

A structurally uniform account of slur-based definites¹

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Abstract. We argue for a structurally uniform account of slur-based definites (SDs), focusing on the systematic ambiguity between descriptive and epithet readings of SDs in Brazilian Portuguese. We show that the interpretive and distributional contrasts between these readings – e.g., concerning misdescription tolerance, Principle C effects, binominal constructions, NP ellipsis – do not motivate structural ambiguity within the DP, contrary to recent proposals. Instead, we derive both readings from the interaction of two independently motivated ingredients: (i) an optional type-shifting operation triggered by a syntactic [EX +] feature on NPs, which transfers descriptive content from the truth-conditional to the use-conditional dimension; and (ii) a systematic lexical ambiguity in definite determiners, which can be interpreted either as uniqueness operators or as pronominal elements. This approach preserves a uniform DP syntax while accounting for the full range of interpretive and distributional properties of slur-based nominals. Furthermore, it also unifies epithet readings with referential uses of definite descriptions.

Keywords: definiteness, slurs, epithets, use-conditions, indices, nominal syntax, expressivity.

1. Introduction

Two intuitions underlie most semantic analyses of slur NPs like *wop* in (1b). The first is that they denote the same set of individuals as their neutral counterparts (e.g. *Italian*), as captured by the truth-conditions in (1) (Caso and Lo Guercio, 2016; Diaz Legaspe, 2018, i.a.). The second is that there is more to the meaning of sentences that contain slurs than what (1b) alone conveys.

- (1) a. ‘Pino is Italian’ = 1 *iff* $\text{Pino} \in \{x : x \text{ is Italian in } w\}$
b. ‘Pino is a wop’ = 1 *iff* $\text{Pino} \in \{x : x \text{ is Italian in } w\}$

These two intuitions can be reconciled by assigning slurs a type of mixed content. Mixed content terms contribute not only to the truth-conditional (TC) level of meaning, the yield of the usual interpretation function $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket^t$, but also to a separate use-conditional (UC) dimension, i.e. the value of $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket^u$ (McCready, 2010; Gutzmann, 2011; Caso, 2021).² The TC meaning of a sentence S is a set of worlds $\{w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n\}$ where $\llbracket S \rrbracket^t$ is *true*, while the UC meaning of S is the set of contexts $\{c_1, c_2, \dots, c_n\}$ where $\llbracket S \rrbracket^u$ is *felicitous*. For slurs, the TC meaning corresponds to a property and the UC meaning is some kind of negative attitude indexed to the speaker, as in (2b).

- (2) a. $\llbracket \text{wop} \rrbracket^t = \{x : x \text{ is Italian in } w\}$ b. $\llbracket \text{wop} \rrbracket^u = \{c : s_c \text{ is anti-Italian}\}$

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²For meaning assignments involving both TC and UC dimensions, when relevant, we write simply $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket$.

In this paper, we are concerned with slur-based definites (SDs) in Brazilian Portuguese (BP). These consist minimally of a definite determiner followed by a slur NP like *jeca* ($\approx$ ‘hick’), (3).

- (3) **O jeca** acabou de chegar.
the SLUR finished of arrive
‘The hick has just arrived.’

As Orlando and Saab (2020b) note for Spanish, SDs like the one in (3) are systematically ambiguous. On the one hand, the DP can be interpreted as a normal r-expression, where it refers to the unique individual that satisfies the at-issue TC property. We call this the Descriptive Reading (DR). On the other hand, such DPs also have an Epithet Reading (ER), where the property of being rural need not strictly hold – it suffices that the referent instantiates stereotypical rural properties. We call this feature of ERs *misdescription tolerance*. Under ERs, the DP is interpreted as a pronoun, while the content of the NP functions more loosely to aid the hearer in selecting an assignment that uniquely identifies a suitable referent in the context.³ The main puzzle raised by SDs is to sort out precisely what becomes of the content of the NP under ERs.

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|---|--|
| <p>(4) Descriptive Reading (DR):
 TC: That rural man has just arrived
 UC: s_c is anti-rural</p> | <p>(5) Epithet Reading (ER):
 TC: He_i has just arrived
 UC: s_c is anti-rural $\wedge g(i)$ ‘looks’ rural in c</p> |
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Each of these readings correlates with different distributional properties, e.g. they behave differently with respect to Principle C effects, and NP ellipsis (Saab and Orlando, 2021; Saab, 2022). Inspired by such facts, previous accounts propose to derive the two readings from a structural ambiguity in SDs (Patel-Grosz, 2014; Orlando and Saab, 2020b). In particular, ERs come about by merging the slur in an ‘expletive’ position inside the DP, where it loses its predication force.

In this paper, we argue for a structurally uniform theory of SDs, where the ER/DR ambiguity does not have a configurational source, *contra* previous proposals. Our proposal derives DRs and ERs from two factors shown to be independently needed under *any* theory of definites:

- (i) a type-shifting operation triggered by the (optional) insertion of a valued and interpretable syntactic [EX : +] feature to the NP (Gutzmann, 2019); and
- (ii) a systematic lexical ambiguity in definites, which can be interpreted either as uniqueness operators or as pronouns (Elbourne, 2005; Schwarz, 2009; Jenks and Konate, 2022, i.a.).

As it turns out, the aforementioned distributional differences between DRs and ERs come (mostly) for free from the interpretative differences triggered by (i)–(ii). Ultimately, what we claim is that there is (almost) nothing special about slurs *per se*, and that the ambiguity they exhibit when partnered with definites is just an instance of a general ambiguity seen in definites at large. The result is a general theory of how an NP’s TC content “disappears” when reference is index-based.

In Section 2, we provide some further background on the DR/ER ambiguity and also present a standard multidimensional framework for the semantics of slurs (based on McCready, 2010 and

³The same ambiguity is licensed for the pejoratives that routinely figure as the nominal core of epithets (e.g. *idiot*). However, since the TC content of such NPs is too vague to begin with (i.e. they define highly context-dependent partitions of D_e), misdescription tolerance does not apply, making it difficult to tease the two readings apart.

Gutzmann, 2011, 2015) which highlights exactly why ERs present such a puzzle. In Section 3 we review previous approaches to SDs, focusing on Orlando and Saab's (2020b) stereotype-based structural ambiguity account. Lastly, in Section 4, we propose our own structurally uniform account, and discuss why it is conceptually and empirically superior to previous approaches.

2. Background

2.1. Distinguishing descriptive and epithet readings

As mentioned, slur-based definites (SDs) are systematically ambiguous between descriptive readings (DRs) and epithet readings (ERs). In DRs, the descriptive content of the NP is predicated of a unique individual. If the NP property has an empty extension, we get the familiar sense that the sentence is either false, or lacks a truth value altogether. Because the NP is truth-conditionally relevant, the DP can readily be used to introduce new discourse referents. This requires that the TC meaning of the NP determines a unique referent by itself or in conjunction with a bridging relation (e.g. PART-OF) to a previously mentioned entity, like we see in (6).

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|---|--|
| <p>(6) [Three men just arrived at the party.]</p> <p>a. Eu vou lá falar com o jeca.
I will there talk to the SLUR^{DR}</p> <p>b. I will go and talk to the rural man.</p> | <p>(7) [Pino_i just arrived at the party.]</p> <p>a. Eu vou lá falar com o jeca_i.
I will there talk to the SLUR^{ER}</p> <p>b. I will go and talk to him_i.</p> |
|---|--|

SDs under ERs do not use their descriptive content in this way; rather, they function like expressively loaded pronouns. Reference succeeds even when the NP property is not strictly true; the referent need only instantiate a perceptually salient stereotype associated to the property. This is what we call *misdescription tolerance*. So (7a) could be judged as true in a situation where Pino is known to have lived in NYC all his life, but just happened to be wearing cowboy boots at the party. Truth-conditionally, (7a) is equivalent to (7b), while (6a) is equivalent to (6b).⁴ But in terms of UCs, (7a) and (7b) are not equivalent. (7a) conveys that: (i) the speaker is expressing contempt for rural people; and (ii) the referent of the pronoun displays typical rural-like traits.

That SDs under ERs do not truly make a descriptive contribution to the sentence (in contrast to DRs) can be observed with the descriptive content identity test (cf. Potts et al., 2009). This test shows that, for instance, in structures of the form *with x or without y*, the expressions *x* and *y* cannot differ w.r.t. their descriptive contribution, cf. (8). The same behavior can be observed in BP, cf. (9a) vs. (9b). Further, (9c) shows that interpreting a definite DP as an epithet does not add descriptive TC content either and is therefore licensed in the construction.

- (8) a. With **the president**_i or without {**the president**_i / **him**_i}, the party will suck.
b. * With **the president**_i or without **the commander in chief**_i, the party will suck.

⁴The distinction also largely correlates with prosodic prominence. Since DRs license new referents, part of the descriptive content of NP must be accented (Umbach 2001). So, for instance, (6) is unacceptable if stress falls on the verb *falar* ('talk') rather than on the slur *jeca*. However, (7) is perfectly acceptable under a parallel stress placement. If stress is placed on *jeca* in (7), the most salient interpretation would be a DR, where the DP introduces a new referent via a bridging relation, i.e. the rural man *at the party* (Bosch 1988: 213). We frame the connection to accent merely as a correlation because we believe that there are cases where ER can be stressed and introduce new discourse referents. This is particularly clear in binominal structures, where the slur NP can even be accented (e.g. *o JECA do Pino*, 'the SLUR^{ER} of the Pino'). However, it does seem to be true that all DRs introduce new referents.

- (9) a. Com **o Zé_i** ou sem {**o Zé_i / ele_i**}, a festa vai ser uma merda.
with the Zé or without the Zé him, the party will be a shit
'With Zé_i or without {Zé_i / him_i}, the party will suck.'
- b. * Com **o Zé_i** ou sem **meu vizinho_i**, a festa vai ser uma merda.
with the Zé or without my neighbor, the party will be a shit
'With Zé_i or without my neighbor_i, the party will suck.'
- c. Com **o Zé_i** ou sem **o jeca_i**, a festa vai ser uma merda.
with the Zé or without the SLUR^{ER}, the party will be a shit
'With Zé_i or without that hick_i, the party will suck.'

As noted in the literature (Dubinsky and Hamilton, 1998; Saab, 2022), unlike ordinary definites, epithets are exempt from Principle C effects and behave more like “special pronouns” (Jackendoff, 1972), cf. (10a). What makes epithets “special” among pronouns is the fact that they are anti-logophoric, i.e. they cannot take as their antecedent an individual from whose perspective the content of the epithet is evaluated (Dubinsky and Hamilton, 1998; Varaschin et al., 2026).

- (10) a. Depois uma série de vacilos, o **Pino_i** acabou levando os alunos a concluir
after a series of slipups the Pino ended up leading the students to conclude
que {**o jeca_i / ele_i / *o Pino_i**} não sabia ensinar.
that the SLUR^{ER} he the Pino not knew teach
'After a series of slipups, **Pino_i** ended up leading the students to conclude that {**the hick_i / he_i / *Pino_i**} didn't know how to teach.'
- b. **O Pino_i** disse que {***o jeca_i / ele_i / *o Pino_i**} chegou.
the Pino said that the SLUR^{ER} he the Pino arrived
'Pino_i said that the {***the hick_i / he_i / *Pino_i**} arrived.'

ERs and DRs also behave differently w.r.t. binominal structures (cf. Saab, 2022). Another peculiar property that distinguishes ERs from DRs and ordinary definites is that only the former are licensed in definite binominal structures. These are structures with a DP embedded in another one – similar to possessive structures, but where both DPs jointly refer to a single individual, cf. (11a). The descriptive identity test (8) applied in (11c) shows that SLUR^{ER}s in binominal structures do not add descriptive content (contra den Dikken, 2006), but only expressive meaning (e.g. a derogatory attitude), on a par with expressive modifiers, cf. (11b) (Potts et al., 2009).

- (11) a. O jeca do Zé chegou.
the SLUR^{ER} of the Zé arrived
'That hick Zé arrived.'
- b. With **the president** or without **the fucking president**, the party will suck.
- c. Com **o Zé_i** ou sem **o jeca do Zé_i**, a festa vai ser uma merda.
with the Zé or without the SLUR of the Zé, the party will be a shit
'With Zé_i or without **that hick Zé_i**, the party will suck.'

Another property distinguishing ERs from DRs is that only the latter are licensed under NP ellipsis (Saab and Orlando 2021). In (12a), only a DR is available, as evidenced by the absence of misdescription tolerance. Likewise, (12b) shows that proper binominals (which, as we saw, force ERs) are not licensed under NP ellipsis: the sentence admits only a possessive reading.

A structurally uniform account of slur-based nominals

- (12) a. o jeca que chegou hoje e o ⟨jeca⟩ que chegou ontem
the SLUR^{DR} that arrived today and the that arrived yesterday
‘the hick that arrived today and the one that arrived yesterday’
- b. o jeca do Pino e o ⟨jeca⟩ do Zé
the SLUR^{DR} of.the Pino and the of.the Zé
‘Pino’s and Zé’s hicks’ (only interpreted possessively)

A further difference between both readings is related to definiteness. While DRs are unrestricted w.r.t. definiteness, cf. (13a)–(13b), ERs are licensed only with a definite determiner, cf. (13b).

- (13) a. {**Todo** / **Um**} **jeca** leu Lobato.
every some SLUR read Lobato
TC (only DR): ‘All rural men read Lobato.’ / ‘Some rural man read Lobato.’
- b. **O** **jeca** leu Lobato.
the SLUR read Lobato
TC (DR): ‘The rural man read Lobato.’ | TC (ER): ‘He read Lobato.’

Lastly, another crucial property that distinguishes DRs from ERs is the absence of *de dicto* readings in the latter. This corresponds to the *scopelessness* property that McCready (2010: 6) takes to be a staple of UC content. In (15) the ascription of the NP property necessarily takes wide scope over propositional attitudes, i.e. s_c commits to the view that the referent seems rural, whereas in (14), there is a reading where only Clara takes this to be the case. This suggests the predication of the NP content takes place on the TC layer in (14) and on the UC layer in (15).⁵

- (14) [**Three men** just arrived at the party.] (15) [**Pino_i** just arrived at the party.]
A Clara tá procurando o **jeca**. A Clara tá procurando o **jeca_i**.
the Clara is searching the SLUR^{DR} the Clara is searching the SLUR^{ER}
‘Clara is searching for **the hick**.’ ‘Clara is searching for **the hick_i**.’

Table 1 summarizes the distinction between ER and DR readings.

	ERs	DRs
Descriptive contribution	no	yes
Principle C effects	no	yes
Compatible with binominals	yes	no
Compatible with NP ellipsis	no	yes
Definiteness requirement	yes	no
<i>De dicto</i> readings	no	yes

Table 1: ER vs. DR distinction.

⁵We thank Lisa Hofmann (p.c.) for drawing our attention to this point.

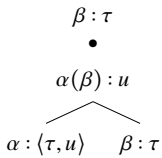
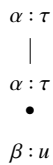
2.2. A logic for slurs: $\mathcal{L}_{TU}$

Following earlier work on UC content (Potts, 2005; McCready, 2010; Gutzmann, 2011; a.o.) we adopt a multidimensional semantic framework that allows a single expression to be associated with multiple parallel levels of interpretation (Bach, 1999). This approach enables a type-theoretic distinction between TC and UC content and allows mixed-typed denotations. The type system of our multidimensional logic for truth and use conditions, $\mathcal{L}_{TU}$, is given in (16).

 (16) **Types for $\mathcal{L}_{TU}$** (adapted from Gutzmann 2015)

- a. e, t are basic TC types.
- b. u is a basic UC type.
- c. If σ and τ are TC types, then $\langle \sigma, \tau \rangle$ is a TC type.
- d. If τ is a TC type, then $\langle \tau, u \rangle$ is a UC type.
- e. If σ is a type and τ is a UC type, then $\langle \sigma, \tau \rangle$ is a UC type.
- f. The set of all types for $\mathcal{L}_{TU}$ is the union of TC and UC types.

In addition to the standard combinatorial rules (FA, PM), we assume the rules in (17)–(19). The UC Application rule (17) licenses the combination of a UC and a TC type, separating TC from UC content by means of the bullet operator $\bullet$. The UC Elimination rule (18) removes the UC type and projects only the TC component. Finally, the Parsetree Interpretation rule derives the multidimensional meaning of the expression as a tuple consisting of its TC meaning and a set of UC propositions collected from the nodes of the tree (cf. Potts, 2005; Gutzmann, 2011).

 (17) **UC Application**

 (18) **UC Elimination**

 (19) **Parsetree Interpretation**

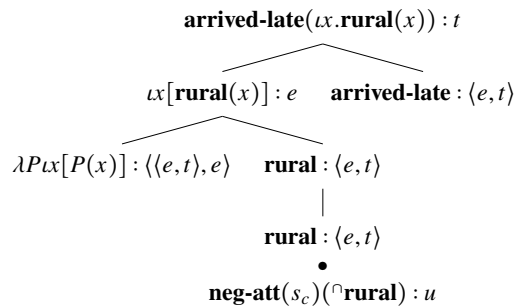
If $\mathcal{T}$ is a semantic parsetree with the TC term $\alpha : \tau$ on its root, and UC terms $\beta_1 : u, \dots, \beta_n : u$ on its nodes, the interpretation of $\mathcal{T}$ is:
 $\langle \llbracket \alpha : \tau \rrbracket, \{ \llbracket \beta_1 : u \rrbracket, \dots, \llbracket \beta_n : u \rrbracket \} \rangle$

This system permits mixed-typed expressions like (21). However, following current approaches to the treatment of slurs (e.g., McCready, 2010; Gutzmann, 2011; Caso, 2021), we encounter difficulties when attempting to derive the distinction between DRs and ERs.

(20) **O jeca** chegou tarde.
 the SLUR arrived late

(21) $\llbracket \text{jeca} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \text{rural}(x) : \langle e, t \rangle \bullet$
 $\text{neg-att}(s_c)(\cap \text{rural}) : u$

(22)



$\llbracket \text{O jeca chegou tarde} \rrbracket = \langle \text{arrived-late}(\iota x. \text{rural}(x)) : t, \{ \text{neg-att}(s_c)(\cap \text{rural}) : u \} \rangle$

Assuming the (simplified) mixed denotation of *jeca* in (21)⁶ and the derivation in (22), it becomes evident that only a DR, but no ER, can be derived. In particular, the TC content of (20) ascribes to the subject the property of being rural, a property that, under ER, must be interpreted as a felicity condition on the utterance context rather than as truth-conditional content. In order to derive ERs, the TC contribution of *jeca* (i.e. **rural** : $\langle e, t \rangle$) needs to be stripped away somehow, so that the entire SD ends up functioning like a pronoun on the TC layer. However, within the $\mathcal{L}_{TU}$ framework combined with standard McCready-style multidimensional semantics for slurs, there is no mechanism that derives this result. In the following sections, we consider two alternative proposals that fill this gap: one that appeals to structural ambiguity, and another that relies on a richer theory of subcategorical features. We will argue for the superiority of the latter.

3. Previous accounts: A structural ambiguity?

Previous accounts address this challenge by claiming that DRs and ERs have different structural sources. Orlando and Saab (2020b) and Saab and Orlando (2021) (henceforth O&S) argue that, under DRs, slurs are lexical heads of the DP projection (23); whereas under ERs, slurs are adjoined to a unique expletive position [Spec, NumP] in a *pro*-headed DP (24), which they take to be analogous to [Spec, TP] in the extended projection of clauses. Crucially, merging the slur in this position strips it of its predicative TC content, leaving only its expressive UC content in place. This is an ornamented variant of the structure that would be assumed for pronouns.⁷

$$(23) \quad [_{DP} D^0 [_{NumP} Num^0 [_{NP} \textbf{jeca}]]] \quad (24) \quad [_{DP} D^0 [_{NumP} \textbf{jeca} [_{Num'} Num^0 [_{NP} \textit{pro}_i]]]]$$

O&S further posit that the UC content of slurs is not a direct expression of a derogatory attitude as in (21), but a *stereotype* – i.e. an open cluster of descriptive and evaluative concepts, like we see schematically in (25). For O&S, the negative valence of a slur is not due to the cumulative negative valence of the evaluative concepts under its stereotype (since some of these may be positive), but mainly to the implied belief that the targeted group is profoundly different from the rest of the community, which justifies its subordinate status (Orlando and Saab, 2020a: 605).

$$(25) \quad \llbracket \textit{jeca} \rrbracket^u = \text{WEARS-BOOTS, DRIVES-TRACTOR, FARMER, IGNORANT, NAIVE, RESILIENT, etc.}$$

O&S are not explicit about how UC meanings like (25) should be formalized to support a compositional derivation for (23)-(24). Saab (2022) articulates a proposal where a stereotype is a set of propositions where at least one contextually given property ($P \in C$) is predicated of the kind corresponding to a slur's TC content. Given this, a sample entry for *jeca* is shown in (26).

$$(26) \quad \llbracket \textit{jeca}_{DR} \rrbracket = \lambda x. \textbf{rural}(x) : \langle e, t \rangle \bullet \lambda p. \exists P [P \in C \wedge p = \lambda w. P(\cap \textbf{rural})(w)] : u$$

This is the meaning posited for DRs, where slurs make a clear TC contribution. For ERs, a

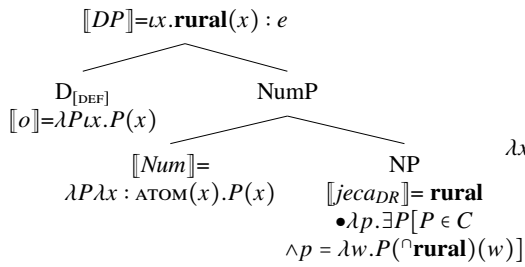
⁶The TC of (21) is the set of rural individuals, and its UCs is the set of contexts where the speaker has a negative attitude towards the kind corresponding to **rural**. See Chierchia (1998) for the definition of the $\cap$ operator.

⁷In a similar vein, Patel-Grosz (2014) proposes that ERs come about by merging a nominal appositive NP in a non-restrictive appositive position to a null pronominal D, e.g. [*pro*, [*o jeca*]], cf. [*he*, [*the hick*]]. We focus here on Orlando & Saab's proposal, which is designed to handle some of the Romance-specific data we present below.

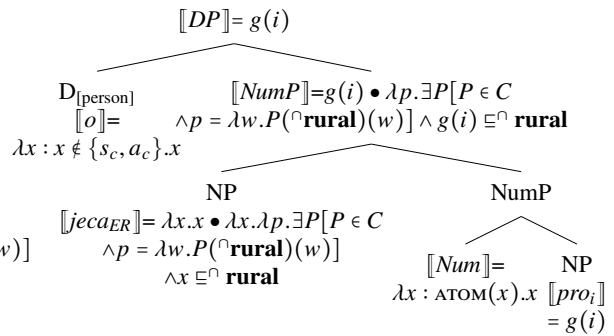
different meaning altogether must be assumed, along the lines of (27).⁸ Crucially, the UC here cannot simply be a stereotype; that would imply no relationship between the referent of the DP and the stereotype. Instead, it is a function from an individual (the pronoun's referent) to a stereotype, with the requirement that the referent belong to the kind subject to the stereotype. Derivations for each reading are given in (28)-(29), assuming the structures in (23)-(24).

$$(27) \quad \llbracket jeca_{ER} \rrbracket = \lambda x.x : \langle e, e \rangle \bullet \lambda x.\lambda p.\exists P[P \in C \wedge p = \lambda w.P(\cap \mathbf{rural})(w)] \wedge x \sqsubseteq^\cap \mathbf{rural} : \langle e, u \rangle$$

(28) **Descriptive Reading**



(29) **Epithet Reading**



Because they assign a pronominal structure to ERs, O&S account for the key properties mentioned in Section 2.1: e.g. the lack of descriptive contribution, the absence of Principle C effects, and the definiteness requirement. They also predict that only DRs are compatible with NP ellipsis, assuming that PF-deletion can only target the complement of Num. Their proposal for ERs also readily allows for an extension into binominal structures, as presented in Saab (2022).

However, this proposal runs into empirical problems. First, it entails slurs cannot be restrictively modified under ERs. This is contradicted by BP data like (30). Second, since ERs are linked to a specific structural position (24), we do not expect misdescription tolerance when slurs appear in a different configuration, e.g. as a modifier of another NP. But this is incorrect in light of epithet binominals like (33), which could be true in a scenario where the uncle is not really rural. Lastly, because the ‘expletive position’ [Spec, NumP] in ERs is taken to be unique like that of clausal subjects, the account rules out iteration of slurs in binominal structures. But Bastos-Gee (2013) notes that this phenomenon, which she refers to as ‘re-cursing’, is possible in BP, as in (32).

(30) o **jeca** triste do Pino
the SLUR sad of Pino
‘the sad hick Pino’

(31) o gremista **jeca** do meu tio
the gremista SLUR of.the my uncle
‘the hick Grêmio supporter, my uncle’

(32) o **balof** do **velhaco** do **jeca** do Pino
the SLUR of.the SLUR of.the SLUR of Pino
‘the fatso, geezer, hick, Pino’

⁸Saab (2022: 370) posits slightly different meanings from the ones we present here. For both DRs and ERs, he assigns UC meanings of type $\langle e, u \rangle$ but this fails for DRs, as (23) contains no individual-denoting form for the UC to apply to. As the TC of ERs, he posits $\emptyset$, but there is no rule in the TC calculus defined for objects of this sort. So we capture his intuition that the TCs of slurs are vacuous under ERs by means of an idempotent identity map. Note that, for type-theoretic reasons, the meanings assigned to Num heads in (28) and (29) are also not the same.

Furthermore, the structural ambiguity theory faces conceptual hurdles. First, for type-theoretic reasons, O&S are forced to sneak in a lexical ambiguity in Ds: in (28), D is a uniqueness operator; whereas in (29) it is a partial identity function characteristic of ϕ -heads (Heim and Kratzer, 1998). Second, the meanings assumed for slurs under DRs and ERs are different from each other not only on the TC layer (where they do in fact seem to differ), but also on the UC dimension. This could lead to a proliferation of lexical ambiguities, where any given slur needs two entirely unrelated entries in the lexicon, cf. (27) and (26). An alternative – arguably closer to O&S’s intent – is to derive the meaning in (27) from (26) on the basis of the presumed structural differences between DR and ERs. This would require the explicit statement of a construction-specific rule that strips away the TC content of slurs in ‘expletive position’. However, such a rule is not explicitly stated by O&S. Finally, because the account relies on construction-specific mechanisms that are parochial to (23)–(24), it does not generalize to other phenomena, such as forms of ellipsis other than NP ellipsis, and referential readings of definite descriptions.

Regarding the latter, note that the ambiguity O&S observe for SDs bears a striking resemblance to the referential/attributive ambiguity described in Donnellan (1966). Like DRs, the NP property in attributive readings (33) is truth-conditionally relevant and predicated of a unique referent. Like ERs, the DP in referential readings (34) is pronominal, requiring some form of deixis or a formal link to a prior utterance. Furthermore, it crucially exhibits misdescription tolerance: A’s utterance in (34) can be true even if the extension of the NP is empty. The descriptive content need only seem ‘true enough’ for the hearer to identify the referent in the immediate context.

(33) **Attributive reading:**

(At the teetotalers meeting, A heard another attendee is drinking a martini.)
A: Who is **the man with the martini**?

(34) **Referential reading:**

(At a party, A spots a funny-looking man holding a martini glass.)
A: Who is **the man with the martini**?

Similar contexts can be constructed to force DRs or ERs in SDs. So, *Quem é o jeca?* (‘Who is the hick?’) would receive a DR in a context where a social worker is trying to identify who, among those present in an event, is a person of rural origins entitled to some sort of government benefit. In a context where we spot a man wearing cowboy boots at a gala, the same question would lead to an ER (cf. Umbach, 2001 for more similarities between ERs and referential readings regarding deaccenting). What these parallels suggest is that ERs and referential readings are, on some level, one and the same beast. This generalization is not captured by O&S’s account.⁹

Finally, O&S’s structural account of the impossibility of ERs under ellipsis in (12) also does not generalize appropriately. While they capture the pattern for NP ellipsis, the failure of forms carrying only UC meanings to reconstruct occurs with ellipsis in general, cf. VP ellipsis (35)

⁹A related phenomenon is that of bound descriptions. In languages like Korean, noun-containing definites can be subject to bound-variable interpretations where the NP content does not project to focus alternatives, as in (i) – i.e. such NPs behave like *fake nouns* in the sense of Ahn (to appear). The overarching generalization is that whenever definites behave anaphorically or deictically – i.e. whenever their interpretation is determined by a pronominal index – their descriptive content (be it ϕ -featural or an NP) becomes not-at-issue or secondary. This is the same pattern we see with ERs, and we cannot capture it if we assign ERs an idiosyncratic structure like O&S do in (24).

(i) emma-man_i emma_i os akkici talun salamtul-un caki os an akkye
mom-only mom clothes cherish other people-TOP self clothes NEG cherish
‘Only mom_i cherishes mom_i’s clothing, others don’t cherish their own clothing.’

and bare argument ellipsis (36) (Potts et al., 2009). Note that the replies in (35)-(36) do not commit B to the negative attitude conveyed by A. O&S, however, address only the NP case.

- (35) A: I saw that **fucker** Pino in the park.
 B: I did ~~see that fucker Pino in the park~~ too (but I actually like him).
- (36) A: What did Carla give to the **wop**?
 B: A book_i ~~Carla gave to the wop t_i~~ (but I have nothing against Italians).

4. A structurally uniform account

In light of these empirical and conceptual problems, we propose a structurally uniform alternative where there is nothing syntactically peculiar about ERs and no ‘expletive position’ for slurs inside DPs. Both DRs and ERs share the same basic DP structure up to differences in subcategorical feature specifications. Contrasts between them are explained by only two ingredients:

- (i) a type-shifting operation triggered by an optional syntactic [EX : +] feature on the NP
- (ii) a systematic lexical ambiguity in definite determiners (uniqueness vs. index-based Ds)

Together, these two ingredients are sufficient to provide a unified account of SDs and referential-attributive ambiguities, and all of the data mentioned in Section 2.1. As we hinted at, something like (i) and (ii) is independently required for a rigorous implementation of O&S’s own structural ambiguity account as well. This means that the extra structure that O&S assume to be necessary to account for the properties of DRs and ERs is actually not doing any work; in fact, it is getting in the way of providing an account that generalizes appropriately to data like (30)-(36).

4.1. An expressive type-shifter

The first ingredient we introduce is a type-shifter that transfers predicates from the TC to the UC dimension, where they are evaluated not for truth, but for appropriateness relative to the speaker’s perspective. This is needed to capture the fact that, in ERs, the descriptive content of the slur NP is somehow erased, leaving only a pronominal variable in the TC layer, cf. (9).

A dimension-shifter with this exact property was first proposed in Potts (2005: 98) as the semantic contribution of the *COMMA* feature – i.e. the same feature which, on the phonological wing of the grammar, triggers the prosodic isolation of parentheticals and other supplements. Subsequently, Gutzmann and McCready (2014) invoked a type-shifter with the same effect (but a different syntactic trigger) to explain the NPs in referential readings of definites like (34) are TC neutral. Ahn (to appear) suggests a similar idea to derive bound descriptions (cf. fn. 9).

Where our proposal differs from most of these accounts is that we assume that this type-shifter – which, following Gutzmann & McCready, we write as “*” – not only transfers properties from one dimension to the other, but also alters them. That is, in terms of the sheer cross-dimensional extension of this slur – the set of entities for which the property yields the value ‘true’/‘appropriate’ – **rural** ≠ *(**rural**). This is essential to our account of misdescription tolerance. In an ER reading of (37), the TC **rural** is not only shipped to the UC dimension (explaining

why it does not count for descriptive identity), but is also weakened: it includes not only rural individuals, but also people who merely have salient traits associated with being rural.

(37) O jeca_i chegou. **TC:** arrived($g(i)$) **UC:** anti-rural(s_c) + *(rural)($g(i)$)

The intuitive definition of $*$ in view of misdescription tolerance is (38), where by ‘epistemically accessible properties’ we mean properties that are perceptually available or subject to the attention of sentient agents in a given situation. Each of these defines a partition over the set of referents on the basis of relevant visible traits: e.g. in a restaurant situation, epistemically accessible properties would typically be wearing certain clothes, ordering certain dishes, etc. The properties that define a stereotype in Orlando & Saab’s sense, as in (25), are a superset of the properties of a derogated kind that are epistemically salient in any given situation.

(38) $*(P)(x) \approx x$ has **epistemically accessible properties** normally associated to being P

We define $*$ more formally in (39), where $>$ is a normality conditional (Asher and Morreau, 1991; McCready and Ogata, 2007) and E_c stands for the set of epistemically accessible properties. Thus, $*$ maps P into the property of having all epistemically accessible properties R that normally follow from being P , according to a knowledge base (e.g. stereotypes, ideologies).¹⁰

(39) For every $P \in D_{\langle e,t \rangle}$, $*(P) = \lambda x. \{R_{\langle e,t \rangle} \in E_c \mid \forall y [P(y) > R(y)]\} \subseteq \{Q_{\langle e,t \rangle} \mid Q(x)\}$

So $*$ gives us, for a given property P , not the stereotype associated with P (i.e. a set of properties/concepts assumed to be defeasibly true of all individuals who are P), but a salient context-dependent subset of such stereotype: i.e. only those properties that pick out characteristics that are salient to s_c (and a_c) in a concrete situation (typically in virtue of being perceptually identifiable). It then requires that all such properties be among the properties possessed by the referent. So, $>$ requires the input to $*$ to be a property for which some kind of stereotype is defined; while E_c ensures that only a subset of the visible stereotypical consequences of this property needs to hold. Which subset is chosen is determined by contextual factors (e.g. the QUD).

For example, suppose we are in a restaurant, and that each person ordered a dish from a different country. In this context, E_c arguably includes properties like **eats-Italian-food**, **eats-Chinese-food**, etc. In this context, the very fact that Pino is fair-skinned and eats pierogi (traits that, according to widespread ideologies, follow from being Polish) is sufficient to license an ER where the slur *polaco* is used to refer to him, as in (40) – even if we know that Pino is, in effect, not Polish. In this context, an ER of (40) would be infelicitous if Pino were eating polenta. So, assuming a basic lexical meaning like (21), the UC meaning of an ER reading of (40) is (41).

¹⁰This proposal is inspired by work on equatives like *so...wie* (‘as much...as’) in German, analyzed as a universal quantifiers over properties (Hohaus and Zimmermann, 2021; Kaiser, 2025). The connection between equative particles like German *so* and $*$ seems to run even deeper. In predicative structures like *Pino ist so ein Bauer* (‘Pino is **such** a farmer’), it is not required that Pino be a literal farmer, but only that he have salient properties that farmers usually have. So *so* seems to be doing something similar at the TC dimension as what $*$ does on the UC dimension.

- (40) O polaco_i saiu. (41) $\{\{R_{\langle e,t \rangle} \in E_c \mid \forall y[\text{polish}(y) > R(y)]\} \subseteq \{Q_{\langle e,t \rangle} \mid Q(g(i))\} : u,$
the SLUR left $\text{neg-att}(s_c)(\cap \text{polish}) : u\}$
The polack_i left.

This approach generalizes to referential readings of definite descriptions (Donnellan, 1966; Elbourne, 2013). In a referential reading of (42), the TC content just says that the individual whom the assignment g associates with the index i is a spy. The UC acts as a constraint on g (one of the context parameters), requiring its value for i to instantiate all epistemically accessible properties that normally follow from being a man with a martini: e.g. holding a martini glass containing a transparent liquid. The NP property is weakened, so misdescription does not lead to infelicity.

- (42) The **man with the martini**_i is a spy.
 $\langle \text{spy}(g(i)) : t, \{*(\text{m-w-m})(g(i)) = \{R \in E_c \mid \forall y[\text{m-w-m}(y) > R(y)]\} \subseteq \{Q \mid Q(g(i))\} : u\} \rangle$

The extent to which a UC property resulting from the application $*$ is weakened depends on how much its corresponding TC property is epistemically accessible to begin with. In cases where the original predicate P is associated with properties that are themselves readily perceptible, $*(P)$ will closely approximate P . Appearance-based slurs provide a clear illustration. The TC content of *balofo* ($\approx$ ‘fatso’) is closely tied to visually accessible traits. As a result, E_c , in most contexts, contains properties that reliably track having specific degrees of fatness, and the UC-shifted predicate $*(\text{fat}) : \langle e, u \rangle$ will remain restrictively close to **fat** : $\langle e, t \rangle$ in its cross-dimensional extension. This correctly predicts that misdescription tolerance is sharply limited in such cases: using an SDs like *o balofo do Pino* under an ER is infelicitous if Pino’s degree of fatness does not exceed the relevant contextual standard, e.g. if Pino is visibly very skinny.

By contrast, for predicates whose applicability cannot be determined on the basis of immediate perceptual evidence, $*$ yields much weaker and contextually variable UCs. Sexuality or religious slurs are paradigmatic cases. There is no stable set of epistemically accessible properties that reliably diagnoses whether an individual is, say, Protestant. Consequently, $*(\text{protestant})$ merely requires the referent to display some salient traits that people associate with **protestant**, which will typically be the case for many referents who are not in fact protestant. This makes slurs targeting such groups particularly flexible under ERs, and more tolerant of misdescription.

The same constraint explains why misdescription tolerance sometimes fails for certain referential descriptions. No weakening via $*$ can license a referential use of *the man in the red sweater* for an individual who is plainly not wearing red. This is because, in most contexts, color is perceptually salient, and, therefore, the violation of a predicate like **red-sweater** is itself epistemically accessible. The direction in which a property may be weakened by $*$ is, thus, fixed by an interaction between its original TC content and constraints on what is perceptually salient.¹¹

In the specific case of ERs of SDs, the dimension-shifter $*$ is triggered by a syntactic feature [EX +], which is optionally inserted into XPs bearing nominal categorial features by the unary rule in (44). In referential readings, however, $*$ is encoded by a different syntactic feature, given

¹¹This approach also predicts contextual variation in the availability of referential readings to be sensitive to levels of expertise among speakers. Thus, (42) would be infelicitous in a context where interlocutors are cocktail connoisseurs who are easily able to visually distinguish martini liquid from water. In such a context, E_c would contain properties that make $*(\text{m-w-m})$ inapplicable to an individual who is merely drinking water from a martini glass.

that SDs subject to ERs are distributionally distinct from DPs supporting referential readings: e.g. only the former license binominal constructions, as the contrast between (45)-(46) shows.¹²

$$(43) [\text{EX } +] \rightsquigarrow \lambda P \lambda x. * (P)(x) : \langle \langle e, t \rangle, \langle e, u \rangle \rangle \quad (44) \text{ NP} \mapsto \text{NP}_{[\text{EX } +]}$$

$$(45) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{o jeca do Pino} \\ \text{the SLUR of-the Pino} \end{array} \quad (46) \quad \begin{array}{l} * \text{o homem com o martini do Pino} \\ \text{the man with the martini of-the Pino} \end{array}$$

Following Potts (2005: 98), we assume that subcategorical syntactic features such as [EX +] may introduce UC meanings independently of terminal nodes, via the rule in (47). In this rule, β is a term of type $\langle \sigma, \tau \rangle$ introduced by a subcategorical feature, as exemplified by (43). Importantly, this rule differs formally from the UC application rule in (17) in being resource-sensitive: the semantic term α is not duplicated in the output. This resource sensitivity marks a crucial empirical distinction between subcategorical and phrasal UC combinatorics, and it is the primary reason why we do not analyze [EX +] as being introduced by phrasal Merge of an empty operator.

(47) Feature Semantics

$$\begin{array}{c} \beta(\alpha) : \tau \\ | \\ \alpha : \sigma \end{array}$$

As noted, O&S also need some kind of mechanism to strip away the TC content of slurs under ERs. So something like what we present here is also needed in their structural ambiguity theory.

4.2. Ambiguous determiners

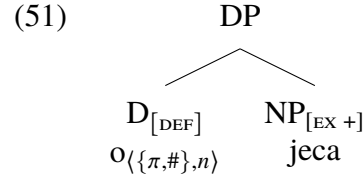
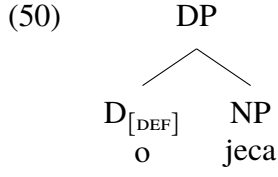
The final ingredient in our account is a systematic ambiguity in definite determiners between plain uniqueness definites (48), and indexed definites (49), which are akin to demonstratives, *pace* distality (Schwarz, 2009; Am-David, 2013; Jenks and Konate, 2022, i.a.). As we saw, this distinction is also assumed by O&S. We take indices to be structured as $\langle \{ \pi, \# \}, n \rangle$ pairs. The person and number features on indices function similarly to presuppositions to restrict the range of admissible assignments (Sudo, 2012; Podobryaev, 2014; Varaschin et al. to appear). For instance, an assignment g is an admissible assignment function for a complete utterance u in a context c if it maps $\langle \{ 2, sg \}, n \rangle$ to a_c , for any n (and similarly for other $\pi, \#$ restrictions).

$$(48) \quad \llbracket_{DEF} \rrbracket = \lambda P \lambda x [P(x)] : \langle \langle e, t \rangle, e \rangle \quad (49) \quad \llbracket_{DEF\langle \{ \pi, \# \}, n \rangle} \rrbracket^g = g(\langle \{ \pi, \# \}, i \rangle) : e$$

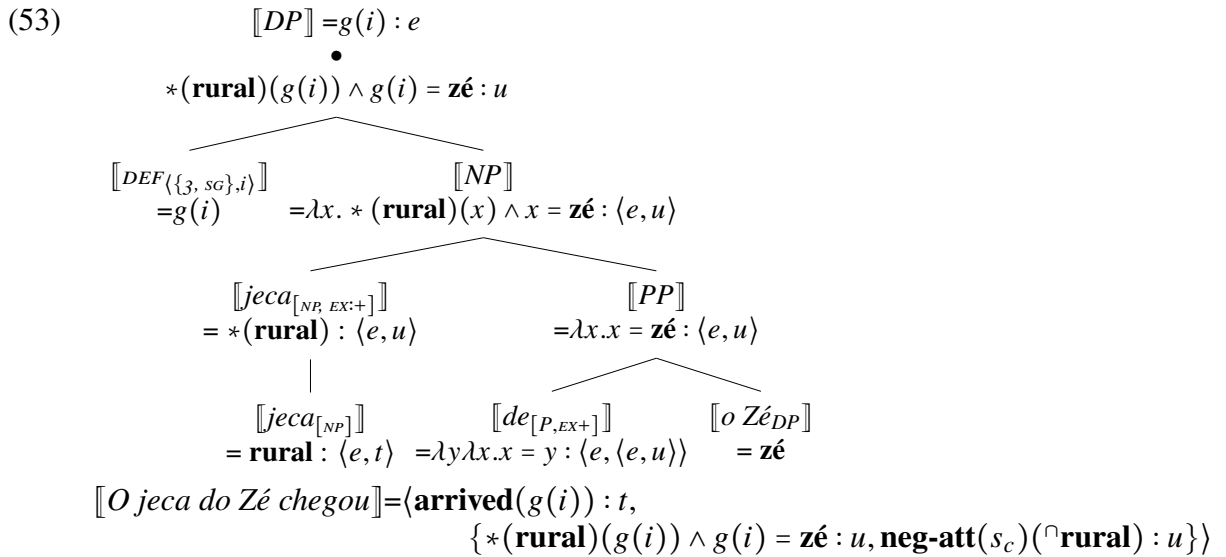
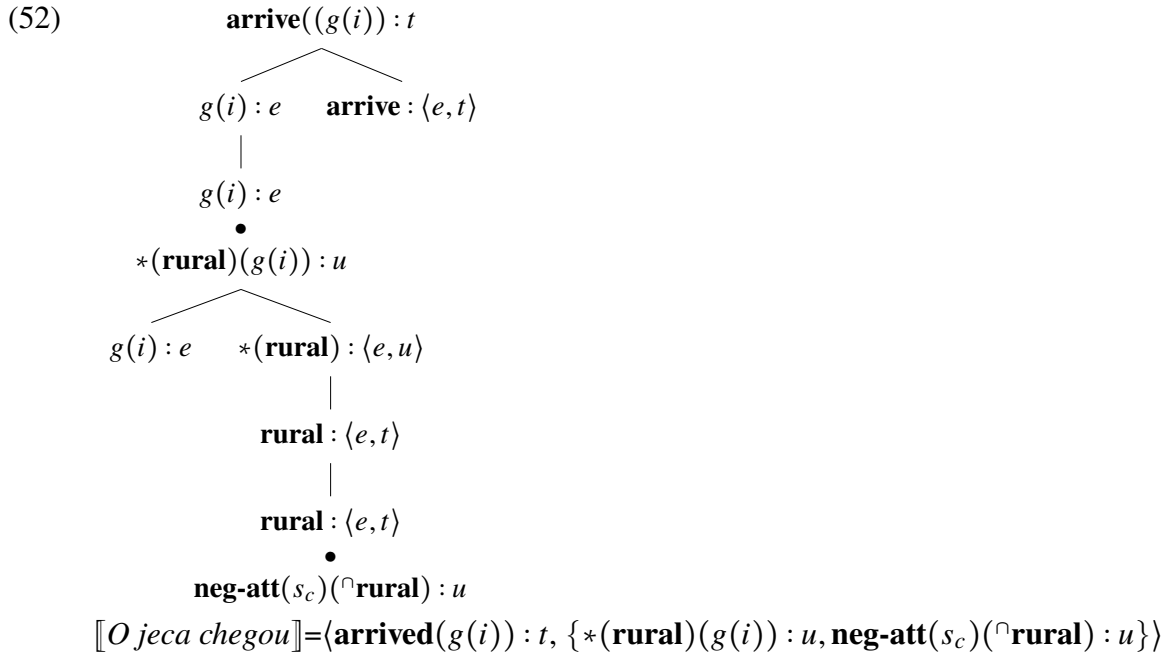
With these pieces in place, it is clear that no structural ambiguity is needed to account for the two readings of definites. The structure for DR is (50) and the structure for ERs is (51). Both are exactly the same, up to differences in the featural composition of individual nodes.

¹²A consistency condition on syntactic features blocks the application of [EX +] to NPs lexically specified as [EX -]. Since pure descriptive NPs bear [EX -], they do not license binominals, which, qua ERs, require [EX +], as in (i). The same NP does appear in binominals with a diminutive (ii), because the latter contributes its own [EX +] value.

(i) * o linguista do Pino (ii) o linguist-inha do Pino
the linguist of-the Pino the linguist-DIM of-the Pino



In light of this, we illustrate a sample semantic derivation for an ER of *o jeca chegou* (‘the hick arrived’) in (52). The derivation for DRs is unproblematic and works exactly as outlined in (22). We also illustrate in (53) the structure we assume for binominal constructions.



Our proposal derives, thus, all of the critical properties of ERs and DRs noted in Table 1. Note

that the DP is purely pronominal: it introduces no predication on the TC layer, and, therefore, makes no descriptive contribution. Reference under ER is fully determined by the assignment g . This accounts for the behavior of ERs in descriptive identity tests as well as the absence of Principle C effects. Due to the presence of $[\text{EX} +]$, which triggers the dimension shifter $*$, slurs in ERs convey only UC content that helps reference resolution by narrowing assignments to those where $g(i)$ matches the recognition-guiding property $*(\text{rural})$. In this sense, the content of slurs in ERs is akin to that of ϕ -features on ordinary pronouns (Sudo, 2012). The extensional weakening provided by $*$ is essential to making the NP's content *usable* in selecting an assignment, given that it ensures that the property can be assessed based on salient cues. UC content is unembeddable and indexical – i.e. it is interpreted relative to parameters of the utterance context – and, therefore, the attribution of $*(\text{rural})$ to $g(i)$ cannot be ascribed to anyone but the speaker of the context itself. This explains the absence of *de dicto* construals for ERs. A similar derivation – with $*$ and pronominal D – generalizes to referential readings of definites like (42).

As (53) shows, this analysis can be easily extended to account for binominals. We treat the preposition *de* as an expressive equative whose UC meaning restricts felicitous contexts to those where a particular identity relation between individuals holds. Syntactically, *de* comes from the lexicon with an unvalued EX feature $P_{[\text{EX}: _]}$, which must be valued through $\uparrow \text{Agree}$ (Gutzmann, 2019), enforcing that only $[\text{EX} +]$ -marked NPs combine with equative adjuncts in binominals. This explains why NPs that cannot be construed expressively are unacceptable in binominals, cf. the contrast in fn. 12. The meaning of the expressive NP layer is composed via a UC analogue of Predicate Modification. The resulting UC for the DP constrains contexts to those where s_c is anti-rural, $g(i)$ is identical to *Zé* and has properties typically associated with rural individuals.

For type-theoretic reasons, a property that is UC-shifted by $*$ can only combine with the pronominal variant of the D head (via UC application). This accounts for the definiteness constraint mentioned in Section 2.1. Indefinites (e.g. *um jeca*) and GQs (e.g. *todo jeca*) lack this effect because their D are generalized quantifiers that range over TC properties of type $\langle e, t \rangle$.

Regarding the ellipsis facts in (12), (35)-(36), what the data suggest is that UCs are invisible to any semantic operation that involves copying discourse-given content (Potts et al., 2009; McCready, 2019). We can capture this general pattern by treating ellipsis as a kind of assignment-dependent null anaphora and restricting the range of g to the set of TC types (D^{TC}). If (54) holds, NP ellipsis should only be possible with DRs. Slur NPs in ERs carry no content that can serve as a suitable antecedent for g , since, when the slur NP is $[\text{EX} +]$ -marked, the type-shifter $*$ empties its TC meaning. For other kinds of ellipsis (e.g. VPE, BAE), there other parts of the TC content of the clause that can be reconstructed. But the UCs are always left out, cf. (35)-(36).

(54) An **assignment function** is a function $g : \langle \{\pi, \#\}, n \rangle \rightarrow D^{\text{TC}}$

Crucially, our analysis also derives the data in (55)-(57), which was problematic under O&S's structural ambiguity account. Restrictive modification under ERs and misdescription tolerance when the slur is used as a modifier are derived by inserting $[\text{EX} +]$ inserted after the modifier is adjoined.¹³ (58) is an abbreviated derivation for the ER of *o jeca triste* ('the sad hick'). Iteration in binominals is simply derived by recursing one *de* expressive equative inside another, like (57).

¹³This analysis correctly predicts that not all instances of predicate-modification involving slurs under ERs should be acceptable. A modifier/modifying slur should only be acceptable under ERs if the complex predicate that

- (55) [o [NP_[EX +] **jeca triste**] do Zé] (56) o [NP_[EX +] **gremista** [AP **jeca**]] do meu tio
the SLUR sad of Zé the gremista SLUR of.the my uncle

- (57) [o [NP_[EX +] **balof** [PP do [NP_[EX +] **jeca** do Zé]]]]
the SLUR of.the SLUR of Zé

- (58) $g(i) : e \bullet *(\lambda x. \text{rural}(x) \wedge \text{sad}(x))(g(i)) : u$
- $$\begin{array}{c}
 \swarrow \quad \searrow \\
 g(i) : e \quad *(\lambda x. \text{rural}(x) \wedge \text{sad}(x)) : \langle e, u \rangle \\
 \quad \quad \quad \downarrow \\
 \quad \quad \quad \lambda x. \text{rural}(x) \wedge \text{sad}(x) : \langle e, t \rangle \\
 \quad \quad \quad \swarrow \quad \searrow \\
 \text{rural} : \langle e, t \rangle \bullet \text{neg-att}(s_c)(\cap \text{rural}) : u \quad \text{sad} : \langle e, t \rangle
 \end{array}$$

5. Conclusion

We have argued for a structurally uniform account of SDs in BP, where the systematic ambiguity between DRs and ERs does not arise from configurational differences within the DP. Instead, both readings emerge from the interaction of two independently motivated ingredients: (i) an optional type-shifting operation triggered by a syntactic [EX +] feature on NPs, which transfers descriptive content from the TC to the UC dimension via the operator $*$; and (ii) a systematic lexical ambiguity in definite Ds, which can be interpreted either as uniqueness operators or as pronominal elements. This approach not only preserves a uniform DP syntax while accounting for the full range of interpretive and distributional properties of slur-based nominals, but also extends naturally to phenomena beyond slurs – including referential uses of definite descriptions, binominal constructions, and the general behavior of expressive content under ellipsis.

Crucially, $*$ replaces a TC property with a recognition-guiding UC property whose satisfaction conditions are sensitive to what agents can use to identify an individual in context. This property acts as a contextual constraint on assignments – much like ϕ -features in ordinary pronouns. This dimension-shifting mechanism, combined with the pronominal variant of the definite determiner, derives misdescription tolerance, the absence of Principle C effects, and the impossibility of NP ellipsis under ERs – all without recourse to construction-specific stipulations.

This treatment raises broader questions about the nature of reference. First, the parallel between ERs, referential readings, and bound descriptions (Ahn to appear) suggests a principled connection between UC-shifted content and anaphora. Why can NP content be “erased” only when a discourse referent is somehow already given (in prior discourse or situationally)? A plausible answer appeals to informativity: when no referent has yet been identified (e.g. in DR uses), the descriptive content of the NP must be taken at face value, since it provides the only means of fixing reference; once a referent is already available, the NP plays only a bookkeeping role (it singles out a discourse referent), and therefore need not match the referent’s properties perfectly.

follows is one that corresponds to a property for which the normality conditional implicit in the definition of $*$ in (39) is defined. Intuitively, this includes only properties that support conditional reasoning based on ideologies and stereotypes. A property like *jeca inteligente* (‘smart hick’) is not one from which speakers can draw such normality inferences to epistemically accessible properties. Therefore, it cannot appear in ER contexts like binominals.

Second, our analysis reveals a striking parallel between ϕ -features on pronouns and UC-shifted NP content in ERs: both serve to constrain assignments without contributing to at-issue TCs. This raises the question of whether the traditional distinction between pronouns and r-expressions has a configurational source or merely reflects semantic dimension differences triggered by sub-categorial features like [EX +]. The picture we outlined here suggests a general radically uniform approach, where all definites are systematically ambiguous between uniqueness uses, where DP internal content (NP or ϕ) is TC relevant, and anaphoric/deictic uses, where NP content is backgrounded to a different dimension, where it no longer needs to hold as strictly and does not project to focus alternatives. This has implications for issues concerning, for instance, the status of binding-theoretic principles that rely on the distinction between pronouns and r-expressions.

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