Questions in Pragmatics

Amsterdam, December 14th

Theme

Questions constitute a central topic in the fields of pragmatics and semantics – as do closely related phenomena such as intonational meaning, information structure and exhaustivity implicatures. What do these phenomena teach us about pragmatics, for instance about its relation to semantics? And, conversely, what does a critical evaluation of the foundations of pragmatics teach us about these phenomena?

Venue

Amsterdam Business School, room 0.02.
Plantage Muidergracht 12 (map).

Programme

9.00	Introduction	
9.10	Daniel Büring	*Are Questions Under Discussion Given?*
9.55	Jennifer Spenader	*Implicit causality and inquisitivity*
10.40	Coffee break	
11.00	Bart Geurts	*Conventions, precedents, and speech acts*
11.50	David Beaver & Edgar Onea	*Cleftomania*
12.40	Lunch break	
14.10	Daniel Goodhue	*Epistemic bias in English yes-no questions*
14.55	Liz Coppock	*Interrogative flip*
15.40	Coffee break	
16.00	Andreas Haida	*On the free-choice entailments of modalized wh-questions*
16.45	Craige Roberts	*Assessing epistemic modal assertions*
17.30	Closing remarks	

Acknowledgement

Abstracts

Daniel Büring *Are questions under discussion given?*

A theory in which focussing and deaccenting are driven solely by *givenness*, will, virtually by definition, rarely predict intuitively impossible deaccentings, except in cases where, intuitively speaking, deaccenting seems to indicate a contrast which is not pragmatically born out, as in Wagner's 'convertible' examples. A theory that relates focussing and deaccenting solely to questions under discussions (QUDs) has an easier time accommodating this kind of 'pragmatic impact' of deaccenting, but runs the risk of deaccenting non-given material, just because it is in the background of a question. It seems we need a bit of both.

This talk explores a specific way of combining these: deaccenting requires privative givenness, but also compatibility with contrastive focussing, which in turn is modelled as related to a QUD. A QUD needs to meet a number of pragmatic conditions, but it need not be given. I argue that this particular division of labor makes the right predictions in a number of tricky cases. (See also the related paper in the Semantics Archive.)

Jennifer Spenader *Implicit causality and inquisitivity*

After a sentence like "John admires Bill because he ..." there is a strong tendency to interpret "he" as Bill, the cause of the admiration, but change the verb to "amazes" and "he" is then interpreted as John. Verbs like "amaze" and "admire" belong to a well-studied class of implicit causality verbs. Their continuation biases (IC biases) have long been investigated empirically. But exactly how lexical semantic features interact with discourse processes to lead to the biases has hardly been addressed formally. Existing explanations tend to be stipulative, with the biases treated as unique and unrelated to other discourse phenomena.

I will present a formal analysis based on the intuition that IC biases are forward looking inferences and can therefore better be modeled within a question-based theory of discourse coherence. I build on the general assumption that IC verbs contain a covert existential event variable. The insight that indefinites have issue-raising capacity from Inquisitive Semantics (Groenendijk and Roelofsen, 2009) can then be adopted to argue that IC verbs evoke alternatives and thus raise questions. Continuation biases are explained by the discourse requirement for speakers to address raised issues. The major advantage of this analysis over existing accounts is that it derives continuation behavior from independently motivated research on expectations triggered by indefinites.

Bart Geurts *Conventions, precedents, and speech acts*

Conventions are coordination devices: patterns in social interactions of the past to be exploited for solving coordination problems in the present. Conventions do not necessarily require general conformity. For in order to explain how past interactions can inform an ongoing one, a single precedent may suffice; hence there is no sharp boundary between conventional actions and actions based on one precedent alone. Language conventions fall into two main categories: they either serve to constrain the forms utterances are allowed to take, or to regulate the communicative process. Speech act conventions belong to the second category, and are not very different from lexical conventions, for example.

David Beaver and Edgar Onea *Cleftomania*

The existential presupposition and exhaustivity inference associated with it-clefts in English and similar constructions in other languages have given rise to a variety of analyses. Clefts

have been analysed on a par with definite descriptions (Percus 1997, Büring and Križ 2013), as identificational copula constructions (Delin and Klein 1990, Pollard and Yasaful 2015), or as inquiry terminators, i.e. constructions which give a complete answer to a question under discussion similar to exclusives, as suggested in Velleman et al (2011). We will show that the main approaches to the semantics of clefts are much more similar than it might appear on the surface. This is because the very nature of issues, discourse referents and definite descriptions is intimately connected.

In particular, we will propose a representation of questions in dynamic semantics which mediates between discourse referents and sets of alternatives. This will allow us to explore a number of contexts in which clefts can be used e.g. following indefinites or explicit questions of various kinds. Finally, we will outline some interesting parallels and differences between it-clefts and exclusives and how this can take us closer to a comprehensive question under discussion based theory of the meaning contribution of it-clefts.

Daniel Goodhue   *Epistemic bias in English yes-no questions*

VERUM focus (Höhle, 1992) has been argued by Romero & Han (2004) to be the source of the perceived epistemic bias conveyed by two kinds of yes-no questions (YNQs) in English: those with high-negation and those with prominence on the auxiliary. I introduce new data demonstrating asymmetries between these two YNQ types that is puzzling for a unified theory of them. I argue that these asymmetries arise because, while auxiliary prominence is an instance of VERUM focus, high-negation is not. An explanation for the bias in YNQs with auxiliary prominence should fall out from the pragmatics of asking YNQs in certain conversational contexts. The bias conveyed by high-negation YNQs is left as an open puzzle.

Liz Coppock   *Interrogative Flip*
Joint work with Steve Wechsler.

In several languages, including Kathmandu Newari, Lhasa Tibetan, Tsafiki, and Akvakh, there is a pattern of verbal morphology in which a special form (called the "conjunct" form or the "ego" form) occurs on first person in declaratives and second person in interrogatives. For example, in Kathmandu Newari, it would occur on the verb "drink" in the equivalent of "I drank too much" and "Did you drink too much?", but not in "Did I drink too much?" or "You drank too much." Uses of this marker with third-person subjects can also appear in combination with evidentials and in speech reports. For example, in the equivalent of "Reportedly, Syam drank too much" with conjunct-marking on the verb, it is implied that Syam is the source of the report. Here we can see that conjunct-marking is also accompanied by an inference of knowing self-reference (de se), so the report must be one where Syam is aware of having drunk too much.

Our analysis runs as follows. First, we assume that a context of utterance supplies an 'authority' role, which is by default the speaker in a declarative and the addressee in an interrogative, but may be deferred to a third party, and this is marked using an evidential. Second, we assume that conjunct-marking, when attached to a verb, signifies that the entity playing the actor role in the event described by the verb is the egophoric center. We formalize this using 'egophoric logic', a logic in which formulae may be associated with both centered intensions (set of centered worlds) and uncentered intensions (sets of ordinary worlds). We assume furthermore that an interrogative or declarative utterance pushes a centered worlds proposition or set thereof onto the 'table' as conceived by Farkas and Bruce. The contextually-relevant authority has responsibility for making one of these propositions pass from the table to the common ground, and must accept the proposition, i.e., must have

the relevant de se attitude. In passing from the table to the common ground, the centered worlds proposition is 'saturated' as it were by the authority, and becomes an uncentered intension, so what goes in the common ground is not a private, de se proposition, but rather a public set of worlds.

Andreas Haida   *On the free-choice entailments of modalized wh-questions*

The sentence in (i) has a free-choice reading, i.e., a reading on which it grants Ann the possibility to see the dean and the possibiity to see the head of department. The sentence in (iii) has a corresponding free-choice reading, i.e., a reading according to which Ann's advisor informed her about these choices. Finally, the sentence in (ii) has a reading on which the inference from (i) and (ii) to (iii) is valid for the free-choice readings of (i) and (iii). Thus, the embedded wh-question in (ii) can give rise to free-choice inferences, too.

(i) Ann must see the dean or the head of department.

(ii) Her advisor told Ann who she must see.

(iii) Her advisor told Ann that she must see the dean or the head of department.

Building on Spector (2007), I will discuss how to derive free-choice entailments of wh-questions, specifically in cases in which the set of alternatives that the inferences depend on seems to vary from possible answer to possible answer.

Craige Roberts   *Assessing epistemic modal assertions*

Important debates in the recent literature on *Epistemic Modal Auxiliaries* (EMAs) hinge on how we understand disagreements about the truth of assertions containing EMAs, and on a variety of attested response patterns to such assertions. Some relevant examples display evidence of faultless disagreement (Lasersohn 2005; Egan et al. 2005; MacFarlane 2005, 2011; Egan 2007; Stephenson 2007) or "faulty agreement" (Moltmann 2002). Others display a variety of patterns of felicitous response to statements with EMAs, responses which sometimes seem to target the prejacent alone, and other times the entire modal claim (Lyons 1977; Swanson 2006; Stephenson 2007; von Fintel & Gillies 2007b,2008; Portner 2009; Dowell 2011; among others). I provide an alternative characterization of what it is to agree about EMA statements, arguing that this has generally been misunderstood. Then I provide evidence that the pattern of felicitous response to a given example is a function of the question under discussion in the context of utterance, undercutting a variety of criticisms of the standard semantics which trade on these phenomena. In the course of this exploration, I motivate a revision of the notion of *Relevance* (from Roberts 1996/2012), which makes it sensitive not only to the simple truth or falsity of a target proposition, but to its possibility or probability as an answer to the QUD.