MILA

Cukier-Goldstein-Goren Center for Mind, Cognition and Language,
School of Philosophy, Linguistics and Science Studies,
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THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 22/06/2023
16:15-17:45
Webb 103
Mats Rooth, Cornell University

Semantic ellipsis after all? Evidence from focus and Boolean antecedents

Connectivity evidence for syntactic structuring in verb phrase ellipsis sites seems to be overwhelming. For instance, it is possible for a VPE site to descriptively contain a WH-trace, or a bound degree variable. Accounts of ellipsis with syntactic structuring compete with semantic ones, where a VPE corresponds to a property variable or discourse referent. This talk looks at a new line of evidence for a semantic account, where apparently a higher order Boolean quantifier binds a property variable in the ellipsis site. This is combined with data from the literature involving focus, where VP ellipses with focused antecedents and ellipses under another ellipsis have what amount to covariant/sloppy readings, and hence are variable-like. These readings of ellipsis are shown to be consistent with syntactic connectivity, creating a puzzle. A solution is developed in a variable-free framework where phrases are semantically closed and polymorphic, for instance a VP that descriptively has a free trace is semantically a relation between individuals. This comes with interface features that distinguish e.g. among a transitive verb, a VP with a free trace, and a VP with a free pronoun. The framework is at the outset theoretically neutral, it is simply a systematic way of formulating compositional semantics. The ellipsis analysis matches semantic information between the antecedent and the ellipsis site, allowing for bound variable readings. It also partially matches interface features between the antecedent and the ellipsis, giving the effect of free-reindexing of individual and degree variables. As in earlier analyses, this is constrained by focus licensing of ellipsis. This allows for instance for a WH-trace in the antecedent to be rebound by another operator in the ellipsis clause.

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