The German word “eigentlich” is used as an adjective, a modal adverb or a discourse particle. The adjective, the adverb and the particle are etymologically and semantically related. Although the word is used frequently and competent speakers of German even seem to understand it, there is disagreement on the meaning of “eigentlich”: Some linguists claim that it marks the most relevant, very important and essential (e.g. [Weydt and Hentschel, 1983]); others state that it marks the not so relevant and less important (e.g. [Kohrt, 1988]). Within Veltman’s framework of defaults in update semantics ([Veltman, 1996]), [Schmitz and Schröder, 2004] have defined the so far only formal semantics for the modal adverb “eigentlich”. According to their definition, the adverb is used to block default conclusions that otherwise might be drawn from an utterance:

(1) Kommst Du mit Essen? — Ich muss meinen Artikel fertig schreiben.
(Shall we go out for lunch? — I have to finish my paper.)

(2) Kommst Du mit Essen? — Eigentlich muss ich meinen Artikel fertig schreiben.
(Shall we go out for lunch? — Eigentlich, I have to finish my paper.)

Let us assume that if someone has to finish a paper (p), then normally he does not go out for lunch (¬q): p ∼ ¬q. From the answer of example (1) we learn that the answerer has to finish a paper: p. Without considering other knowledge on the subject except the assumed default rule, we can conclude that presumably he will not go out for lunch: 0[p ∼ ¬q][p] |= presumably(¬q). From the answer of example (2) too we learn that the answerer has to finish a paper: eigentlich(p) |= p. The answer does not change our knowledge of default rules: 0[p ∼ ¬q][eigentlich(p)] |= p ∼ ¬q. However, due to the occurrence of “eigentlich” we cannot conclude that the answerer will not go out for lunch: 0[p ∼ ¬q][eigentlich(p)] ̸|= presumably(¬q). The answer of example (2) is therefore not satisfactory – we are waiting for a “but” that introduces the relevant information for answering our question, e.g.: “Eigentlich, I have to finish my paper, but I am very hungry.” [Schmitz and Schröder, 2004] claim that the modal adverb “eigentlich” is always and exclusively used to block default conclusions, like in example (2).

Let us sidestep for a moment. Test persons were asked what time it is according to the answer of example (3):

(3) Wie spät ist es? — Es ist 5 nach 3, meine Uhr geht aber 5 Minuten vor.
(What time is it? — It’s 5 past 3, but my watch is 5 minutes fast.)

The great majority of the test persons answered that it is exactly three o’clock. The test persons did not interpret the answer literally but in the sense of “On my watch it’s 5 past 3, but my watch is 5 minutes fast” which entails that it is exactly three o’clock. They created a modal interpretation context for “It’s 5 past 3” – that is, they performed an operation of meaning enrichment, thereby making the entire utterance, including the information that the watch is five minutes fast, relevant. Recipients can perform operations of meaning enrichment; cooperative speakers who want to be understood must anticipate possible meaning enrichments, and recipients who want to understand the speakers can only perform enrichments that can be anticipated; therefore, it must be clear in advance what kinds of meaning enrichments can be done. In example (3), the creation of a specific modal context is possible. We can integrate this possibility into the meaning representation of the answer sentence and represent it’s meaning (in a shorthand notation) along the following lines: [It’s 5 past 3]N = ⟨it’s-5-past-3, modal(on-the-speaker’s-watch) : optional⟩. This is an underspecified representation from which at least two different, fully specified interpretations can be derived: it’s-5-past-3 ∈ [(it’s-5-past-3, modal(on-the-speaker’s-watch) : optional)]U, and on-the-speaker’s -watch-it’s-5-past-3 ∈ [(it’s-5-past-3, modal(on-the-speaker’s-watch) : optional)]U.

(4) Wie spät ist es? — Eigentlich ist es 5 nach 3, meine Uhr geht aber 5 Minuten vor.
(What time is it? — Eigentlich, it’s 5 past 3, but my watch is 5 minutes fast.)

When I asked test persons what time it is according to example (4) the clear majority answered that it is five past three. Instead of creating a modal context and interpreting the answer in the sense of “On my watch it’s 5 past 3” (like in example (3)), they interpreted the answer literally. In example (4), “eigentlich” does not block a default conclusion – as it must be assumed according to [Schmitz and Schröder, 2004] – but the creation of a modal context. The meaning of the sentence can be represented as follows (where x is a variable that can be unified
with any modal operator): \([It's \, 5 \, past \, 3]_N = \langle it's-5-past-3, modal(\_): \text{blocked} \rangle\). This meaning representation is not underspecified like the representation of example (3): \(i't's-5-past-3 \in \hat{\langle it's-5-past-3, modal(\_): \text{blocked}\rangle_U\), but on-speaker's-watch-it's-5-past-3 \not\in \hat{\langle it's-5-past-3, modal(\_): \text{blocked}\rangle_U}\).

Let us take another look at the examples (1) and (2). Test persons were asked whether the answerer will not go out for lunch, will presumably not go out for lunch, will presumably go out for lunch or will go out for lunch. For the first answer (without “eigentlich”), (example 1)), more than half of the test persons assumed that he will not go out for lunch, and less than half assumed that he will presumably not go out for lunch. That is, the majority of test persons not only drew a default conclusion but also strengthened this conclusion from presumably\((-q)\) to \(-q\). We can integrate the possibility of what I call ‘modal strengthening of a default conclusion’ (msdc) into the meaning representation of the example: \([I \, have \, to \, finish \, my \, paper]_N = \langle i-have-to-finish-my-paper, msdc : \text{optional} \rangle\). For the second answer (with “eigentlich”), example (2)), about one quarter of the test persons assumed that the answerer will presumably not go out for lunch (default conclusion drawn but not strengthened), the other three quarters assumed that he presumably will go out for lunch. According to [Schmitz and Schröder, 2004], this must be explained along the following lines: The speaker does not answer the question under discussion. He has a reason for not going out for lunch – he has to finish his paper –, but he deters the recipient from assuming that he will not go out for lunch because of this reason. An “eigentlich”-clause is at least very often followed by a “but”-clause that gives contrasting, effectively relevant information for answering the question under discussion. From such contrary information one can conclude that the speaker (presumably) will go out for lunch. Such information was not given in example (1), but the test persons could anticipate it. Therefore they could assume that the answerer presumably will go out for lunch. The test results for example (2) can also be explained in a similar way without assuming that “eigentlich” serves to block a default conclusion: “Eigentlich” is used as an enrichment blocker. In example (2) it blocks the modal strengthening of a default conclusion: \([Eigentlich, I \, have \, to \, finish \, my \, paper]_N = \langle i-have-to-finish-my-paper, msdc : \text{blocked} \rangle\). One can still draw the default conclusion presumably\((-q)\). However, the speaker must have a reason for blocking the modal strengthening of this conclusion to the clear answer \(-q\) instead of presumably\((-q)\). The best reason is that he does not want to give this answer because in fact he wants to go out for lunch \((q)\). The test persons anticipated this ‘best reason’ and assumed that presumably\((-q)\).

I define “eigentlich” as an enrichment blocker: by using “eigentlich” a speaker deters the recipient from performing certain operations of meaning enrichment. This definition has several advantages. (a) It allows the interpretation of example (4); and its explanation of the test person’s interpretations of example (2) is as good as that of [Schmitz and Schröder, 2004]. (b) Meaning enrichment and blocking of meaning enrichment can be context-sensitive; thus the impact of “eigentlich” can depend on a given utterance context. (“Eigentlich” according to [Schmitz and Schröder, 2004] is context-insensitive.) (c) Following [Schmitz and Schröder, 2004], no default conclusion can be drawn from “I have to finish a paper, but eigentlich I am very hungry”. According to the new definition a default conclusion can be drawn but not modally strengthened. This seems to be the more adequate analysis. (I presuppose an analysis of “but” like that of [Winter and Rimon, 1994].) (d) According to [Schmitz and Schröder, 2004], a default conclusion can be drawn from the second conjunct of “Eigentlich, I have to finish a paper, and I am very hungry”. According to the new definition, no default conclusion can be drawn. This seems to be more plausible. (e) We get a better account to the adjectival use of “eigentlich”: We can explain the role of “eigentlich” in the paradigmatic example “Das eigentliche Griechenland, derjenige Theil Griechenlands, welchem dieser Name der schärfsten Wahrheit nach zukommt.” (Adelung, 1774: (The real (eigentlich) Greece, that part of Greece, which holds this name in the strictest sense.) as that of deterring the recipient from widening the concept of ‘Greece’. Concept widening is an operation of meaning enrichment; this operation is blocked. (f) An expression can be semantically weakened or strengthened by the application of a meaning enrichment operation. The blocking of such an operation can therefore have a weakening or a strengthening effect. Thus, I explain why there can be different intuitions regarding the effect of “eigentlich” (see above).

References


