THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 23/03/2023
16:15-17:45
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Webb 103

A fresh look at transparent free relatives

A number of studies over the last 50+ years have addressed a construction with the *prima facie* appearance of a free relative (FR), but with markedly different intuitively felt properties, which is widely known by the nickname T(ransparent)FR. One easily detectable difference (out of three) between FRs and TFRs is that, invariably, the former are definite and the latter non-specifically indefinite. To illustrate, the data in [1] are most naturally paraphraseable as in [2].

[1] a. John is eating [what Mary put on his plate a minute ago].　　　　　**←FR**
　　b. John is eating [what *seems* to be **a juicy steak**], but I may be mistaken.　**←TFR**
[2] a. John is eating **the thing** that Mary put on his plate a minute ago.
　　b. John is eating **something** that seems to be a juicy steak, but I may be mistaken.

This difference, however, much like the other two, was not widely recognized in earlier literature. Instead, a number of researchers (most notably Henk van Riemsdijk) based their analyses of TFRs on the impression that a particular constituent (boldfaced in (1b)) exhibits syntactic, morphological and semantic properties analogous to those of the 'external head' of a complex DP. This impression gave rise to the pre-theoretical term 'transparent', and to analyses in which the constituent at issue was in effect the head of the TFR. The semantics of TFRs was in general discussed only informally, and consisted essentially in viewing the remainder of the TFR as a parenthetical modifier of the (presumed) head, having 'hedging' import. Thus, an example like (1b) would be assigned the import of (3a), and sometimes, the pronunciation in (3b).

[3] a. John is eating a juicy steak, or so it seems.
　　b. John is eating, what seems to be, a juicy steak.

In past work, I showed that this type of interpretation, while sometimes possible, is inappropriate in general, for example, in cases like (4a). To deal with TFRs that do not involve a parenthetical construal, I proposed a formal semantic analysis that assigns to (1b) and (4b) the import of (2b) and (5) respectively.

[4] a. Bob bumped into [what couldn't possibly have been **Fido**].　≠
　　b. #Bob bumped into Fido, but it could possibly have been it.
[5] Bob bumped into something that couldn't possibly have been Fido.

In the first part of my talk, I will make explicit all the semantic differences between TFRs and (minimally different) FRs, and will outline the gist of my formal semantic analysis. In the second part of the talk, I examine the 'transparency effects' attributed to TFRs by my predecessors (in particular, by Henk van Rimesdijk in a number of studies), and argue that none of them supports a head analysis of items like the one boldfaced in (1b), and that all these effects can be satisfactorily dealt with under the analysis I proposed.

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