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

THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 20/04/2023
16:15-17:45
Keny Chatain, Institut Jean Nicod

Reducing Pronoun Accessibility To Presupposition Satisfaction

A pronoun cannot always co-refer with a given DP: while the cases in (1a-c) are natural, the cases in (1d-e) are not interpretable. The problem of pronoun accessibility is the problem of determining which antecedent-pronoun configurations are licit, which ones are impossible. The poster cases in (1) point to a simple generalization: the pronoun "it" can co-refer with "a phone-book" if and only if the existence of a phone-book can be taken for granted at the point where the pronoun "it" is used. Simple though it may seem, this generalization is not fully validated by many current theories of pronouns. Such theories typically under-generate, failing to license cases like (1c) as well as other more complicated examples.

(1) a. There is a phone-book_7 and it_7 is in the cabinet.
    b. If there is a phone-book_7, it_7 is in the cabinet.
    c. Either there isn't a phone-book_7 or it_7 is in the cabinet. (attributed to Partee)
    d. # Either there is a phone-book_7 or it_7 is in the cabinet.
    e. # There might be a phone-book_7 and it_7 is in the cabinet.

Taking the generalization at face-value, I propose a system where a pronoun can be interpreted if and only if the existence of a witness - a phone-book in the cases above - can be presupposed. This theory builds on insights from E-type theories (Evans, 1980 ; Heim, 1990 ; Elbourne, 2005) but drops some of the assumptions that have made such theories inviable, like uniqueness.

The benefits are conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, by reducing pronoun accessibility to presupposition satisfaction, the proposal can build upon so-called "explanatory" theories of presuppositions (Schlenker, 2009 ; George, 2008 ; Fox, 2013, a.o.). Such theories derive discourse effects from truth-conditional meaning, instead of baking these effects into meanings themselves (Soames, 1989), as in Dynamic Semantics (Heim, 1983, a. o.). Second, the proposal has a broad empirical coverage: it explains the original cases in (1), but also the more complex quantified cases in (2) of quantifier subordination (Roberts, 1987) and donkey anaphora (Geach, 1962). In addition, it makes a range of new predictions, regarding the possibility of cataphora and pronouns licensed by pragmatic inferences.

(2) a. Every farmer who has a donkey feeds it hay.
    b. Every farmer has a donkey. Few of them feed it hay.

Click [here] to see the colloquium program.