

Tel Aviv University
School of Philosophy, Linguistics and Science Studies,
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THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 15/12/2022

16:15-17:45

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Webb 103

Variable agentivity: between polysemy and underspecification

Many verbs typically used agentively allow a variety of non-agentive uses. The question then is how agentive and non-agentive uses of a given verb are related. Certain recent approaches attribute variable agentivity to underspecification: agentivity arises from a pragmatic inference when a verb's external argument is human. In other approaches, agentivity is introduced by a functional head, with different types of agents correlating with different types of Voice heads. These approaches also attribute variable agentivity to underspecification. I argue that it is necessary to distinguish between variable agentivity attributed to underspecification and variable agentivity attributed to a fairly systematic kind of polysemy: agentive uses of certain verbs emerge as a conventionalized — hence lexicalized — way of referring to an activity prototypically performed to achieve a particular goal. I take the variable agentivity of the verb *sweep* as an extended case study, showing how this approach accounts for a wide range of subtle argument realization properties and their correlated interpretive properties. I also show that this approach can be extended to other verbs. Finally, I suggest that variable agentivity due to underspecification is pragmatic in nature and not due to different flavors of Voice heads.

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