

THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 13/11/2025

16:15-17:45

Webb 103

Maria Polinsky, University of Maryland

Making Exceptions: The Syntax of Exceptive Constructions Across Languages

Natural language allows us to express universal statements (e.g., *All dogs bark*), and languages also have means of expressing exceptions to such generalizations, via exceptive constructions (e.g., *All dogs bark except basenjis*). Within the exceptive construction, one recognizes the associate (*all dogs*) and the exceptive phrase (*except basenjis*) which in turn consists of the exceptive marker (*except* in the example above; consider also English *but, other than, save, except for*) and the exception (*basenjis*).

Linguistic means of expressing exclusion have received modest attention from philosophers of language and semanticists, whose focus has been primarily on English. Beyond that small body of work, little is known about exceptive constructions across the world's languages: how they are built, what their distribution is within and across languages, and how they compare to other constructions expressing comparison or contrast. In this talk, I present and analyze the landscape of exceptive constructions in several natural languages focusing on the structural contrast between free/connected exceptives and phrasal/clausal exceptives. I will then link this exploration to more general issues of ellipsis and case-marking in exceptive phrases. In particular, I will consider polarity mismatches present in the exceptive construction. The bottom line is that relating polarity mismatches to syntactic representations results in a series of incorrect predictions; as a result, non-syntactic explanations need to be explored.

I also consider the difference between exceptives and exclusive constructions (as in *Dogs aside, I did not see any mammals in this zoo*). Unlike exceptives, exclusives do not express negative inferences (that something is not part of a generalization) and they are compatible with a broader range of associate types than exceptives. Despite conceptual differences, exceptives and exclusives are often encoded by the same marker, and I will address this homophony by considering the Italian marker *eccetto* that can introduce both constructions in some varieties of Italian (Seguin 2024).

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