

Harvard Linguistics Colloquium

Speaker: Ryan Bochnak (UBC)

Title: The semantics and pragmatics of conjectural questions: The view from *xma*-interrogatives in Ktunaxa (joint work with Ana Laura Arrieta Zamudio, UBC)

Time: Friday, September 25, 12-1:30pm

Location: Fong Auditorium (Boylston 110)

Abstract:

Conjectural questions are a type of questioning speech act where the addressee is not assumed to be in a position to provide an answer. Such questions are formed in many languages using an inferential evidential or epistemic modal. In this paper, we investigate interrogatives in Ktunaxa (isolate) containing the modal *xma*. Such interrogatives can receive an interpretation either as a canonical information-seeking question or as a conjectural question. Our analysis makes use of both semantic and pragmatic ingredients. For the semantics, we combine the lexical semantics of *xma*, which we argue is a weak necessity modal with both circumstantial and epistemic readings, with a standard question semantics and standard interrogative flip. On the pragmatic side, we observe that *xma* in declaratives can be used parenthetically, where its prejacent contains the relevant information for the current issue in the conversation. We argue that this use of *xma* gives rise to the implicature that the speaker does not know for sure that the prejacent is true. Combining this with the semantics of an interrogative containing *xma* leads to the inference that the addressee is ignorant about the answer, thereby deriving the signature effect of conjectural questions. We argue that there is cross-linguistic support for this general architecture of conjectural questions, with some languages conventionalizing certain aspects of conjectural questions that we argue are pragmatic in Ktunaxa.