Experiments in (non-truth-conditional) linguistic meaning: Exploring subjective predicates and perspective-taking

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Abstract:

The information that we encounter conveys both objective facts about the world and people's subjective opinions. This distinction is also reflected in language: Words that express opinions (e.g. fascinating, frightening) differ from words conveying more objective facts (e.g. wooden, Philadelphian): Subjective adjectives are perspective-sensitive and reflect someone's opinion/attitude, whereas objective adjectives express factual information. Indeed, when two people disagree about matters of taste, neither is in the wrong: It is widely observed that there is nothing contradictory when one person says "That cheesesteak was tasty!" and the other responds "No, it was not tasty" (faultless disagreement) -- in contrast to disagreements about objective facts. The question of how (and whether) to capture such phenomena using truth-conditional semantics is a foundational question that has attracted extensive attention formal semantics and philosophy, but has traditionally not been explored from an experimental perspective. In this talk, I will present a series of psycholinguistic studies from my lab that use a variety of experimental methods to explore three inter-related questions concerning subjectivity: First, how good are we at noticing subjective information, at recognizing something as a subjective opinion? Second, how accurately and how automatically do we keep track of whose opinion is being expressed? Third, when faced with opposing opinions, do we really regard the disagreement as faultless, with neither person being in the wrong? As I will show in my talk, the processing of subjective adjectives is constrained in semantically and syntactically principled ways, but also guided by contextual and social considerations that go far beyond the predicate itself. These results call for an approach to subjective adjectives that integrates not only lexical factors, but also sentence-level, interlocutor-level and social factors.