry's critical referentialism (see Perry 2001/2012 and Korta & Perry 2011). Perry's underlying idea is that:

I cannot accept that a semantic theory can be correct that does not provide us with an appropriate interface between what sentences mean, and how we use them to communicate beliefs in order to motivate and explain action. A theory of linguistic meaning should provide us with an understanding of the properties sentences have that lead us to produce them under different circumstances, and react as we do to their utterance by others. (Perry 2012, p. 9)

On this account the utterance of a sentence comes equipped with various contents. The basic idea is that every utterance is *systematically* associated with a family of contents that derive from the combination of the speaker's plan (his/her

intentions and beliefs), the conventions exploited, and the circumstances of the utterance. The truth-conditions of these contents can be classified in different ways; some of these contents are reflexive or utterance-bound contents, with the utterance itself as a constituent. In other words:

Any statement, whether or not it contains indexicals, has multiple reflexive contents associated with it, which will be grasped by a semantically competent listener and are necessary for an account of cognitive significance. ... if we examine carefully what the problems that cases of co-reference and no-reference pose for semantic theory, we shall see that these problems can be solved at the level of reflexive content. (Perry 2012, pp. 12-13)

These variegated contents expand from the purely reflexive to the referential, or official, content: they constitute a family of gradually less reflexive and less contextually dependent contents. The content expressed by the utterance is, according to Perry, usually considered the referential content or official content and corresponds to the intuitive direct-reference concept of what is said (or Kaplanian content).

To illustrate the difference between official and reflexive contents, let's suppose that Jane utters (15) while David utters (16):

(15) I love champagne

(16) Jane loves champagne

From the direct reference standpoint, the proposition expressed by (15) and (16) is the following:

(15/16) a. That **Jane** loves champagne<sup>19</sup>

(15) and (16) express the same singular proposition, with Jane and the property of loving champagne as constituents. (15) and (16) have the same official content.

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<sup>19</sup> I follow Perry's notation of using boldface for content constituents; roman when the constituent is the object designated; italics when it's not an object but an identifying condition.

This, though, does not explain why, in normal circumstances, if Jane's aim is to get John to invite her to drink some champagne, she would utter (15) but not (16). John may even be unaware of Jane's name. Even if he knew her name it would be awkward for Jane to speak as Maradona and De Gaulle used to do, and utter (16).

Perry's account starts from distinguishing the reflexive content of an utterance like (15).<sup>20</sup> The indexical (reflexive) content of (15) corresponds to what a hearer would understand, given his/her knowledge of English and no other contextual information besides the fact that (15) has been produced. This can be rendered by the following:

(15)      b. That *the speaker of (15)* loves champagne

(15b) is a reflexive content, for it has (15), the utterance itself, as a constituent: (15b) is about (15) itself. (15b) is a proposition associated with (15) in virtue of the meaning of the sentence, the type, "I love champagne". This property is given by the linguistic meaning of the type, independently of any contextual feature. Any competent speaker of English grasps this meaning, i.e. grasps (15b). If one were to read it on a blackboard or in an anonymous letter (15) without knowing who wrote it (i.e. who the referent of 'I' is) a competent speaker would understand at least (15b). (15b), though, is not the content expressed, *viz.* it is not what Jane said in uttering (15). Jane said that she loves champagne; she didn't say that the speaker of (15) loves champagne. To borrow Frege's terminology (15b) is not the subject matter of (15).

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<sup>20</sup> The distinction between reflexive truth-conditions or reflexive content and incremental truth-conditions or official content bears a similarity to and is inspired by Reichenbach's (1947) token-reflexive treatment of indexical expressions. According to Reichenbach, the meaning of an indexical such as 'I' is explained using a reflexive description of the form 'the utterer of this token' while the meaning of 'you' is explained as 'the addressee of this token'. This conception was refined with Kaplan's (1977) content/character distinction. The character (or linguistic meaning) of an indexical can be represented as a function taking as its argument the context and delivering as its value the content or referent. Thus, the character of 'I' can be represented as 'the agent of this utterance' and the character of 'you' as 'the addressee of this utterance'. In short, the character or linguistic meaning of an indexical is what a competent speaker/hearer masters.

Jane talked about herself (the subject matter); she didn't talk about the words she used. Yet (15b) plays a crucial role in Jane's communicative plan. Given that John understands (15) and notices that the speaker of (15) is the person sitting next to him, he can grasp the following:

(15) c. That *the person next to me* loves champagne

This is not the content expressed by (15); it is not what Jane said, but it's the relevant content that John should grasp for Jane's plan to succeed—that is, to trigger John to invite her to drink champagne. It is this content and not the indexical or the referential content that accounts for the cognitive motivation and cognitive impact of (15). (15c) is understood on the basis of the hearer's knowledge of English, i.e. (15b), and perceptual awareness of the context of utterance, who the speaker is and where she is located. John grasps it through his perception of the utterance.

With proper names the situation is slightly different. The reflexive content of (16), uttered by David to John, would be the following (cf. Perry 2012, p. 122):

(16) b. That *the person the convention exploited by (16) permits one to designate with 'Jane'* loves champagne.

John's mastery of English does not give him more than that. Without any hints about the naming convention the speaker is using to refer to a particular person, John is not in the position to grasp the official content of (16), i.e. he is cognitively blind about the content expressed. Furthermore, John will not get any other "intermediate" content that could give him an idea about the referent picked out by David's use of 'Jane'. While (15b) directs the hearer, John, to a particular aspect of the context of the utterance, the speaker, (16b) does not lead John to any contextual aspect and, thus, to further less context-sensitive (or incremental, to use Perry's terminology) contents. In a nutshell, while (15c) allows John to invite Jane to drink champagne, (16b) does not prompt John to invite Jane to drink champagne. Even if John happens to know the

person called ‘Jane’ that David is referring to, so that he understands what David is saying—i.e. he grasps the official content of (15/16a)[That **Jane** loves champagne]—this is not enough to trigger John to invite Jane to drink champagne: to do so, he must recognize Jane as the person sitting close to him, *viz.* he needs to grasp (15c)[That *the person next to me* loves champagne].

An utterance’s reflexive content helps us to deal with problems pertaining to cognitive significance. As Frege (1892) pointed out, one expands one’s knowledge when one comes to realize that Hesperus is Phosphorus. For, although the referential or official content of “Hesperus is Phosphorus” does not differ from the one of “Hesperus is Hesperus”, their reflexive contents differ.<sup>21</sup>

I will now try to show how Predelli’s theory of bias fits within the Perry-inspired account of communication.<sup>22</sup> The reflexive truth-conditions of (13) and (14) that I repeat here:

(13) Alas, Jane is a whore

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<sup>21</sup> As Kaplan suggested in his seminal “Demonstratives” (1977), to deal with the notion of cognitive significance we have to focus on the expressions’ character (roughly, linguistic meaning). Thus the cognitive significance of an utterance of ‘My pants are on fire’ differs from the cognitive significance of ‘His pants are on fire’ insofar as the character of ‘my’ differs from the character of ‘his’ even in the case the two expressions are co-referential. One utterance may trigger different behaviors from the other. Inspired by Kaplan, Perry argues that problems pertaining to cognitive significance ought to be explained at the level of reflexive truth-conditions: “(a) The cognitive significance of an utterance S in language L is a semantic property of the utterance; (b) It is a property that a person who understands the meaning of S in L recognizes; (c) The cognitive significance of an utterance of S in L is a proposition; (d) A person who understands the meaning of S in L, and accepts as true an utterance of S in L, will believe the proposition that is the cognitive significance of the utterance; (e) A person who understands the meaning of S in L, and sincerely utters S, will believe the proposition that is the cognitive significance of his utterance” (Perry 1988, p. 194).

<sup>22</sup> In a recent paper Vallée (2014) convincingly proposes a similar (Perry-inspired) account concerning slurs. One of the aims of my paper is to show how Vallée’s account generalizes to other categories of biases.

(14) Jane is a sex-worker

could be cashed out, respectively, as follows:

(13/14) a. That *the person the convention exploited by (13) permits one to designate with 'Jane' is a sex-worker.*

while its official content would correspond to the proposition

(13/14) b. That **Jane** is a sex-worker.

Yet, since (13), unlike (14), also conveys the biases that the utterer (or writer) has a negative attitude both regarding sex-workers and regarding the fact that Jane is a sex-worker, the reflexive content of (13) also encapsulates the agent of (13)'s biases, i.e.

(13) c. That *the agent of (13) has a negative attitude toward the individual s/he refers to using 'Jane' being a sex-worker*

(13) d. That *the agent of (13) has a negative attitude toward sex-workers*

(13c) should capture the generalized conversational implicature that the agent of (13) has a negative attitude (conveyed by the use of the interjection 'alas') concerning Jane being a sex-worker, while (13d) the generalized conversational implicature that the agent of (13) has a negative attitude, triggered by the slur 'whore', toward sex-workers in general. If Perry is right in arguing that reflexive contents help us to classify agents' attitudes (and, as such, to deal with problems pertaining to cognitive significance), then the reflexive contents triggered by the interjection 'alas' and the slur 'whore' capture the attitude of the agent of (13).

The picture I am proposing, it seems to me, comes close to the view championed by Predelli's account. In particular, it comes close to Predelli's view that the meaning of an expression can be considered as a pair comprising the character of the given expression *and* the bias it conveys. Thus 'whore' and 'sex-worker' will contribute the same property into the proposition expressed (the official content), while differing in

their contribution into the reflexive content. The interjection ‘alas’ does not make a contribution into the official content; its contribution affects the agent’s attitude *vis-à-vis* the latter and it is captured at the reflexive level by (13d).

Furthermore, if we take on board Grice’s view on generalized conversational implicatures as being the information that one extracts from, say, an anonymous letter, we can deal with the conventional aspect associated with slurs and interjections—that is, the information that a competent speaker can infer in virtue of his/her mastery of the language. This also allows us to capture Predelli’s view that if we fix the context of use some sentences are self-verifying. In the context of a face-to-face communication, for instance, an utterance of

(17) I exist [said by John]

is self-verifying. Its self-verifiability is not triggered by the official content, i.e. the proposition that John exists, but by its reflexive content, i.e.:

(17) b. That *the agent of (17) exists when she produces it (at the time and location of the utterance)*.

This information ought not to be confused with particularized conversational implicatures. The speaker of (17) may *conversationally* implicate that he is a male, that she or he has a Californian accent, that she is an adult person, that she or he speaks fluent English, and so on and so forth. After all, the audience must perceive the utterance. The relevant information concerning the self-verifiability of an utterance like (17) is *conventionally* imparted insofar as one *cannot* utter (17) and contradict oneself. If (17) were used in a will it would force a switch of context (it would be, as Predelli states, an obstinate use of the indexical). As competent speakers, the heirs, on hearing “I do not exist” would easily compute that the agent introduced by the signature does not exist at the time they read/hear the utterance. This competence is captured at the reflexive level of content.

## 6 Conclusion

After this excursion toward Predelli's theory of bias and his account of communication, I hope to have shown that many of the data he proposes can be dealt with within a pluri-propositionalist theory of communication that, to my understanding, is independently motivated — *viz.* it isn't an *ad hoc* theory motivated by the presence of various biases in natural languages. Yet it can be developed so as to account for the rich amount of data that Predelli's theory of bias elegantly deals with. In particular, I attempted to show how Predelli's view that an expression comes equipped with both a character and a bias can be accommodated in distinguishing between the official content and the reflexive one. While the character may contribute to the expression of the official content (what is said), the bias, along the lines of generalized conversational implicatures, contributes to the reflexive content. As I see it, Predelli's theory of biases, and his general account of communication, fits nicely within Perry's and Korta & Perry's account of communication, though I am not sure the latter will agree with my understanding and development of their original framework, and, in particular, whether they sit with me in arguing that generalized conversational implicatures contribute into the reflexive content of an utterance.

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