

THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 11/06/2026

16:15-17:45

Webb 103

Orr Well, Tel Aviv University

A question-based approach to focus ineffability

Focus, typically realized through pitch accent, is known to play an important role in establishing congruence between a question and its answer. The felicity of a question-answer pair often depends on where focus is placed:

- (1) What does John eat in PARIS?
 - a. John eats CREPES in Paris.
 - b. # John eats crepes in PARIS.

However, Schwarzschild (1993, 1997, 2004) observes that certain seemingly harmless question-answer pairs are infelicitous, regardless of focus placement:

- (2) What does John only eat in PARIS?
 - a. # John only eats CREPES in Paris.
 - b. # John only eats crepes in PARIS.

(2-a) carries the unwanted inference that John eats nothing but crepes in Paris, while (2-b) triggers the improper presupposition that John eats crepes somewhere. Previous approaches to the ineffability of (2) attempt to reduce the problem to formal constraints on the structure of the answer when considered in isolation. We show that such constraints are not only stipulative, but also fail to predict that the answer can be ameliorated by modifying the preceding question or other contextual factors. We argue instead that focus ineffability arises from an interaction between semantic content and the pragmatics of question answering. Specifically, ineffability follows under the assumption that focus introduces an implicit question into discourse. In cases like (2), either the implicit question does not coherently relate to the explicit background question, or the answer itself does not appropriately address it, regardless of how focus is assigned or how *only*'s quantificational domain is determined. Overall, the work highlights the central role that questions and answers play in the dynamics of discourse.

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