Department of Linguistics
Senior Thesis Colloquium

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Thursday, April 30, 2015

3:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Boylston Hall 105

	Program
3:00	*Opening remarks* (Prof. Maria Polinsky, Head Tutor)
3:10	Anna Dimitrijević *No* Ifs *or* Ands, *only* Buts. *Toward a Unified Semantics for* But: *A Focus/Polarity Based Approach*
3:30	Jake Freyer *Kikuyu Tone Revisited: Phonetics and Phonology*
3:50	BREAK
4:00	Hannah Bou-Lai Lam *Talking Body: Investigating the Roles of Animacy and Reversibility in the Word Order of Improvised Gesture Paradigms*
4:20	Kenneth Mai *Heritage Speakers on the Edge: Sentence Final Particle Usage Among Heritage Cantonese Speakers*
4:40	*Closing remarks*

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Refreshments will be provided.

No *Ifs* or *Ands*, only *Buts*.
Toward a Unified Semantics for *But:*
A Focus/Polarity Based Approach

Anna Dimitrijević
Linguistics

This thesis investigates the semantics of the word *but*. Its starting point is a critical analysis of Maziar Toosarvandani's semantics for *but*, one of the most interesting recent works on the topic. The thesis then presents a new proposal based on the interaction of focus and polarity. Toosarvandani (2014) argues that *but* is polysemous and that its conjuncts make reference to a question under discussion (QUD). While Toosarvandani's proposal convincingly resolves some of the shortcomings of the previous inferentialist and formalist accounts, it leaves others open. Moreover, while a QUD-based approach to *but* can accommodate most of the relevant phenomena, its predictive power remains questionable. It is to overcome these empirical and conceptual limits that this thesis attempts a new proposal.

The central idea the thesis pursues is that *but* is a focus-sensitive operator that coordinates DPs or propositions of differing polarity. Drawing on Barwise and Cooper's (1981) theory of generalized quantifiers and Rooth's (1992) theory of focus, this thesis provides a new lexical entry for *but*. According to this lexical entry, the first conjunct of a *but* sentence must be a member of the focus semantic value of the second conjunct, and moreover the two conjuncts must contrast in polarity. Extensive examples demonstrate how these presuppositions account for the various uses of *but*, from the core cases, to some of the most recalcitrant ones. In addition to offering a new uniform semantics for *but*, this thesis may pave the way for a better understanding of the cross-categorial uses of *but* and of some ways in which languages vary on this score.

Kikuyu Tone Revisited: Phonetics and Phonology

Jake Freyer
Linguistics & African and African American Studies

In this thesis, I examine the tone system of Kikuyu, an East African Bantu language. I aim to revise and update current scholarly understanding of Kikuyu tone from a phonetic and phonological perspective.

Kikuyu is the most widely spoken language in Kenya, with well over 6 million native speakers. Its tone system is known, from previous work, to be complex and distinctive, and is frequently used as an example to illustrate phenomena such as downstep and rightward tone shift.

A series of insightful papers by George Clements and Kevin Ford between 1975 and 1984 present a thorough analysis of Kikuyu tone from an early autosegmental perspective. However, almost no descriptive or analytical work has been done on the subject in the intervening 30 years, and extant works present little phonetic data to support their phonological descriptions.

After introducing basic properties of the language, I report on basic phonetic characteristics of Kikuyu tone, including downdrift, contour timing and downstep, supported by computer-analyzed phonetic data from three native (l1) young adult speakers.

I examine the distinctive process of tone shift, which causes tones to surface on syllable to the right of where they are morphologically expected. I first review the standard analysis of this phenomenon proposed by Clements and Ford (1979 and 1981) and Clements (1984), and note problems that arise from the foundational assumption that tones are underlyingly floating. I then present an alternate analysis that solves these problems by positing that tones are underlyingly associated with segments.

Kikuyu is one of the strongest examples of a language analyzed as having underlyingly unassociated tones. This study refutes that claim, and as such has important implications for the nature of tone in other languages that appear to be similar. It also defines a framework for future inquiry into Kikuyu, whose tone remains under-studied.

Talking Body: Investigating the Roles of Animacy
and Reversibility in the Word Order of
Improvised Gesture Paradigms

Hannah Bou-Lai Lam
Linguistics & Mind, Brain, and Behavior

Many natural languages employ word order to convey information about how the subject, verb, and object constituents relate to each other. In the gestural paradigm, participants also employ a similar tool organizational tool, resulting in a majority of the participants consistently producing a SOV word order regardless of their natural spoken word order (Goldin-Meadow, So, Özyürek & Mylander, 2008). However, follow-up studies found that when the event is reversible and involves animate entities, speakers switch to a SVO word order (Gibson et al., 2013; Hall, Mayberry & Ferreira, 2013; Meir, Padden, Aronoff & Sandler, 2010). The two competing hypotheses for explaining this switch are the reversibility and animacy hypothesis. My experiments were designed to extricate these two explanations from each other and to determine if one was a more compelling motivation to cause the shift to SVO. To do so I added a third event condition where the both the agent and patient are inanimate and the event is reversible. In the new condition, the reversibility account would predict a greater shift to SVO whereas the animacy account would not. Our results from both experiments show that participants are sensitive to the animacy of the 2entities and are not affected much by the communicative pressure from reversibility of situations. This study considers the implications of how cognitive biases and constraints influence linguistic structures, and how verb patterns in sign languages may explain some of the findings from this improvised gestural paradigm.

Heritage Speakers on the Edge:
Sentence Final Particle Usage Among
Heritage Cantonese Speakers

Kenneth Mai
Linguistics

This thesis investigates the use of sentence final particles (SFPs) in heritage Cantonese. Heritage speakers are early or sequential bilinguals who, in adulthood, are more proficient in the dominant language of their society than in their first, "heritage" language. Heritage speakers exhibit systematic divergence from the baseline (the language they were exposed to), a number of which can be attributed to greater trouble with certain domains.

SFPs can serve as a lens into heritage grammar. These particles, attached to the end of sentences or utterances, perform a variety of functional and pragmatic functions. Given their abundance and ubiquity in colloquial Cantonese (Leung 1992; Kong 2013), SFPs are likely to be familiar to heritage speakers. However, interpretation of SFPs is sensitive to the context they appear in; as a result, it is often difficult to pinpoint their exact meanings. Additionally, absence of SFPs generally does not affect truth conditions or grammaticality of utterances, which leads to an appearance of optionality. Given that even native speakers and highly proficient bilingual speakers have trouble with optionality of phenomena at the interface of syntax and discourse (Sorace & Serratrice 2009), heritage speakers are predicted to have difficulty matching SFPs to the context and thus misuse or omit them inappropriately.

Research on SFP usage among native speakers of Cantonese with aphasia (Kong 2013) inspired this investigation heritage speaker use of SFPs. The results confirm the prediction that heritage speakers use fewer particles on average. Though heritage and aphasic speaker perform similarly, a closer look reveals that the former have access to the full CP domain, unlike aphasic speakers (Platzack 2001). This implicates processing constraints as the culprit behind heritage speaker performance. The results also motivated a reanalysis of the particles aa3 and ne1, lowering their syntactic position from "Type 2" to "Type 1".