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THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 30/05/2024
16:15-17:45
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The syntax of presupposition projection

In this talk, I will discuss presupposition projection. Consider the following pair of sentences:

(1) a. Rosa used to smoke Belomor and **stopped smoking**.
    b. Rosa **stopped smoking** and used to smoke Belomor.

Both sentences (1a) and (1b) have a subconstituent *(Rosa) stopped smoking* that introduces the presupposition 'Rosa used to smoke'. Nevertheless the sentence in (1b) as a whole carries this presupposition, while the sentence in (1a) as a whole does not (Karttunen 1977, Kamp 1981, Heim 1982, Groenendijk and Stokhof 1991, Chierchia 1995, Mandelkern et al. 2020, Kalomoiros and Schwarz 2021). Truth-conditionally, the sentences (1a) and (1b) are equivalent, but, in the terms of Karttunen (1977), the presupposition of *(Rosa) stopped smoking* is "filtered out" in (1a), but not in (1b). The basic intuition is that in (1a) the presupposition of the second conjunct is "filtered out" by the first one, since the first conjunct entails it. Meanwhile, (1b) shows that the presupposition of the first conjunct cannot be "filtered out" in the same way by the second one, even though it is entailed by it. In other words, the first conjunct seems to affect the context in which the presuppositions of the second conjunct are evaluated, but not vice versa.

Examples like (1) show that the presupposition of a presupposition bearing element (*(Rosa) stopped smoking*) is not evaluated in the Global Context in which the sentence that contains this element is uttered, but rather in its Local Context, which is calculated based on (A) the Global Context in which the sentence is uttered and (B) the Syntactic Context of the presupposition bearing element (other material in the sentence). The question that I will address in the talk is how the Syntactic Context should be defined. Specifically, why in (1a) the Syntactic Context of *stopped smoking* must include *used to smoke Belomor*, while in (1b) the Syntactic Context of *stopped smoking* cannot include *used to smoke Belomor*?

In the talk, I will briefly discuss the lexicalist approaches to Syntactic Context computation (Karttunen 1977, Kamp 1981, Heim 1982, Groenendijk and Stokhof 1991) and arguments against them based on explanatory adequacy (Rothschild 2008, Schlenker 2009). In the rest of the talk, I will show the shortcomings of the alternative accounts based on the surface linear order, like the ones developed by Schlenker (2009) or Kalomoiros (2021). I will argue that the mechanism of Syntactic Context computation is neither lexical, nor is it based on simple surface linear order. Instead, I propose a syntactic approach to Syntactic Context computation, based on the theory of Single Root Derivation (Johnson 2003, Privoznov 2021), which crucially treats all specifiers and structural adjuncts as syntactic terminals. I will argue that this will allow us to formulate the notion of Syntactic Context for presupposition projection in such a way that it will capture not only conjunction cases like the one in (1), but also presupposition projection in disjunction, conditionals and in sentences with nominal quantifiers. Throughout the talk, I will also bring to bear data concerning discourse anaphora (a binding relation between an indefinite and a pronoun), which behaves essentially in a way parallel to presupposition projection with respect to Syntactic Contexts, as has been famously shown by Heim (1982) and Kamp (1981).

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