

GSAS Workshop – Harvard Linguistics Circle

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Title: Questions are multidimensional: evidence from perspective-sensitivity

The semantics and pragmatics of questions have been extensively studied with a formal lens for the last fifty years. In this talk, I explore how perspective-sensitive elements *inside* a question influence both the semantic and pragmatic contributions of a question. In particular, I will use the phenomenon of Interrogative Flip to demonstrate that the epistemic states of agents as manifested in a wide array of evidentials affect the *context change potential* of the question. Most previous studies describe an obligatory shift in the anchor of an evidential from the speaker to the addressee in interrogatives, across a diverse set of languages. In this work, we discuss a lesser-studied set of facts, which show that in many languages this shift does not take place. Bringing together diverse cross-linguistic data, I propose that evidentials come in two shapes: those that participate in Interrogative Flip, and those that do not. The difference between the two classes is located in a formal property, and all attested evidential systems are shown to fall in either class, even those that appear to allow for 'mixed' anchors. In this dynamic approach to the interfaces of semantics and pragmatics, I will (i) propose modelling speech acts in terms of their context change potentials, (ii) model evidence with the parameters of *sourcehood* and *commitment*, (iii) model how these parameters manipulate the context change potentials of speech acts, (iv) model *commitment update operators* as a separate class from speech act operators.

This framework makes several crucial predictions, which I show is borne out empirically, including the association between evidentiality and bias in questions, and the paradigm gap borne out of the subclass of reportative evidentials interacting with the question operator. Overall, this work aims at a unified theoretical treatment of the myriad interactions of questions and perspective-sensitivity with an eye towards accounting for the diversity in the rich typological landscape.