

Candidate Summary

Phillips, Josh

Dissertation Title: At the Intersection of Temporal & Modal Interpretation: Essays on Irreality

Reader	Command of Literature	Originality	Insight	Clearness	Style	Method	Overall
Bowern, Claire	VG	D	D	VG	VG	D	D
Dayal, Veneeta	D	VG	VG	D	VG	VG	VG
Kotek, Hadas	D	D	VG	G	VG	VG	VG
Deo, Ashwini	D	D	D	D	VG	VG	D
Condoravdi, Cleo	D	D	D	D	D	D	D

[Bowern, Claire](#)

This dissertation does many things. In organization, Phillips has provided three case studies from different languages about the way that tense, aspect, mood, and negation interact in talking about displacement. That is, what are the ways in which tense and mood (or rather, discussion of the temporal and modal domains) interact.

The empirical domain for the work is Kriol -- one of the Creole languages of Northern Australia -- and Yolŋu Matha, a group of Indigenous, Pama-Nyungan languages from broadly the same region. There is also comparative work with other Australian languages in the chapter on the negative existential cycle, as well as in the discussion of bambai. Comparative work within the Yolŋu subgroup informs the chapters on cyclic tense. Data were collected with original fieldwork in Arnhem land over several years, along with material from grammars and other pre-existing collections. Josh has done a great job combining many data sources collected under many

different circumstances. One should also note that he has worked in detail with several unrelated languages.

The topics of the dissertation are explored through several branches of formal semantics -- quantificational approaches to modals, temporal semantics, and the formal pragmatics of discourse subordination and how modal bases are established in the common ground in conversation. This is the first formal work on TAM in Australian languages, and only the second or third paper which has any formal semantic treatment (there is some work on quantifiers). Therefore there is no tradition of work on these languages in this framework and Josh has had to create that from scratch; no small feat. As discussed in the dissertation, current theories of related phenomena (e.g. the analysis of subjunctives) don't translate well to these languages. While not all the puzzles were solved here, the dissertation provides a very rich set of questions for further work, and indicators of topics of interest.

Then there is the historical dimension of the topic. While this perhaps received less prominence in the final version of the dissertation than in the prospectus plan, diachronic questions permeate the thesis. More specifically, each case study has a diachronic component -- how tense marking changes into apprehensionality in the bambai part (part I), how negation marking changes across related languages (in the negative existential cycle work for part II, and, in brief, how a cyclic tense system might have arisen through a combination of language contact and the reanalysis of language-internal resources (part III). In each case, Josh has provided an analysis of the synchronic phenomenon, identified the source of the marking (in the lexicon or morpho-syntax), and hypothesized a pathway for the contemporary system that draws on a combination of known paths of change, cross-linguistic typology, and constrained by the semantic analysis.

There are several themes that run through the dissertation. The analysis of bambai shows that apprehensional readings for bambai emerge from temporal ones when the context is unsettled. That is, language users make use of temporal markers in non-temporal contexts, in this case to signal an implicature about their attitude to an as yet unrealized event. Part II on the negative existential cycle looks particularly at the ways in which privative (nominal) morphology is recruited into this cycle in several Australian languages, providing additional pathways into the cycle compared to those previously examined in the literature. This work proposes an analysis of negation as a quantificational modal operator and shows how an analysis such as this can help to explain the interactions between negation and modality that several Australian languages exhibit. The third area, on cyclic tense, like the work on bambai shows how use conventions end up in the semantics; in this case, the marking of precontemporarility. The non-settledness of an event, like with bambai, drives reality status marking in Yolngu; this reality status marking also interacts with negation -- these typologies of (non)veridicality and (non)existence probably explain several otherwise opaque or arbitrary aspects of Yolngu verb morphology.

As is almost always the case with dissertations, there are aspects of the project which need to be left for future work. In an ideal (unrealized) world, I would have liked to see greater attention paid to the implications of the proposals made in the body of the dissertation, even if they could not be further tested at this stage. I also found some aspects of the writing quite dense, and would have appreciated a little more spelling out of the background assumptions and clearer demonstration of how the pieces of the arguments fit together in places. These issues can be fixed for publication, however.

Given that my primary area of research is not in formal semantics, I'd like to close with what I see the implications of this work being for language change and language documentation (and I'll leave detailed discussion of the formal aspects of the work to the other members of the committee). While it is not, of course, news to documentary linguists that clear and explicit formulations of hypotheses are more easily testable than vague ones, documentary linguists have not engaged with formal semantics enough, to the detriment of our linguistic descriptions. Work like Josh's makes all the more clear that English translations do not allow for an adequate investigation of morphology and that engagement between formal semantics and language documentation can be very fruitful. Likewise, semanticists have a lot to gain from work with "unfamiliar" languages and the problems they pose. New empirical domains don't just let us apply existing theories and check off some more explananda - they create new ways of seeing familiar categories. Finally, all these applies just as much to language change, where comparative reconstruction of meaning can go along with the reconstruction of forms, constrained by theories of meaning, to allow us to understand the dynamics of language, the array of currently attested linguistic systems, and the way meaning is encoded.

Dayal, Veneeta

This dissertation brings together insights from work on the aboriginal Australian languages and formal semantics to explore displacement strategies in three different domains, the Australian Kriol item bambai, the different forms of negation in three Pama Nguyen languages as manifested over time, and the expression of distinct tense markers in Yolnu. Each of these pose interesting challenges for a formal theory of meaning. Phillips does a remarkable job of laying out the empirical nuances, with an impressive control of the literature on each topic. He also shows us why each of these topics is important for understanding how displacement strategies are to be modeled in a serious theory of meaning for natural language. As far as I am aware, this is the first study of its kind for Australian languages and will serve as a roadmap for anyone interested in pursuing these topics further.

Kotek, Hadas

This is a well written and well researched dissertation, which presents an investigation of the close relationship in meaning between modality and tense/aspect in languages of Northern Australia, a topic which has received little to no attention in the previous formal semantics literature. The dissertation comprises three independent but connected parts, each bringing together data from original fieldwork in Arnhem Land, a synchronic, formal semantics analysis, and diachronic, historical considerations which inform the building blocks for the analysis. This is a unique and fruitful approach to research in linguistics, combining evidence from diverse sources to converge on a single analysis. Both the use of arguments from historical linguistics and the use of data from original fieldwork on understudied languages are notable strengths of

this dissertation.

In part 1 of the dissertation, Phillips studies the notional category of “apprehensionality”, an understudied grammatical category in the current formal linguistic literature. The dissertation documents the distribution and meaning of the lexical item bambai (cf English by and by) in Australian Kriol, which can either serve as a time-frame adverbial or as an apprehensional. The dissertation offers the first formal semantic account of apprehensionals in the literature, based on Kratzer’s framework for modal expressions. It additionally provides a use-conditions based account for the negative speaker attitude component of the apprehensional reading, and discusses the historical development of the apprehensional reading of bambai from the subsequential one. The insights from the path of grammaticalization of these readings lend additional support for the formal analysis, and seem to be on the right track.

In developing this account, Phillips demonstrates mastery of three distinct complex formal semantic literatures on (a) Kratzerian modality, (b) Robertsonian modal subordination and Questions under Discussion, and (c) Use conditions. His ability to combine the idea of historical alternatives with mainstream modal-semantic theories, along with the notion of modal subordination, is key for the success of his analysis. On the other hand, a remaining issue to be resolved is a problem in two of the detailed derivations in (94) and (96) in chapter 4, where at least one step in the computation contains a technical error. Despite this issue, however, the ideas presented in this chapter appear sound, and I believe that the computation error can be corrected without impacting the overall direction of the analysis.

Part 2 of the dissertation focuses on the phenomenon of the Negative Existential Cycle, a grammaticalisation process where negative existential predicates develop into markers of sentential negation. The dissertation documents the cycle in a number of Pama-Nyungan languages from different sub-families, mainly based on comparative data from the existing literature. Phillips proposes an analysis for the category of “privatives” as negative existential predicates, and argues that they have developed into sentential negation in each of the documented languages, instantiating the cycle.

The dissertation adopts a unified semantics for negation as a two-place operator, as a way to account for the syntactic distribution of negation in the various stages of the cycle. To me, this part of the dissertation is the weakest, and given more time, could be further developed to show how the data in chapter 5 supports the details of the analysis in chapter 6. That is, the account may be technically correct, but I am not convinced that the data requires it. Nonetheless, the analysis here is sufficient for the dissertation, and provides a starting point for a more in depth investigation of the formal semantics of these negative markers.

Finally, part 3 of the dissertation is concerned with the cross-linguistically rare phenomena of metricality and cyclic tense in Western Dhuwal-Dhuwala, which present challenges to the commonly adopted semantic accounts of tense marking. The data again comes from original fieldwork as well as from the descriptive literature. Here, Phillips demonstrates mastery of the literature on tense and modality. He is able to digest intricately complex data and present them in an enlightening way to make sense of what is otherwise an entirely perplexing data set.

The dissertation develops an ingenious approach to the Western Dhuwal-Dhuwala tense

system, based on the idea that the language privileges two intervals, today and before-today, and in addition privileges an interval near the right edge of each one. The account additionally explains complex interactions with negation and certain modals, where some of these contrasts are neutralized, building on the notion of historical alternatives. This account expertly integrates what could otherwise appear to be problematic data into existing mainstream accounts of tense semantics. If it were expanded a bit and structured better, I believe that this part of the dissertation could have been an entire dissertation on its own. In future work, it could be developed into a stand-alone monograph-length publication.

Despite its strengths, I don't feel like the dissertation has earned the overall grade of "Distinguished", because of organizational issues relating to data presentation, and because the technical analysis is at times in need of additional development. These will need to be resolved when sections of this dissertation are submitted for publication. However, I don't think that any of these points should stand in the way of this dissertation being accepted in its current form.

Deo, Ashwini

Joshua Phillips' dissertation is a valuable contribution to several areas of Linguistics -- Formal Semantics, Historical Linguistics, Typology, and its empirical focus, Australian Languages. The dissertation is ambitious in its scope and reveals the author's ability to distill essential properties from a range of apparently disparate and unsystematic distributional patterns within and across the studied languages to bring coherence to them using the tools of temporal and modal semantics. Phillips has done an admirable job of careful reading of existing descriptive work and his own nuanced semantic fieldwork to identify semantic temporal/aspectual/modal explananda in Australian Kriol (apprehensionality), Pama-Nyungan languages (development of negation), and Yolngu (cyclic tense and asymmetric negation). The result of this effort is a solid and detailed empirical foundation on which the study of such phenomena, not only in Australian languages, but cross linguistically, can move forward.

What I believe qualifies the dissertation for the Distinguished mark is the range of ideas Phillips brings to bear on describing and offering an explanation of the diverse phenomena he takes up for analysis. While the result is not an entirely satisfactory set of analyses (yet), this apparent weakness must be attributed to the complexity of the systems and changes to these systems that he seeks to describe and the non-obviousness of the solutions, not to lack of effort to synthesize on Phillips's part. Phillips goes very far indeed in offering working analyses. With the work in Part 3, in particular, the patterns described are extremely complex and present challenges to thinking about both diachronic change, the organization of temporal systems, and the intricate way in which remoteness and (non)realization of eventualities in time are signaled in languages. We must thank Phillips for being able to make sense of the data enough that bringing them to a discussion on temporal/modal semantics and diachronic semantics is fruitfully possible. Finally, at a time when Linguistics (like several other disciplines) is getting more and more specialized with dissertation-level work that seems increasingly siloed within particular sub-fields, it is extremely encouraging to see work like that of Phillips' that seeks to address broader questions and gain insight into undocumented linguistic systems with complex

patterns by appealing to both semantic theory, typology and diachrony

Condoravdi, Cleo

Josh Phillips' dissertation is exceptional in its scope and ambition. It covers an impressive amount of ground empirically and theoretically.

It is a wonderful example of integrating detailed descriptive work on under-represented languages --- in this case, Australian Aboriginal languages --- with mainstream semantic theorizing.

The dissertation centers around the linguistic categories of tense, aspect, modality, negation and their interaction in a variety of intricate linguistic systems. The work stands out in several ways:

- it examines data from multiple Australian Aboriginal languages from a comparative perspective;; some of the data comes from Phillips' own fieldwork;
- there is a typological and a diachronic component to all the analyses of the phenomena studied;
- it provides the first formal semantic analysis for phenomena which are typologically distinctive and not at all well-understood.

A striking example of the last point is his ingenious analysis of the distribution and interpretation of the four inflectional categories marking temporal reference and the realis/irrealis distinction in Western Dhuwal(a). Previous work had understood the system as involving so called 'cyclic tense', that is a tense system which marks temporal distance of the described event from the speech time and which aligns different linguistic forms with discontinuous temporal intervals (as opposed to the continuous intervals of the familiar past, present and future tense systems). Phillips shows that semantically the tense system of Western Dhuwal(a) is neither sensitive to temporal distance nor requiring discontinuity. In the process, he recasts the generalizations about the distribution of the inflectional categories. What is most striking about his analysis is how simple the system ultimately turns out to be, with the proper temporal and modal concepts in place and the recognition of the role reasoning about competition of alternative forms plays in interpretation.

It is not often that one sees a dissertation with such a compelling combination of typological, historical and theoretical work.

Yale

[Accessibility at Yale](#) · [Privacy policy](#) · [Feedback](#)
Copyright © 2021 Yale University · All rights reserved