

Semantics at the language-mind interface
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Abstract:

Standard models in linguistics and philosophy of language suppose that "the meaning relation" in natural language is both compositional and functional, pairing linguistic expressions with their contributions to the truth conditions of the sentences in which they occur. Such models hew quite closely to the primary data on which semantic theories are based—truth value judgments in context—and are compatible with approaches that pair linguistic expressions with their contributions to thought only insofar as sentences determine thoughts. In this talk, I discuss experimental findings on people's understanding of plural comparatives like *The red dots are bigger than the blue dots*. Minimally, these findings challenge the assumption that the relationship between sentence and thought is functional. More substantively, I take the relevant phenomenology to suggest that (i) even non-specialists expect sentences to (determinatively) express thoughts, but (ii) in fact, sentences merely provide instructions for thought assembly. This discussion highlights the need for a new foundational formal model that can predictively relate morphosyntax to nonlinguistic cognition.