

# Conventional Evaluativity\*

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Some expressions, such as ‘generous’ and ‘stingy’, are used to not only describe the world around us. They are used to also evaluate the things they are applied to. In this paper, I suggest a novel account of how this evaluation is conveyed: the conventional triggering view. It partly agrees and partly disagrees both with the standard semantic view and its popular pragmatic contender. Like the former and unlike the latter, it has it that the evaluation is conveyed due to the conventional meaning of the sentences in question. Unlike the former and much like the latter, it suggests that the evaluation is a secondary rather than a primary content.

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## 1 Introduction

Some expressions are used to not only describe the world around us. They are used to also evaluate the things they are applied to. Think of a situation where Anne is having lunch with her colleagues at a local restaurant. When she sees her colleague Berta tipping the waiter 20%, she tells Dora:

(1) Berta is generous.

This seems to be a positive comment, perhaps even a praise of Berta and her behaviour. Assume that later Anne sees another colleague, Carla, tipping only 5%. She then says:

(2) Carla is stingy.

This seems to be a negative comment about Carla, perhaps even an admonition. Similar things could be said about Anne’s utterances of (3) and (4):

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- (3) Berta is courageous.  
(4) Carla is cowardly.

Her utterance of (3) evaluates Berta positively, while her utterance of (4) evaluates Carla negatively.

How do these utterances convey evaluation? The majority view in metaethics has it that the evaluation is a primary content that is semantically expressed (see, for instance, Kyle (2013; 2020)).<sup>1</sup> Recently, this view has received considerable pushback (see, most prominently, Väyrynen (2009; 2011; 2012; 2013a; 2013b)). It is argued that the evaluation is a secondary content that is merely pragmatically conveyed.<sup>2</sup>

I suggest an alternative account. I argue that the evaluation in question is best understood as being conventionally triggered, where ‘being conventionally triggered’ is used as an umbrella term that comprises conventional implicatures and semantic presuppositions.<sup>3</sup> I thus partly agree and partly disagree both with the majority view and its these days most popular contender. Like the former and unlike the latter, I hold that the evaluation is conveyed due to the conventional meaning of the sentences in question. Unlike the former and much like the latter, though, I take the evaluation to be a secondary rather than a primary content.<sup>4</sup>

I use two well-known diagnostics to show that my view is to be preferred over the indicated pragmatic view. The diagnostics make reference to the notions of cancellability and calculability, which will be understood in broadly Gricean terms. I assume that if my conventional triggering view is correct, the evaluation will be noncancellable and noncalculable, and that if the pragmatic view is correct, the evaluation will be exactly the opposite, i.e. cancellable and calculable (I’ll say more about these predictions in due course). I don’t show here that my view is superior to the primary semantic content view. Various—to my mind convincing—objections to this view have been presented in the debate, which have shifted the burden of proof to proponents of this view. Importantly, these objections do not threaten the conventional triggering view. So if these objections withstand scrutiny, my account will have the upper hand.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See also Foot (1958) and Dancy (1995) for prominent cognitivist defenses and Blackburn (1984; 1992) and Gibbard (1992; 2003) for expressivist defenses of the semantic expression view.

<sup>2</sup>Väyrynen’s view has it that the relevant evaluations are ‘defeasible implications’ (2013a, p. 81) which are ‘not at issue’ (2013a, p. 118) and which project out of various embeddings (2013a, p. 81). For earlier versions of the pragmatic view, see, e.g., Hare (1952; 1981).

<sup>3</sup>There might be further ways in which the evaluation could be conventionally triggered. See, e.g., Copp (2009) on conventional simplicatures.

<sup>4</sup>For the difference between primary and secondary contents, or proffered and non-proffered or at-issue and non-at-issue contents, see, e.g., Potts (2015) and the works cited therein. It is generally agreed that both conventional implicatures and semantic presuppositions arise due to the conventional meaning of the sentences triggering them and that they are secondary contents in that they are, for instance, assertorically inert. See, e.g., Potts (2007).

<sup>5</sup>The to my mind most convincing objection against the primary semantic content view is about intuitions according to which the evaluation (to be specified below) survives the embedding of the target sentences under negation, modals, and as the antecedent of conditionals.

I proceed in three steps. In section 2, I precisify my main claim. In section 3, I present my argument against the pragmatic view. In section 4, I sum up and indicate ways to proceed.

To avoid misunderstandings, let me clarify that I confine myself to the workings of *evaluative language* and so won't talk about evaluative *concepts* or evaluative *properties* and the like. I do think that my arguments have implications for intensions and extensions of the evaluative expressions in question, but I leave the details for another occasion.

## 2 Evaluativity

In this section, I address two pertinent questions regarding my claim that sentences such as (1)–(4) conventionally trigger evaluation. First, what falls under 'sentences like (1)–(4)' and, second, what is the evaluation in question?

I start with the first. I take sentences like (1)–(4) to be sentences featuring a certain kind of *evaluative term*, namely a so-called *thick term* (or *hybrid evaluative*) as opposed to a *thin term* (or *pure evaluative*).<sup>6</sup> It is matter of ongoing debate how to think of thick terms and thin terms and how to tell them apart from non-evaluative terms. Some think that we have an intuitive grasp based on agreed-upon examples; others hold that *thick terms* and *thin terms* are theoretical notions in need of clarification. I don't take sides here. Those who have an intuitive grasp of thick terms can go with it, using 'generous' and 'stingy' as well as 'courageous' and 'cowardly' as paradigm examples to be contrasted with common-place examples of thin terms, most notably 'good' and 'bad', as well as agreed-upon examples of non-evaluative terms such as 'green' and 'blue'. Those who are skeptical of purely intuition based accounts might find the suggestions below helpful for the discussion to come. I take these suggestions to be theoretically neutral in that both proponents of the primary semantic content view as well as advocates of the secondary pragmatic content view could take them on board, but I'm also happy to concede some degree of stipulativeness (for a similar strategy, see, for instance, Kyle (2020, p. 5)).

I suggest that utterances of sentences of the form 'a is T' with *a* being a singular term and *T* being a thick term convey—in the absence special circumstances—two types of content.<sup>7</sup> They either convey contents of type (a) and (b<sup>+</sup>):

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For this as well as further objections to the semantic view, see, e.g., Eklund (2011), Väyrynen (2012), and Väyrynen (2013a, p. 3). See Kyle (2013) for a response. For further discussion of the indicated semantic view, see Tappolet (2004), Eklund (2011, p. 34), Väyrynen (2009), and Väyrynen (2013a, 60ff.).

<sup>6</sup>See, most prominently, Williams (1985), as well as Eklund (2011) for helpful discussion.

<sup>7</sup>The proviso 'in the absence of special circumstances' is taken from Grice (1989, p. 37) and is used here to allow for instance that special circumstances may interfere so that either no content of type (b) is conveyed or a content of type (b) of the opposite valence is conveyed (the latter would be the case when the utterance of (1) conveys something negative and the utterance of (2) conveys something positive).

- (a) a has certain descriptive T-underlying features f to a degree above the contextually set threshold d.
- (b<sup>+</sup>) If someone has f to a degree above d, then that someone is good in at least one way.<sup>8</sup>

Or they convey contents of type (a) and (b<sup>-</sup>):

- (a) a has certain descriptive T-underlying features f to a degree above the contextually set threshold d.
- (b<sup>-</sup>) If someone has f to a degree above d, then that someone is bad in at least one way.<sup>9</sup>

I stay neutral here on how context sets the threshold d. I'm inclined to think that the mechanism at work will be the same as the one for gradable adjectives more generally, but I won't argue for this here (for pertinent discussion, see, for instance, C. Barker (2002), Kennedy (2007), Burnett (2017), and Viebahn (2020).)

To see this proposal in action, recall Anne's utterance of sentences (1) and (2) (similar things can be said about her utterances of (3) and (4)). Her utterance of (1) roughly conveys the following contents:

- (1a) Berta is willing to give money to a degree that is above the contextually set threshold d.
- (1b) If someone is willing to give money to a degree above d, then that someone is good in at least one way.

Her utterance of (2) roughly conveys the following contents:

- (2a) Carla is unwilling to give money to a degree that is above the contextually set threshold d.
- (2b) If someone is unwilling to give money to a degree above d, then that someone is bad in at least one way.

In line with the above I furthermore suggest that utterances of sentences that do not feature a thick term sometimes fail to convey, even absent special circumstances, either a content of type (a) or a content of type (b). If Anne were to utter a sentence containing a thin predicate, such as

- (5) Berta is good.
- (6) Carla is bad.

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<sup>8</sup>If having f to a too high degree makes the thing in question bad in at least one way even if a lower dose makes it good in at least one way, then (a) and (b<sup>+</sup>) should receive an upper bound in addition to the lower bound. Nothing of importance in the following would change though.

<sup>9</sup>Since having f to a very high degree doesn't seem to make things good in at least one way if a lower dose makes them bad in at least one way, no change along the lines of the previous footnote will be required.

her utterance need not convey a content similar to (a), even absent special circumstances.<sup>10</sup> And if Anne were to utter a sentence containing a non-evaluative predicate, such as

- (7) Berta's shirt is green.
- (8) Carla's glasses are blue.

her utterance need not convey a content similar to (b), even absent special circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

So to summarize my answer to the first question: I take sentences like (1)–(4) to be sentences of the form 'a is T' in which T is a thick term, and I will assume that sentences of this type differ from sentences in which the predicate is not a thick term in that only utterances of the former, not utterances of the latter, convey absent special circumstances contents of type (a) and (b).

Even though I suspect that my preferred conventional triggering view applies to all these sentences I will only consider a specific subset in the following. My first restriction concerns the content of thick terms. I will only look at sentences containing broadly speaking moral thick terms. This excludes not only aesthetic thick terms (for instance 'beautiful' and 'ugly') and epistemic thick terms (for instance 'smart' and 'stupid'), but also further potential thick terms that ascribe only instrumental value (candidates would be 'functioning' and 'broken'). Somewhat differently put, it leaves us only with those thick terms for which the evaluative content of type (b) is about a way of being morally good or bad as opposed to being aesthetically, epistemically, or instrumentally good or bad. The second restriction concerns the category of thick terms I will consider. I will only consider sentences containing Ts that are adjectives and that are used predicatively rather than attributively. This rules out sentences like 'She is a saint/sinner' and 'He is a generous/stingy germ spreader.' My main claim in this paper thus is that sentences of the form 'a is T' with T being a morally thick adjective conventionally trigger evaluation.<sup>12</sup>

Two comments on contents of type (a) and its interplay with contents of type (b). First, the above account does not prejudge whether the whole of what is being conveyed by 'a is T' at c can be split up into a purely descriptive and a purely evaluative part. Contents (a) and (b) might be the only contents that are being conveyed or they might be transparently entailed by one complex

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<sup>10</sup>My claim leaves open that sometimes sentences (5) and (6) are semantically equivalent to e.g. 'Berta is a good basketball player' or 'Carla is bad at playing basketball' (see Szabó (2010) and Kyle (2020)). On these interpretations, the respective sentences convey something of type (a) and of type (b). Note, furthermore, that my claim allows that speakers quite generally apply 'good' and 'bad' on the basis of descriptive features.

<sup>11</sup>Here, too, I leave open that sometimes an utterance of (7) and (8) conveys something of type (b). Note that while the above does entail that no expression is both thick and thin, it leaves open whether there is a further category of evaluative terms that is in between.

<sup>12</sup>Thick terms might not form a unified class after all, such that my theory applies only to some thick terms but not to others. This would still be progress. If thick terms are not unified, we need different theories for different types of thick terms, and my paper would provide a theory for one type of thick term (which comprises the most frequently discussed, paradigmatic thick terms). I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this issue.

content that is being conveyed. Second, the account does not prejudge whether there is in fact a (simple or complex) sentence that is equivalent to the descriptive content (a). My proposals (1a) and (2a), for instance, are meant only as approximations, not as precise characterizations.

Furthermore two comments on contents of type (b). First, the conditional in (b) can be read in different ways. A fairly weak reading has it that having  $f$  to a degree above  $d$  *generally* or *normally* brings it about that the things in question are good/bad in at least one way; a stronger reading has it that having  $f$  to a degree above  $d$  *necessitates* that the things in question are good/bad in at least one way. Again, I will stay neutral on this issue. Second, the conditional in (b) doesn't just say that *there is some* a degree  $d$  such that if someone is above  $d$ , then that person is good/bad in at least one way. Rather, the context determines a specific degree  $d$  and (b) says that if someone is above *this specific*  $d$ , then the person is good/bad in at least one way. To see why this is important, suppose that the evaluative component of Anne's use of (1) or (2) were just that there is some degree  $d$  such that if someone is willing/unwilling to give money to a degree above  $d$ , then that someone is good/bad in at least one way. This would not explain the intuitive datum that Anne's utterances are also evaluations of *Berta* and *Carla*. More concretely, it would not explain that Anne's utterances of (1) and (2) also convey contents along the following lines:

- (1c)            Berta is good in at least one way.
- (2c)            Carla is bad in at least one way.

Or, more generally, it would not explain that utterances of sentences of the form 'a is T' (unlike those of the form 'a is not T') convey in the absence of special circumstances contents of the following type, respectively:

- (c<sup>+</sup>)            a is good in at least one way.
- (c<sup>-</sup>)            a is bad in at least one way.<sup>13</sup>

For assuming that Anne's use of (1) or (2) just conveyed that there is some degree  $d$  such that if someone is willing/unwilling to give money to a degree above  $d$ , then that someone is good/bad in at least one way, we could not derive (1c) and (2c), even if these alternative contents were conjoined with (1a) and (2a), respectively. We could only derive an evaluation of Berta and Carla if the descriptive component of Anne's utterance weren't (1a) and (2a) but that Berta/Carla is willing/unwilling to give money to a degree that surpasses *every* threshold  $d$ , but Anne clearly does not convey such strong propositions. Meanwhile, given my suggestion that Anne's use of (1) and (2) conveys (1b)

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<sup>13</sup>We should take (c<sup>+</sup>) and (c<sup>-</sup>) to claim that there is *some* way in which a is good/bad. This doesn't rule out that the use of the relevant sentences also conveys that there is a *contextually specified* way in which a is good/bad. For discussion, see Kyle (2013, p. 6) and Cepollaro and Stojanovic (2016, 483f.).

and (2b), which are about a specific contextual degree  $d$ , we can easily derive (1c) and (2c).<sup>14</sup>

This leaves us with the second question from above: what is the evaluation in question? Unsurprisingly, I take the evaluation in question to be a content of type (b). Accordingly, my claim in this paper will be that sentences of the form ‘ $a$  is  $T$ ’ with  $T$  being a morally thick adjective conventionally trigger a content of type (b).

### 3 Two Diagnostics

In this section, I look at sentences of the indicated type and show that the respective evaluative content of type (b) is neither cancellable nor calculable (for the two diagnostics, see, most prominently, Grice (1989, ch. 2)). As indicated in the introduction, I take this to be predicted by the conventional triggering view, according to which (b) is a conventional implicature or a semantic presupposition, but incompatible with pragmatic views according to which (b) is either a (particularized or generalized) conversational implicature or a mere pragmatic presupposition (see, for instance, Blome-Tillmann (2013), Potts (2007; 2015), and Zakkou (2018)).<sup>15</sup> Väyrynen seems to defend a further version of the pragmatic view according to which (b) is calculable but noncancellable in the Gricean sense. Against this view only my discussion of section 3.2 applies. My discussion of section 3.1 is of interest still because it provides a novel argument for the noncancellability claim and shows that if (b) were to be pragmatically conveyed, it wouldn’t be a conversational implicature or a pragmatic presupposition but a pragmatic phenomenon *sui generis* as suggested by Väyrynen.<sup>16</sup>

#### 3.1 Cancellability

Are (1b) and (2b) as they are conveyed by Anne’s utterance of (1) and (2) cancellable? One way to answer this question would be to look at the following sentences:

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<sup>14</sup>Given the weak understanding of (1b) and (2b) in terms of generality, (1a) conjoined with (1b) as well as (2a) conjoined with (2b) would strongly suggest the truth of (1c) and (2c); given the strong understanding of (1b) and (2b) in terms of necessitation, (1a) and (1b) as well as (2a) and (2b) would entail the truth of (1c) and (2c).

<sup>15</sup>Following Stalnaker, Potts (2015, p. 169) takes pragmatic presuppositions to ‘include the preconditions for linguistic interaction (for example, the mutual public knowledge that we are speaking the same language), the norms of turn taking in dialogue, and more particularized information about conversational plans and goals.’ In the same vein, Sudo (2014) takes a speaker’s use of, e.g., ‘John forgot to call Mary’ to pragmatically presuppose that the hearer(s) understand English. These preconditions, norms, plans and goals seem to be cancellable in the Gricean sense. For instance, ‘John forgot to call Mary, but none of you understands any of what I’m saying right now’ might sound pointless in context but is not infelicitous in that it is not a ‘linguistic offense’ (Grice, 1981, p. 186).

<sup>16</sup>There are noteworthy differences among the conventional triggering views and among the indicated types of pragmatic views. They concern the projective behaviour of (b). Since I don’t discuss the projective behaviour here, I’ll lump each pair of views together.

- (1') Berta is generous, but she's a horrible person.  
 (2') Carla is stingy, but she's the best person.

These sentences can sound felicitous. Note though that this by itself doesn't show that (1b) and (2b) are cancellable. For being a horrible person is compatible with being good in at least one way and, likewise, being the best person is compatible with being bad in at least one way.

A better way to see whether (1b) and (2b) as they are conveyed by Anne's utterance of (1) and (2) are cancellable would be to assess whether sentences which conjunctively concatenate (1) with the negation of (1b), on the one hand, and (2) with the negation of (2b), on the other, sound felicitous. These sentences would be pretty cumbersome, however, which threatens to interfere with our felicity judgments. Besides, they would force us to give a precise characterization of the respective features *f*. To circumvent these problems, I suggest to consider the following sentences:

- (1'') Berta is generous, but the kind of spending behaviour she is showing doesn't make one good in at least one way.  
 (2'') Carla is stingy, but the kind of spending behaviour she is showing doesn't make one bad in at least one way.

Do these sentences sound felicitous?<sup>17</sup> They do strike us as strange in many ordinary situations.<sup>18</sup> Arguably, though, they sound fine if uttered in special circumstances.

Assume we have the sentences used by a certain group of (b)-contestors, the so-called 'generous'- and 'stingy'-objectors (or 'T-objectors', more generally) who differ from so-called 'generous'- and 'stingy'-users (or 'T-users', more generally) by rejecting the ideology in the background of the relevant content (b).<sup>19</sup> Assume, for instance, that (1'') and (2'') are used by what I call a *value neutralist*, who is against any value ascription in the domain in question and thinks that there is no degree of T-underlying features *f* that makes the respective subjects either good or bad in even one way. More concretely, assume that the speaker thinks that people's spending behaviour is not morally relevant in

<sup>17</sup>The indicated reading is one where the first respective sentence is about Berta's and Carla's momentary behaviour rather than their character (to zoom in on this reading, you might want to replace 'is generous/stingy' with 'is being generous/stingy'). Alternatively, one could focus on a reading according to which the first respective reading is about Berta's and Carla's character and on which the second respective phrase is about the spending behaviour they are usually or regularly showing. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

<sup>18</sup>For corresponding intuitions, see Väyrynen (2013a, 66f., 104f., 111, 120). For empirical support, see Willemsen and Reuter (2021).

<sup>19</sup>The discussion to follow is inspired Väyrynen (2013a, ch. 5) and Kyle (2013). The term *T-objector* is coined in Kyle (2013). See Väyrynen (2013a, 129ff.) for the relation between T-objectors and T-users, on the one hand, to insiders and outsiders of a given community, on the other. For the claim that the truth of an evaluative content of type (b) can be rationally contested for any T and context *c*, see, e.g., Hare (1963, p. 24), Blackburn (1992; 1998) and Gibbard (1992; 2003), Scanlon (2003), Richard (2008, ch. 1), Väyrynen (2009; 2012; 2013a), and Eklund (2011).

any sense. Alternatively, assume that (1'') and (2'') are used by what I call a *value reversalist*, who objects to the specific valence of the value ascription in the domain in question and so thinks that having the T-underlying features f to a degree above d gives the subjects the opposite value. More concretely, assume that the speaker thinks that keeping money for yourself is good and giving money to others is bad. In such situations, (1'') and (2'') do not sound too bad anymore. At the very least, they sound much better than as used by the relevant T-user who endorses the evaluative content (b). This might seem to suggest that the relevant contents are cancellable.

However, for these situations to show that the respective evaluative contents are cancellable in the Gricean sense, our T-objectors would have to be using the first phrase—i.e. ‘Berta is generous’ and ‘Carla is stingy’—literally and in its ordinary meaning. But it is not clear that they are using this phrase that way. For if they were, we’d expect (1'') and (2'') to not only sound fine as used by them but as used by anybody who thinks that (1a)/(2a) is true while holding that (1b)/(2b) is false. After all, the respective first phrase with its literal, ordinary meaning and the negation of (b) would not only be compatible; anybody who thinks that (1a)/(2a) is true while holding that (1b)/(2b) is false would have a perfectly valid reason for using (1'') and (2''). Now, as indicated, I grant that (1'') and (2'') sound fine as used by T-objectors, i.e. as used by those who contest (b) because they reject the ideology in the background. I am skeptical, however, that (1'') and (2'') also sound fine as used by those who contest (b) without rejecting the ideology in the background. To see this, let me bring into play what I call *value ambitionists* as a third kind of (b)-contestor. Unlike value neutralists and value reversalists, value ambitionists accept the ideology in the background of a given content of type (b) (so they are not T-objectors in the sense given above). They reject the content still, because they have a more demanding outlook. Value ambitionists think that having features f to a degree above d is not enough to make things good or bad, respectively. For concreteness think of a value ambitionist who agrees that Berta is willing to give money to a degree above a given contextually set threshold d (let’s say that she knows that Berta tipped 20% and that the threshold is set at 15%) and thus assents to the relevant content of type (a) but thinks that tipping 20% does not make people good in any way; only tipping 30% does. Assume now that this person utters (1'') in the scenario described at the beginning where Berta has tipped the waiter 20%:

(1'')                    Berta is generous, but the kind of spending behaviour she is showing doesn’t make one good in at least one way.

This sounds infelicitous. Picture also a value ambitionist who agrees that Carla is unwilling to give money to a degree above a given contextually set threshold d (let’s say that she knows that Carla just tipped 5% and that the threshold is set at 10%) and thus assents to the relevant content of type (a) but thinks that tipping 5% does not make people bad in any way; only not tipping at all does. Now assume that such a person utters (2'') in the scenario in which Carla has

tipped the waiter 5%:

- (2'') Carla is stingy, but the kind of spending behaviour she is showing doesn't make one bad in in at least one way.

This, too, sounds infelicitous. So while (1'') and (2'') might sound fine as used by some (b)-constestors they do not sound fine as used by others. Given the above assumption, this suggests that (1'') and (2'') do not sound fine with the respective first phrase being used literally and in its ordinary meaning.

One might wonder in what way exactly our T-objectors—the value neutralists and the value reversalists—use the relevant T in uttering (1'') and (2''). Cepollaro (2017) has recently argued on independent grounds that they are using T non-literally. More specifically, she suggests that they are using T echoically (a notion coined by Relevance Theorists, see, for instance, Sperber and Wilson (1986) and Wilson and Sperber (2012)). Another hypothesis would be that T-objectors engage in conceptual engineering (see, for instance, Burgess and Plunkett (2013; 2013) and Cappelen (2018)). They use the respective terms in deviant ways to suggest that we should get rid of their evaluative meaning component. In light of the fact that value neutralists and value reversalists, unlike value ambitionists, reject the ideology in the background and so have every reason to suggest to get rid of (b) as a meaning component, this seems plausible. But I won't try to substantiate this claim any further in the following. What is important for my purposes is only that there is good reason to believe that the T-objectors are not using the first phrase of (1'') and (2'') literally and in its ordinary meaning.<sup>20</sup>

I thus conclude that the evaluative content (b) is not cancellable in the classical Gricean sense.

### 3.2 Calculability

Are (1b) and (2b) as they are conveyed by Anne's utterance of (1) and (2) calculable? Proponents of the pragmatic view might want to appeal to a reasoning along the following lines:<sup>21</sup> Anne could have used sentences with different thick terms. For instance, she could have used

(9) Berta is wasteful.

(10) Carla is frugal.

thereby conveying roughly

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<sup>20</sup>My point is congenial to Copp (2009), who discusses whether conative or motivational mental states expressed by sentences containing thin terms are cancellable and helpfully distinguishes between two ways in which a term can be used in a nonstandard way: it can be used with a different *core meaning* and with a different *implicature* or *simplicture meaning*. Applied to the above, we could say T-objectors use 'generous' and 'stingy' with a different implicature or simplicture meaning.

<sup>21</sup>This is the argument in favor of calculability that I have heard most often in discussions. For a similar proposal with respect to slurs, see Bolinger (2017).

- (9a) Berta is willing to give money to a degree that is above the contextually set threshold  $d$ . (=1a)  
 (9b) If someone is willing to give money to a degree above  $d$ , then that someone is bad in at least one way.

and

- (10a) Carla is unwilling to give money to a degree that is above the contextually set threshold  $d$ . (=2a)  
 (10b) If someone is unwilling to give money to a degree above  $d$ , then that someone is good in at least one way.

She didn't use these alternative sentences, however. So she conveyed (1b) and (2b).

Note, to begin with, that proponents of the pragmatic view cannot rely on attested cases that draw on a reasoning along the above lines as these cases are dissimilar to the cases in question in important respects. Consider first sentences (11) and (12).

- (11) Dora ate some of the cookies.  
 (12) Dora ate all of the cookies.

It is commonly agreed that by using (11) the speaker can convey that Dora didn't eat all of the cookies. Part of the reason seems to be that she didn't use the alternative sentence (12), which semantically expresses a stronger content, where being stronger is usually expressed by reference to a scale. It is anything but clear however that (9) semantically express a stronger content than (1), and that (10) semantically expresses a stronger content than (2). Unlike in the case of 'some' and 'all', 'generous' and 'wasteful', on the one hand, and 'stingy' and 'frugal', on the other, do not form semantic scales from weaker to stronger.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, even if (9)/(10) were semantically stronger than (1)/(2), we would at best have a way to calculate that (1) and (2) convey (1b) and (2b); we would still lack a way to calculate that (9) and (10) convey (9b) and (10b). Consider secondly sentences (13) and (14).

- (13) Dora is not unfriendly.  
 (14) Dora is friendly.

It is often assumed that by using (13) the speaker can convey that Dora is not exactly friendly either (for discussion of negative strengthening in the context of embeddings, see Kyle (2013)). Part of the reason seems to be that she didn't use the alternative sentence (14), which is less complex than (13). But (9) is no

<sup>22</sup>One might argue that being too generous makes you wasteful, and so 'generous' and 'wasteful' form a scale after all, but unlike in the case of 'some' and 'all', this ordering is not semantically encoded. There is nothing inconsistent in saying 'Even if you're maximally generous, you're not wasteful.' Note also that it is quite implausible that being too stingy makes you frugal.

less complex than (1), and (10) is no less complex than (2). Accordingly, the proponent of the pragmatic account cannot model her case after (13) and (14) either.

Proponents of the pragmatic view might point out that there are less often acknowledged cases exploiting a reasoning along the above lines that are relevantly similar to the cases in question. Two kinds of cases come to mind (for pertinent discussion, see Väyrynen (2013a, sec. 6.1 and 6.2), as well as Bolinger (2017) regarding slurs.)

First, consider the following sentence pairs consisting of distinctively British English and American English sentences, on the one hand, and sentences of different registers, on the other.

- (15) Dora bought a new jumper.
- (16) Dora bought a new sweater.
- (17) Dora and Erna exchanged caresses.
- (18) Dora and Erna made out.

Proponents of the pragmatic view might want to claim that the sentences of each pair differ neither in what is semantically expressed or conventionally triggered nor in how complex they are. Still we learn more from the fact that the speaker uses the one rather than the other than that Dora bought a piece of cloths and that Dora and Erna got intimate. If the speaker uses the respective first, we learn that she knows some British English and that she likes to express herself in a refined manner; if she uses the respective second sentence, we accordingly learn that she knows some American English and that she likes to express herself colloquially.

But here, too, there is an important disanalogy to the cases we are interested in. We might indeed learn something about the speaker's language skills as well as her preferred way of expressing herself from the fact that she uses one of (15)–(18), but we usually wouldn't take the speaker to convey these contents: whichever language a speaker is using, she is usually not conveying that she knows this language (just as she is usually not conveying that she is right now speaking that language, or even speaking at all), and, likewise, whichever register a speaker is choosing, she is usually not conveying that she likes or prefers to express herself in that way. In the case of (1) and (2) as well as (9) and (10), however, the speakers do convey the evaluative contents of type (b). The contents of type (b) are part of the speaker's communicative message.

One might object that this disanalogy is superficial because, given the right circumstances, the speaker might very well convey something about her language skills and their preferred way of expressing herself. Assume that you are in an American department store and are looking for someone who speaks British English. If a bystander then used (15) she plausibly conveys that she speaks British English. Or assume that you are looking for someone who knows how to express oneself in a refined manner, and a friend uses (17). Then that friend plausibly conveys that she likes to use a high(er) register. Alternatively, assume someone utters (16) as a response to (15) or utters (18) as a response to (17).

Then she might plausibly convey that she knows some American English and that she prefers to express herself colloquially.

There remains an important disanalogy, however. For the speaker of the Dora-sentences (15)–(18) to convey the relevant contents, special circumstances are required. For Anne to convey the evaluative (b)-contents with her use of (1) and (2) more or less any kind of context will do. So, while utterances of (15)–(18) might have the indicated contents about BE/AE and different registers as a particularized conversational implicature, proponents of the pragmatic view will hold that utterances of sentences featuring thick terms like (1)/(9) and (2)/(10) will have the evaluative (b)-contents as generalized conversational implicatures or something even more pervasive. They will not take it to be a particularized conversational implicature. Accordingly, the proponent of the pragmatic account cannot model her case after (15)/(16) or (17)/(18).

Second, consider the following German sentences both of which could be translated to ‘The Germans have become a people of different origins’.

- (19) Die Deutschen sind ein Mischvolk geworden.
- (20) Die Deutschen sind eine Multikultigesellschaft geworden.

Proponents of the pragmatic view might want to claim that even though ‘Mischvolk’ is a Nazi word (a word frequently used by Nazi operatives during the Third Reich) and ‘Multikultigesellschaft’ is a non-Nazi word (a word which came into fashion in Germany in the progressive movements of the 1970s and 1980s), these two sentences differ neither in what is semantically expressed and conventionally triggered nor in how complex they are. Still, we usually take the speaker of the first sentence to convey that Germany becoming more diverse is problematic and we usually take the speaker of the second sentence to convey the opposite. One might suggest that analogous things can be said about (1) and (2).

There are important disanalogies here too, though. It is a well-known fact to many speakers of German that ‘Mischvolk’ and ‘Multikultigesellschaft’ are used by distinct groups with distinct political opinions. Liberal leaning people categorically refrain from using the former; they even avoid mentioning it. Right wing extremist, in contrast, avoid the latter. This explains why, when someone uses the former term, she reveals that she sympathizes with Nazi ideology and that if someone uses the latter expression, she signifies opposition to it. Roughly, the reasoning is that since we know that only sympathizers of Nazi ideology use ‘Mischvolk’ and only opponents of Nazi ideology use ‘Multikultigesellschaft’, we can tell where a speaker’s sympathies lie when she uses one of these expressions.<sup>23</sup> There is no corresponding well-known fact regarding the

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<sup>23</sup>One might doubt that it’s transparent to German speakers in general that different groups of people use the predicates of (19) and (20), respectively. But this would only show that even in the case of (19) and (20) the relevant proposition cannot be calculated in the way suggested. More cautiously: it would only show that the relevant proposition can be calculated only by some—which nicely reflects the fact that some competent speakers of German do not ‘hear’ the difference between (19) and (20). A similar response would not seem open regarding (1)–(4), since any competent speaker of English would take Berta to be evaluated positively and Carla to be evaluated negatively in the scenarios described at

thick terms in question. Most people (though not all) have both ‘generous’ and ‘wasteful’ in their repertoire and they use them as they see fit. Same for ‘stingy’ and ‘frugal’: most people sometimes use the one and sometimes use the other. So if it were the case that ‘generous’-users generally believed, say, that spending a lot is good, while ‘wasteful’-users generally believed that spending a lot is bad, we would have to conclude that most people hold contradictory beliefs about whether spending a lot is good or bad. *Mutatis mutandis* for ‘stingy’ and ‘frugal’.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, the respective users of ‘Mischvolk’ and ‘Multikultigesellschaft’ share the view that racially mixed groups pose and do not pose a problem, respectively, which is the content that we take to be conveyed by the use of our sample sentences. However, this is different in the case of thick terms. People using ‘generous’ might be united in that each one of them thinks that there is *some* degree *d* such that if someone is willing to give money to a degree above *d*, then that someone is *good* in at least one way, just as people using ‘wasteful’ might be united in their view that there is *some* degree *d* such that if someone is willing to give money to a degree above *d*, then that someone is *bad* in at least one way (*mutatis mutandis* for people using ‘stingy’ versus people using ‘frugal’.) But, as argued in section 2, Anne’s use of ‘Berta is generous’ in the situation described at the outset or her alter ego’s use of ‘Berta is wasteful’ at a relevantly similar situation convey much more specific contents that contain a degree *d* that is fixed contextually. If we wanted to derive these more specific contents along the lines suggested by the comparison with (19) and (20), we would have to assume that this contextually set threshold *d* is such that ‘generous’-users are united in their view that being willing to give money to a degree above *that degree d* is good in one way and, accordingly, that ‘wasteful’-users are united in their view that being willing to give money to a degree above *that degree d* is bad in one way. Clearly, though, this is not the case. Members of the two respective groups impose different thresholds. While some ‘generous’-users think that tipping 5% makes you good in at least one way, others think only tipping more than 20% does; and while some ‘wasteful’-users think that tipping 5% makes you bad in at least one way, others think only tipping 20% does (*mutatis mutandis* for ‘stingy’ and ‘frugal’).<sup>25</sup>

I thus conclude that the evaluative content (b) is not calculable in any of the suggested ways.

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the beginning. I thank two anonymous reviewers for pressing me on this issue.

<sup>24</sup>Slurs seem to be in this respect much more similar to (19) and (20) than to (1) and (2), suggesting that the evaluation conveyed with slurs *is* calculable. For a corresponding pragmatic account of slurs, see Bolinger (2017). I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this issue.

<sup>25</sup>I agree with an anonymous reviewer who points out that sometimes the relevant *d* is subject to disagreement between two exchange partners. However, I don’t think that helps proponents of the pragmatic view, because we can simply focus on cases where there is no such disagreement.

## 4 Outlook

I have argued that the evaluation conveyed by pertinent sentences containing paradigm thick terms is neither cancellable in the classical way nor calculable in any hitherto acknowledged form. Further research is needed to show whether this claim generalizes to fully support the suggested conventional triggering view, according to which the evaluation belongs to the conventional meaning, but is secondary rather than primary. Additional tests will also have to be applied to find out in what conventional way exactly the evaluation is conveyed. Relevant work has been done by Cepollaro and Stojanovic (2016), on the kinds of embeddings the evaluation survives, by Väyrynen (2013a), on whether the evaluation is detachable, and by Kyle (2013), on whether the evaluation imposes a novelty constraint. My sympathies lie with the conventional implicature view rather than the semantic presupposition view, but I'll leave the details for another occasion.

Either way, though, if I am right and the conventional triggering view prevails, this will be of interest to various ongoing debates. For instance, the conventional triggering view suggests that thick terms should be a subject to metaethical discussions just as much as thin terms should be, contrary to what seems to be proposed by secondary pragmatic content views (see, for instance, Väyrynen (2013a, ch. 1)). Furthermore, the conventional triggering view rules out that the difference between thick terms and thin terms is just one of degree rather than of kind (at least given the plausible assumption that thin terms semantically entail evaluation), contrary to what might seem plausible on primary semantic content views (for discussion, see, for instance, Eklund (2011), but also S. Barker (2000) and Finlay (2005)). Moreover, since the conventional triggering view is congenial to the claim that descriptive and evaluative matters are separable and can be disentangled at least in principle, it will shed light on the relation between the descriptive and the evaluative, and it will further our understanding of the fact-value distinction (for discussion, see, among many others, the articles in Kirchin (2013)).<sup>26</sup> Last but not least, the conventional triggering view will be crucial in debates on pejoratives and approbatives (for an overview, see, for instance, Hom (2010), but also Hay (2011)) as well as dual character concepts (see, for instance, Reuter (2019)), which seem to equal my target sentences in that they, too, comprise an evaluative dimension. If sentences containing these expressions conventionally trigger evaluative contents similar to (b), the conventional triggering view suggests that they should be considered thick as well; if they convey evaluation by some other means (which seems plausible to me at least in the case of dual character expressions), they might form categories of their own. None of this is to say that the conventional triggering view would answer any of the indicated questions comprehensively. It is just to say that it will be an important component and thus promises to

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<sup>26</sup>Proponents of the secondary pragmatic content view might suggest the same, but that doesn't make conventional triggering views any less interesting since if, as argued in this paper, pragmatic views face problems, the indicated claims about the descriptive and evaluative might be true nonetheless.

further long-standing philosophical debates.

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