

Carnegie Mellon University

Differentiating Contents

Center for Formal Epistemology and Linguistics Workshop
Department of Philosophy

Saturday, December 5, 2015
Baker Hall, Dean's Conference Room, 154R

[Register Here](#)

Registration is not required, but will be helpful for planning purposes.



Schedule

9:15am - 9:45am Coffee & welcoming remarks

9:45am - 11:00am [Will Starr](#) (Cornell University, Department of Philosophy)

Title: "Force and Conversational States"

Abstract: Models of discourse dynamics offered by Lewis, Stalnaker, Hamblin, Roberts and others, have been justly influential in recent work on speech acts, but they do little to capture the phenomenon central to earlier work on speech act theory: the fact that different utterances of the same sentence can have a variety of forces, e.g. commands, promises, assertions. The reason is simple: these models are appropriately constrained to the way utterances influence the assumptions that are mutually made for the purposes of the exchange — agents' discourse commitments. But the difference between a command and a suggestion intuitively lies in how an assumption that's made mutual in conversation bears on the agents' private commitments — not just their discourse commitments. We develop an extended model of discourse dynamics to capture this dimension, and investigate the pragmatic processes which govern it. This investigation turns up a surprising claim: these processes are not the familiar ones of Gricean intention recognition. We offer a rather different picture based on social mechanisms like norms, which constrain the way language users construe utterances without being part of the process by which they interpret each others goals and intentions. We show that this picture aligns with a linguistically supported semantics for interrogative, imperative and declarative mood.

11:00am - 12:15pm [Craig Roberts](#) (The Ohio State University, Department of Linguistics)

Title: "Assessing epistemic modal assertions"

Abstract: Important debates in the recent literature on Epistemic Modal Auxiliaries (EMAs) hinge on how we understand disagreements about the truth of assertions containing EMAs, and on a variety of attested response patterns to such assertions. Some relevant examples display evidence of faultless disagreement ((Lasnik 2005; Egan et al. 2005; MacFarlane 2005, 2011; Egan 2007; Stephenson 2007) or "faulty agreement" (Moltmann 2002). Others display a variety of patterns of felicitous response to statements with EMAs, responses which sometimes seem to target the prejacent alone, and other times the entire modal claim (Lyons 1977; Swanson 2006; Stephenson 2007; von Stechow & Gillies 2007b, 2008; Portner 2009; Dowell 2011; among others). I provide an alternative characterization of what it is to agree about EMA statements, arguing that this has generally been misunderstood. Then I provide evidence that the pattern of felicitous response to a given example is a function of what's at-issue in the context of utterance, undercutting a variety of criticisms of the standard semantics which trade on these phenomena. In the course of this exploration, I motivate a revision of the notion of Relevance (from Roberts 1996/2012), which makes it sensitive not only to the simple truth or falsity of a target proposition, but to its possibility or probability as an answer to the QUD.

12:15pm - 2:00pm Lunch off campus

2:00pm - 3:15pm [Sarah Murray](#) (Cornell University, Department of Linguistics)

Title: “Evidentials and Varieties of Update”

Abstract: In Cheyenne (Algonquian), evidentials are part of the same morphological paradigm as illocutionary mood markers, which indicate sentence type. Based on this system and crosslinguistic data from the literature, I argue for a non-modal analysis of evidentials that does not appeal to a separate level of illocutionary meaning. In particular, I argue that evidentials contribute not-at-issue content, which is new and truth-conditional, but not part of the main propositional content. They can also interact with the semantic contribution of the illocutionary mood markers. The proposed analysis can account for the interpretation of evidentials in declaratives and interrogatives as well as for cross-linguistic variation in evidential behavior.

This analysis is set within a more general semantic theory, where all sentences potentially contribute three varieties of update: updates to the common ground, context structuring updates, and updates that introduce discourse referents. These different types of update are used to model different aspects of natural language phenomena. Not-at-issue information directly updates the common ground. The illocutionary mood of a sentence structures the context. Other updates introduce discourse referents of various types, including propositional discourse referents for at-issue information. Distinguishing these types of update allows a unified treatment of evidentials across languages, as well as other related phenomena, such as evidential parentheticals in English, appositives, and mood marking.

3:15pm - 4:30pm [Natasha Korotkova](#) (UCLA Department of Linguistics/CMU Department of Philosophy)

Title: “Evidentials and Questions”

Abstract: The behavior of evidentials in questions is strikingly uniform across languages. First, evidentials *shift*, meaning that in questions they change their perspective from speaker to the addressee. For example, in *And when, allegedly, will the “end of the world” be?*, the adverbial *allegedly* requests a reply based on hearsay. Second, a logically possible interpretation is not attested, namely, a reading such that evidentials-in-questions remain speaker-oriented. The first property is frequently discussed in the literature and there are several competing accounts. The second property is not addressed directly and is usually derived as a side effect. I show that theories hard-wiring the shift to the semantics and/or syntax of evidentiality make wrong predictions. I further argue that the inability to be speaker-oriented in questions is an intrinsic property of evidentials and that the shift is better understood in pragmatic terms.

4:30pm - 4:45pm Coffee break

4:45pm - 6:00pm **Round Table Discussion: “When the main point is embedded: parenthetical main clauses revisited”**

Abstract: An utterance of the sentence *Jane said that Sanders is not electable* can be used in (at least) two distinct ways. It can be used to address a QUD to which Jane’s saying that Sanders is not electable is directly relevant (e.g. “What was Jane’s contribution to the discussion?”). But it can also be used to address a QUD to which the main clause is not directly relevant, although the embedded clause is (e.g. “Is Sanders electable?”). When used felicitously in the second way, the main clause assertion typically has some additional discourse function, which depends on the content of the embedding verb. In many cases, the main clause has an evidential function, but it can also function, for example, to justify the speaker’s primary discourse contribution (as when a speaker says out the blue: I just remembered that I have a dentist appointment this afternoon.) These “embedded main point” utterances raise a variety of questions, including: What exactly is the content of each discourse contribution? How are these contributions derived? And what is the update effect of each?

All of the presentations we will hear in the workshop bear on the analysis of this type of utterance. It seems clear that the analysis requires a refined model of discourse dynamics, as in the work by Starr and Murray. The “parenthetical” contribution made by the main clause proposition clearly has something in common with the contribution made by grammatical evidentials of the type to be discussed by Murray and Korotkova; but there are questions about similarities and differences between the cases. One special feature of embedded main point utterances is that when the main clause has an evidential function, the “main point” contribution is typically offered with less than complete certainty, making these contributions somewhat like the epistemic modal utterances to be discussed by Roberts. In this final session of the workshop, then, we will jointly attempt to bring the proposals heard in the course of the day to bear on the phenomenon of embedded main point utterances. The session will begin with a short presentation from Mandy Simons (CMU) summarizing the relevant data (including some new observations not included in the 2007 paper). After this, we anticipate a lively discussion of this topic.