

# Non-restrictive Modification and Backgrounding

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## 1 Introduction

Non-restrictive modifications are commonly said to provide information which is irrelevant to the denotation or reference of the modified phrase. It expresses a property of the referent or denotation which is supposed to be evident in the context in which the sentence is uttered thus providing information which is intuitively backgrounded. Non-restrictive modifications may appear in various forms, e.g. as relative clauses, appositions, or attributive adjectives. In this paper the focus is on attributive adjectives. The example in (1) is from a newspaper article referring to an anti-aircraft defense bill dismissed by the German constitutional court. The prominent interpretation of the NP *unschuldige Passagiere* ('innocent passengers') is such that the modification by *unschuldige* ('innocent') is non-restrictive. According to this interpretation passengers in the context of an aircraft hijacking are generally viewed as innocent and are contrasted with kidnapers. There is also a restrictive interpretation of *unschuldige Passagiere* such that kidnapers are regarded as non-innocent passengers, which is, however, marginal.

- (1) Ein Abschuss eines gekaperten Flugzeuges, in dem sich neben den Entführern unschuldige Passagiere befinden, ist und bleibt verboten.  
'Shooting down a kidnapped aircraft that has innocent passengers on board in addition to the kidnapers is illegal.'

In distinguishing between the restrictive and the non-restrictive interpretation of (German) attributive adjectives intonation plays a crucial role. Consider the NP *bunte Blumen* ('colorful flowers') in (2). Since according to general world knowledge flowers are always colorful, the modifier has to be interpreted non-restrictively. An accent on the modifier, as in (2b), would induce a restrictive interpretation triggering a set of alternatives (cf. Rooth 1992) including colorless flowers, which is ruled out by world knowledge. Obviously, the non-restrictive interpretation requires the modifier to be deaccented. This suggests to regard the modifier as background, as in (2c). A narrow focus on the noun would, however, induce a set of alternatives comprised of colorful things, which is clearly not the intended reading. This leaves the option of an NP-wide focus, as in (2d), which does trigger the intended set of alternatives, e.g. vegetables and trees. It is in conflict, however, with the intuition that a non-restrictive modifier expresses information evident in the context and thus backgrounded.

- (2) (a) In Annas Garten sind bunte Blumen, aber kein Gemüse und keine Bäume.  
'In Anna's garden there are colorful flowers, but no vegetables and no trees.'  
(b) ?? In Annas Garten sind [BUNTE]<sub>F</sub> Blumen (... aber keine farblosen Blumen).  
'In Anna's garden there are colorful flowers (... but no colorless flowers)'  
(c) ?? In Annas Garten sind bunte [BLUMEN]<sub>F</sub> (... aber kein buntes Gemüse und keine bunten Bäume)  
'In Anna's garden there are colorful flowers (... but no colorful vegetables and no colorful trees)'

- (d) In Annas Garten sind [bunte BLUMEN]<sub>F</sub> (... aber kein Gemüse und keine Bäume)  
'In Anna's garden there are colorful flowers (... but no vegetables and no trees').

Although, as shown above, a non-restrictive interpretation requires the modifier to be de-accented, it should be clear that the converse does not hold – deaccenting does not entail a non-restrictive interpretation. This is evident from (2c) and is confirmed by (3). In Edna's reply the modifier *rot* ('red') is deaccented due to the previous mentioning of *rot* in Tom's statement, but it must be interpreted restrictively, as indicated by the contrast in the subsequent sentence.

- (3) Tom: Ich habe für unsere neue Wohnung einen roten Teppich gekauft.  
'I bought a red carpet for our new apartment.'

Edna: Das ist ja großartig. Chuck hat gesagt, dass er mir einen roten [SESSEL]<sub>F</sub> schenkt.  
Dann schmeißen wir den grünen endlich weg.<sup>1</sup>  
'This is great. Chuck said that he will give me a red armchair. We will then get rid of the green one.'

The examples in (2) and (3) demonstrate that a non-restrictive modifier does not constitute background information, and a backgrounded modifier need not be interpreted as a non-restrictive one, clearly showing that there is no correspondence between non-restrictive modification and backgrounding in the sense of focus/background. Still, a non-restrictively interpreted modifier cannot carry a narrow focus and it does not qualify as background information applying to other alternatives. This gives rise to the supposition that the concept of focus vs. background and the concept of restrictive vs. non-restrictive modification are not just orthogonal but that non-restrictive modification does not take part in the focus/background partition of the sentence.

In the remainder of this paper I will, first, consider various cases of non-restrictively interpreted attributive adjectives in indefinite and definite noun phrases addressing the question of what is modified by a non-restrictive modification. Secondly, examples like the ones in (2) will be re-examined in order to clarify the interaction of focus/background and the non-restrictive interpretation of attributive adjectives. In the third section, the presupposition interpretation of non-restrictive modification and the conventional implicature analysis proposed by Potts (2005) will be considered. It will turn out, that there is an essential difference between so-called expressives, like *damn*, and regular adjectives like *unschuldig* ('innocent') in (1). While both types of attributes on a non-restrictive interpretation have widest scope, the former but not the latter is "attached to the speaker" such that it cannot be picked up by the next speaker. This will lead to the conclusion that expressives do establish a separate meaning dimension expressing a public commitment of the speaker in the sense of Gunlogson (2003) which is not part of the common ground.

## 2 Non-restrictive interpretation of attributive adjectives

In the case of indefinite NPs, licensing of a non-restrictive interpretation seems to depend on the lexical meaning of the adjective and the noun. In *weiße Schimmel* ('white white horses') a restrictive interpretation of the attribute is not available because *Schimmel* means 'white horse' and the attribute *weiß* ('white') has no influence on its denotation. In *bayerische Beamte* ('Bavarian officers') a non-restrictive interpretation of the attribute is ruled out because *Beamte*

<sup>1</sup> Foci are indicated only if relevant to the argument. There may be additional foci not indicated in the examples.

(‘officers’) are not generally Bavarians. In *unschuldige Passagiere* (‘innocent passengers’), as in (1), the situation is more complicated, since we may regard passengers in general to be innocent, but we may also take the view that every person purchasing a ticket is a passenger, including kidnappers. This amounts to two readings, *passenger*<sub>1</sub> and *passenger*<sub>2</sub> where one corresponds to the non-restrictive and the other one to the restrictive interpretation of the modifier.

Adjectives like *weiß* (‘white’), *bayrisch* (‘Bavarian’) and *unschuldig* (‘innocent’) differ from adjectives like *dreckig* (‘dirty’), *süß* (‘sweet’) and *dämlich* (‘stupid’) in that the latter are “expressive” (expressing the speaker’s anger or approval etc.). Expressives must be interpreted non-restrictively (Huddleston & Pullum 2002), but in most cases they come with a regular counterpart which has a restrictive interpretation. In *dreckige Gauner* (‘dirty crooks’), for example, the adjective may be interpreted non-restrictively meaning something like *mean*, but it may also be interpreted restrictively meaning *covered with dirt*. Similarly, in *süße Kätzchen* (‘sweet kittens’) the adjective has a regular as well as an expressive meaning, but due to selectional restrictions (kittens cannot be sweet in the sense of taste) this NP requires a non-restrictive interpretation of the attribute. Finally, there are adjectives which have only an expressive meaning, like *damn* or *dämlich* (‘stupid’) enforcing a non-restrictive interpretation.

In the case of indefinite NPs the modifier clearly combines with the noun. Simplifying matters considerably, the restrictive interpretation leads to the intersection of adjective and noun denotation, while on the non-restrictive interpretation the modifier applies to the kind denoted by the noun. In the case of definite NPs on a non-restrictive interpretation the modifier may also apply to the referent. Assuming that definiteness indicates uniqueness (and neglecting pronominal interpretations relating to familiar referents, cf. Umbach 2002) the NP *der bayrische Beamte* (‘the Bavarian officer’) will refer to the unique individual in the intersection of Bavarians and officers, which has to be a singleton set. If the noun already denotes a singleton, as in *der blonde Schachweltmeister* (‘the blond chess world champion’) the attribute is clearly non-restrictive since it does not affect the choice of the referent. This type of non-restrictive interpretation entails that the unique individual that is the chess world champion is blond, but it does not entail that chess world champions in general are blond.

If licensed by the lexical meanings of the noun and the adjective, definite NPs may, in addition to the restrictive reading, allow for the kind-related and for the referent-related non-restrictive interpretation. Thus the NP *der kleine Pekinese* (‘the small Pekinese’) may either refer to the unique Pekinese dog that is small (restrictive), or to the unique Pekinese dog (in the given situation) entailing that Pekinese dogs are generally small (kind-related non-restrictive), or to the unique Pekinese dog (in the given situation) entailing that this dog is small (referent-related non-restrictive). Expressive adjectives modifying a definite NP, although excluding a restrictive interpretation, do allow for both types of non-restrictive interpretation. *Der dämliche Beamte* (‘the stupid officer’), for example, may either be interpreted entailing that officers in general are stupid or entailing that the unique officer in the given situation is stupid. In order to avoid side issues, I will leave the referent-related type of non-restrictive modification out of consideration in the remainder of the paper and instead focus on the kind-related type. Simplifying matters again, *Ein/der kleine(r) Pekinese bellt* (‘A/the small Pekinese barks’) will, on its non-restrictive reading, be interpreted as entailing that Pekinese dogs are in general small,  $\exists x/\exists!x. \textit{pekinese}'(x) \ \& \ \textit{small}'(\overset{\cap}{\cap}(\textit{pekinese}')) \ \& \ \textit{bark}'(x)$  (where  $\overset{\cap}{\cap}$  represents the nominalization function mapping a predicate to a kind).

Although expressive adjectives like *dämlich* (‘stupid’) must be interpreted non-restrictively, it is not the case that all adjectives that allow for a non-restrictive interpretation are expressives. Many regular adjectives shift to an expressive meaning when interpreted non-restrictively (cf. *süß* ‘sweet’), but there are also adjectives that license a non-restrictive interpretation without

changing into an expressive, e.g. *weiß* ('white') and *unschuldig* ('innocent'), indicating that the analysis of non-restrictive attributive adjectives should not be restricted to expressives.

### 3 Focus / Background

As indicated in the beginning of the paper, non-restrictive attributive adjectives exhibit a particular behavior with respect to focus and background. In (4) and (5) there is a narrow focus on the modifier. (4a) will be licensed by a preceding discourse such as *In dem Zimmer waren zwei Beamte, ein blonder und ein rothaariger*. ('There were two officers in the room, one was blond and the other one red-haired'), inducing a restrictive interpretation. In the case of (4b), it is hardly possible to come up with a licensing context. Only contexts explicitly mentioning the expressive seem to license this focus, e.g., *Der eine Beamte war faul und der andere dämlich*. ('One of the officers was lazy and the other one was stupid') In such contexts the focused expressive appears like a quotation ("the officer who was called stupid"). In contrast to the restrictive modifier in (4a), which triggers a set of alternatives, e.g., {*red – haired, blond, black, brown, ...*}, the expressive in (4b) seems unable to induce alternatives. In the quotation-like context above we might think of *dämlich* ('stupid') and *faul* ('lazy') as alternatives, but these alternatives are only available because they have been mentioned before, which is atypical for alternatives evoked by focus.

- (4) (a) Der [ROTHAARIGE]<sub>F</sub> Beamte fragte nach meinem Ausweis.  
 (b) ?? Der [DÄMLICHE]<sub>F</sub> Beamte fragte nach meinem Ausweis.  
 'The red-haired / stupid officer asked for my passport.'

While the modifier in (4b) has only an expressive meaning, the one in (5a) is ambiguous and the one in (5b) has only a regular meaning. Being focused, *dreckig* ('dirty') allows only for the *covered with dirt* reading and has to be interpreted restrictively. Focusing *unschuldig* ('innocent') requires a reading of *Passagiere* ('passengers') including non-innocent passengers and is also interpreted restrictively. Evidently, expressives as well regular adjectives on a non-restrictive interpretation resist focus. Regular adjectives and ambiguous ones switch to a restrictive interpretation when focused, while expressives make the sentence unacceptable (unless used in a quotation-like manner).

- (5) (a) Der [DRECKIGE]<sub>F</sub> Gauner hat mein Fahrrad gestohlen.  
 'The dirty crook stole my bike'  
 (b) Am Heck der Maschine stand ein [UNSCHULDIGER]<sub>F</sub> Passagier.  
 'There is an innocent passenger at the rear end of the plane'

In (6) and (7) the focus is on the noun. (6a) will, e.g., be licensed by a context such as *In Raum 311 sprach ein Beamter mit einem Antragsteller, beide hatten feuerrote Haare*. ('In room 311 there was an officer talking to an applicant, both red-haired'). In the case of (6b), it is again hard to perceive of a licensing context. Even in a quotation like use of the expressive narrow focus on the noun seems infelicitous. Similarly, in (7) narrow focus on the noun enforces a restrictive reading of the modifier. *Dreckig* ('dirty') in (7a) adopts the *covered with dirt reading*, and *Passagiere* ('passengers') in (7b) must be read as including non-innocent passengers. The examples in (4)-(7) clearly show, that expressives as well regular adjectives on a non-restrictive interpretation do not take part in the focus/background partition of the sentence: (i) They cannot carry a narrow focus and (because?) they are unable to raise alternatives, and (ii) they do not qualify as background and (because?) they are unable to constrain the alternatives evoked by

the focus. While the inability to raise alternatives is at least intuitively plausible, the resistance to constrain alternatives is really surprising. Assuming that a non-restrictive adjective combines with the kind denoted by the noun, there is no obvious reason why it should not be able to apply to alternative kinds.

- (6) (a) Der rothaarige [BEAMTE]<sub>F</sub> hatte ein rosanes Hemd an.  
(b) ?? Der dämliche [BEAMTE]<sub>F</sub> hatte ein rosanes Hemd an  
'The red-haired / stupid officer was wearing a pink shirt.'
- (7) (a) Der dreckige [GAUNER]<sub>F</sub> traf den dreckigen [POPEN]<sub>F</sub>.  
'The dirty crook met the dirty priest.'  
(b) Am Heck der Maschine stand ein unschuldiger [PASSAGIER]<sub>F</sub>.  
'There is an innocent passenger at the rear end of the plane'

As already shown in the beginning of this paper, the only focus compatible with a non-restrictive attributive adjective is a focus including (at least) the adjective and the noun, as in *der [dämliche BEAMTE]<sub>F</sub>* ('the stupid officer'). This focus yields alternatives such as *{stupid officer, applicant, ...}*, which is intuitively correct. But it disproves the intuitive idea that non-restrictive modification expresses some kind of background.

#### 4 Presupposition or conventional implicature ?

It is generally agreed that a non-restrictive modification triggers an entailment such that the modifying property applies to the modified argument. Since this entailment it is not blocked by, e.g., negation and modals, it is usually regarded as a presupposition giving rise to a truth value gap in case of inconsistency with the common ground ( cf. Umbach 1996). The presupposition interpretation has been challenged by data suggesting that it is possible for the hearer to ignore the entailment triggered by a non-restrictive modification if it is in conflict with the common ground, especially in the case of adjectives and appositions. Another argument against the presupposition interpretation is provided by the fact that, unlike regular presupposition, the entailments triggered by non-restrictive modifications project out of, e.g., indirect quotation contexts. For this reason Geurts (1999) proposed a buoyancy principle which allows for global accommodation of backgrounded material (where the notion of background in Geurts' paper includes the entailments of non-restrictive modifications as well as background as opposed to focus).

In Potts (2005) a range of phenomena is investigated including non-restrictive relative clauses, parentheticals, appositions, discourse adverbials, epithets and expressives. The basic idea is that by using such expressions the speaker makes a comment upon (part of) the asserted content of the utterance, and that these comments are conventional implicatures (cf. Grice 1975). Conventional implicatures are characterized as commitments made by the speaker by virtue of the meaning of the words he chooses which are logically and compositionally independent of "what is said". Following Potts, conventional implicatures constitute a separate dimension of meaning, in addition to the "at-issue" meaning of the utterance (i.e. the assertional meaning in the case of declarative sentences). To represent conventional implicatures Potts suggests a multidimensional semantics such that the meaning of a sentence is represented by a tuple consisting of the asserted proposition and a (possibly empty) list of propositions representing conventional implicatures. The interaction between these two dimensions is restricted such that conventional implicatures can never be argument to an asserted expression and must take asserted contents as their arguments.

In Potts' analysis focus is not considered. Although he admits that intonation has some kind of effect – non-restrictive relative clauses, for example, are distinguished by their so-called comma-intonation – he refers to focus semantics merely as a "campaign point" supporting the multidimensional view of meaning. In the face of the findings above indicating that non-restrictive adjectives do not take part in the focus/background division a separate dimension of meaning appears tempting. It is unclear, however, how the conventional implicature dimension relates to the focus dimension of meaning in the sense of, e.g., Rooth (1992) or Krifka (1992). Moreover, its role in communication is far from obvious – does it, e.g., enter the common ground of the discourse participants?

By interpreting non-restrictive modifications as conventional implicatures instead of presuppositions Potts accounts for the fact that they (i) are attributed to the speaker of the utterance even if embedded in indirect quotation, (ii) do not necessarily give rise to truth value gaps in case of inconsistency with the common ground, (iii) do not necessarily lead to accommodation and (iv) in the majority of cases require informativeness. The evidence for these facts stems from different constructions within the range of conventional implicature phenomena. The question is, however, whether all of these phenomena behave similarly with respect to the above listed properties.

Regarding accommodation, there seems to be a difference between regular adjectives and expressives. Let us assume that in (8a) A uses the reading of *Passagier* ('passenger') compatible with the non-restrictive interpretation of *unschuldig* ('innocent'). In his response B simply ignores the modifier and uses the other reading, which makes the answer incoherent. For a successful communication B would have to use the reading intended by A and thus accommodate A's presupposition that passengers are innocent. In (8b) there is no accommodation required for the answer to be coherent – B even contradicts A's view that officers are stupid. This suggests that, while regular adjectives on a non-restrictive interpretation do require accommodation, expressives do not.

- (8) (a) A: Nehmen Sie an, in dem Flugzeug befinden sich unschuldige Passagiere.  
'Let us assume that there are innocent passengers on board.'  
B: ?? Unter den Passagieren könnten auch Entführer sein.  
'There might be kidnappers among the passengers.'
- (b) A: Hat heute schon wieder ein dämlicher Beamter angerufen?  
'Was there a call by some stupid officer again?'  
B: Ja, heute hat einer von der Stadtverwaltung angerufen. Er war übrigens  
durchaus vernünftig.  
'Yes, someone from the city administration called. He was quite sensible.'

Let us finally consider scope issues. Non-restrictive adjectives, regular ones as well as expressives, undoubtedly take widest scope even if occurring in a position which is a presupposition plug, e.g., in an indirect quotation context. The sequence in (9a) appears inconsistent because assuming that *unschuldig* is used non-restrictively the reading of *Passagier* in the embedded sentence differs from the one in the subsequent sentence. The example in (9b) is from Potts (2005). Although embedded in indirect quotation, the use of *lovely* indicates that Edna thinks that red vases are beautiful.

- (9) (a) ?? Der Einsatzleiter sagte dem Minister, dass sich unschuldige Passagiere an Bord der Maschine befinden. Vermutlich sind unter den Passagieren auch Entführer.  
'The head of operations said that there are innocent passengers on board. Maybe there are kidnappers among the passengers.'

- (b) (Chuck thinks that all his red vases are ugly, and tells Edna that she can take on of them. Edna likes red vases, selects on and returns home to her housemate:)  
"Chuck said, I could have one of his lovely vases!"

The fact that they invariably take widest scope in the utterance seems to be a hallmark of non-restrictive modifications. It is one of the main reasons for Potts to regard them as comments by the speaker and reject a presuppositional analysis. Surprisingly, the scope behavior of expressives and regular non-restrictive adjectives seems to differ when taking dialog into account. In (10) the non-restrictive adjective in A's utterance is picked up in B's utterance without appearing marked. In (11), however, picking up the expressive used in the preceding turn has a quotation-like flavor. Edna's statement implicates that she likes Chuck's paintings (whereas Chuck might like them or not). When Tom repeats her expression *wunderbar* ('wonderful') it seems like a quote indicating irony. This suggests that expressives do not only take widest scope but are, in addition, plugged by the turn they are used in, which is plausible taking into account that they express the speaker's attitude.

- (10) A: Bitte bedenken Sie, dass sich neben den Entführern unschuldige Passagiere an Bord befinden.  
'Please keep in mind that there are innocent passengers on board'  
B: Selbstverständlich werden wir nichts tun, was (die) unschuldige(n) Passagiere gefährden könnte.  
'We will of course not do anything that might endanger (the) innocent passengers.'
- (11) Edna: Chuck hat gesagt, dass er mir eins seiner wunderbaren Bilder geben will.  
'Chuck said that he will give me one of his wonderful paintings.'  
Tom: Aber häng das wunderbare Bild bitte nicht in den Flur.  
'But please do not hang the wonderful picture in the hall.'

## 5 Conclusion

The framework presented in Gunlogson (2003) makes it possible to distinguish between the speaker's and the hearer's commitments. Commitments are public in the sense that they are mutually recognized. If the speaker is committed to a proposition  $p$  then the common ground includes the proposition that *the speaker believes p* while  $p$  itself need not be part of the common ground. This framework suggests itself for the analysis of expressives. Although the entailments induced by the use of expressives (e.g. that Chuck's pictures are wonderful) are public commitments of the speaker, they are obviously not meant to be adopted by the hearer, which is, e.g., implicated by the lack of accommodation and the resistance to be picked up across turns. In Gunlogson's framework the entailments induced by expressives can be analyzed as commitments of the speaker which do not enter the common ground.

To conclude, the fact that non-restrictively used attributive adjectives do not take part in the focus/background partition of the sentence strongly suggests to follow Potts in representing the entailments resulting from non-restrictively used adjectives separate from the assertional part of the utterance. But if these entailments are subsumed under the conventional implicature dimension, we will have to assume that all of the conventional implicature phenomena behave similarly with respect to focus/background, which is unlikely taking the range of phenomena into account. For expressives Gunlogson's framework offers a convincing solution. As for the rest, including regular non-restrictive adjective, there is at the moment no conclusive answer.

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