

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

Thursday 28/04/2022

16:15-17:45

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Frontal lecture in Webb 103

transmitted on Zoom

The Relevance of Cost to the Computation of Inferences

A sentence such as “John ate some of the cookies” gives rise to the scalar implicature (SI) that John did not eat all of the cookies. This SI corresponds to the negation of the alternative utterance “John ate all of the cookies”. However, not every utterance can be considered a potential alternative. If we assume that “John ate some but not all of the cookies” is a potential alternative, we will end up with the unattested inference that John ate all the cookies. It is clear that there should be a way to differentiate between utterances in order to determine which is considered an alternative to a given sentence and which is not.

In this talk I will discuss the following two questions, following recent developments in the theory of scalar implicatures:

- I. How are alternatives differentiated? Can they be differentiated by invoking the notion of cost to the speaker? If so, how should such cost be measured?
- II. Are there independent reasons to assume that the set of potential alternatives is restricted or can we allow for all sentences to serve as possible alternatives?

I show that differentiation by naive costs to speakers makes the wrong predictions in the case of indirect implicatures and in sentences that involve long contextual alternatives. I also show that assuming that alternatives are not restricted leads to undesirable empirical predictions. An unrestricted alternative set has been part of accounts of exhaustive inferences of pitch accent and the interpretation of fragment answers (Bergen & Goodman, 2016). I will discuss these accounts and show that by not restricting the set of alternatives, they make wrong predictions regarding the placement of accent. In the case of fragment answers, unrestricted alternatives lead to ungrammatical results. I also present a result that shows that unrestricted alternatives generate so-called anti-exhaustivity effects in even basic cases of SIs, a problematic prediction.

Click [here](#) to see the colloquium program.