

Thursday Interdisciplinary Colloquium

Fall 2018-Winter 2019

Thursdays, 16:00-17:30, Webb 103

10.01.19

Nicole Katzir

Tel Aviv University

Minimum and Maximum Constructions: Semantics and Argumentation

In many languages, minimum constructions (e.g., English *at least*; Hebrew *lefaxot* 'at least') and maximum constructions (e.g., English *at most*; Hebrew *le-xol ha-yoter* 'at most') have a range of non-quantificational meanings. For example.

(1) *At least in that big trainwreck several people were saved.*

(Example taken from Kay, 1992)

(2) *hiftaxreru me- ha- tfisa lefi- ha kir xayav lihiyot*
let.go from-the-conception according.to-her a.wall must to.be

lavan ve- haxnisu kcat ceva la- xa'im. maksimum, tamid
white and-insert some color to.the-life. MAKSIMUM always

effar licbo'a fuv axar kax.
possible to.paint again after this

'Let go of the idea that a wall must be white, and introduce some color into your life. MAKSIMUM, you can always paint it again later.'

In this talk, I will present my analysis of the different possible meanings of Hebrew minimum and maximum constructions, based on corpus data. I argue that argumentation (as described and developed in the works of Anscombe and Ducrot, e.g., 1976, 1983) has a central role in the semantic (i.e., encoded) meaning of all constructions containing these expressions. Interestingly, despite their radically different literal meanings when used as numeral modifiers (opposites), both types of constructions serve to present non-optimal arguments in favor of the speaker's main point.

In addition, I examine different morpho-syntactic variants of each construction. For minimum constructions, these are *lefaxot* 'at least', *le-xol ha-paxot* 'at the very least', and *minimum* 'minimally'/'at least'. For maximum constructions, these are *le-xol ha-yoter* 'at most' and *maksimum* 'maximally'/'at most'. I propose that the differences between morpho-syntactic variants of the same construction lie in their discourse profiles: non-obligatory but frequently recurring discourse conditions that hold when a certain linguistic form is used (Ariel, 2008).

03.01.19

Daniel Margulis

MIT

Quantifier Float with Overt Restriction

Floated quantifiers create the appearance that n -place predicates can take $n+1$ arguments. For example, *be asleep* seems to take one argument in (1), and two arguments in (2).

(3) *All (of) the cats are asleep.*

(4) *The cats are all asleep.*

To deal with this problem, there have been two ways to deny the existence of an additional nominal in constructions with floated quantifiers:

- (i) *The stranding approach* (Sportiche, 1988), according to which both DPs initially form a single, partitive DP. That is, (2) is claimed to be derived from (1) via movement.
- (ii) *The adverb approach* (Dowty & Brodie, 1984; Doetjes, 1997), according to which the floated quantifier is not a DP but an adverb.

In this talk, I will first present data from Hebrew floated quantifiers arguing against the stranding approach. The arguments are based on interpretive asymmetries between constructions involving floating and the partitive constructions from which they are allegedly derived. Such asymmetries are observable thanks to the fact that Hebrew floated quantifiers require an overt NP/pronominal restrictor, as demonstrated in (3)-(4).

(5) *ha- xatulim ješenim kul-*(am).*
the-cats asleep all- they
'The cats are all asleep.'

(6) *ha- xatulim axlu kol *(exad/xatul) šnej dagim.*
the-cats ate each one/cat two fish
'The cats each ate two fish.'

After presenting arguments against stranding, I will propose an analysis in Neo-Davidsonian event semantics, asserting that the two nominals are in fact DPs sharing a theta-role.

27.12.18

Jonathan Berant

Tel Aviv University

Mapping Natural Language Questions and Commands into Programs

Conversational interfaces and virtual assistants are now part of our lives due to services such as Amazon Alexa, Google Voice, Microsoft Cortana,

etc. Thus, translating natural language queries and commands into programs, also known as semantic parsing, is one of the prime challenges nowadays in natural language understanding. In this talk, I will give an overview of work in statistical semantic parsing in the last decade, starting with grammar-based methods, where programs are derived using context-free grammars (CFGs) or combinatory categorial grammars (CCGs), until neural methods that map directly from natural language to formal language without any intermediate latent structure. I will try to emphasize the challenges that arise due to the interaction between the modeling of language and the assumptions underlying the machine-learning algorithms that are used in practice.

20.12.18

Hadas Kotek
(in collaboration with **Matt Barros**)
Yale University

Ellipsis Licensing and Redundancy Reduction: A Focus-Based Approach

Sluicing is ellipsis in a question, leaving only a *Wh*-phrase overt (Ross, 1969), e.g.: *Sally called someone, but I don't know who*. Recent work on the licensing conditions of sluicing has converged on the need for a semantic approach to ellipsis licensing, where the sluiced question must be congruent to an issue or a Question under Discussion raised in the discourse (Q-equivalence; e.g., Ginzburg & Sag, 2000; AnderBois, 2011; Barros, 2014; Weir, 2014; Kotek & Barros, 2018).

We highlight several challenges to Q-equivalence, and argue instead for a return to a focus-based approach (Rooth, 1992; Romero, 1998; Fox, 2000; Merchant, 2001). We develop a proposal similar to, but improving on, Merchant (2001), where sluicing is possible provided that the antecedent and sluice have the same focus-theoretic propositional content. Under such an approach, antecedents are importantly not responsible for raising any particular issue/question themselves. We furthermore provide a generalized account going beyond sluicing to explain cases of VP-ellipsis. Finally, we entertain the idea that the theory of ellipsis licensing should be integrated into a general theory of redundancy reduction (Rooth, 1992; Tancredi, 1992) – in particular, that the semantic condition on identity in ellipsis is the same as the condition on deaccenting.

13.12.18

Roman Himmelreich
Tel Aviv University

Positional Allomorphy: Pausal vs. Context Forms in Tiberian Hebrew

According to the Masoretic script, Tiberian Hebrew exhibits positional allomorphy, whereby a word has different surface structures: the *pausal*

form – in phrase final position, and the *contextual* form – in phrase medial position (Revell, 1981, 2012; Goerwitz, 1993; Drescher, 2009).

	<i>Pausal form</i>		<i>Contextual form</i>		
a.	כּ.טָוּ	כָּתַב	כּ.טָוּ	כָּתַב	'wrote 3MS.SG'
	כּ.מָר.ט	אָמַרְתָּ	כּ.מָר.ט	אָמַרְתָּ	'said 2MS.SG'
b.	כּ.מָר.רֹוּ	שָׁמְרוּ	כּ.מֶ.רֹוּ	שָׁמְרוּ	'guarded 3PL'
	לֶ.חֻ	לָכוּ	לֶ.חֻ	לָכוּ	'go! 2MS.PL'

Vowel alternations in these data are analyzed as vowel reduction. The main problem encountered with pause vs. context allomorphy is that, in some cases, the reduced vowel resides in a stressed syllable, which is typically a prominent prosodic position that resists reduction. Earlier studies have proposed different foot-types for each phenomenon: trochaic feet for stress, and iambic feet for vowel reduction (Rappaport, 1984). This analysis employs consistent trochaic foot-type for both phenomena. An elaborated scheme of phenomenon-specific syllable weight is developed, where syllable weight is grounded in a cross-linguistically attested hierarchy of positional prominence. Specifically, weight assignment varies, depending on syllable structure, the position of the vowel in the word, the position of the word in the phrase, and the relevant phenomenon (stress vs. vowel reduction). Such phenomenon-specific syllable weight systems are found in numerous languages (Gordon, 2006).

As for the phenomenon of stress, weight assignment is sensitive only to syllable structure (CVC is heavy). Whereas for the phenomenon of vowel reduction, weight assignment is based on the following prominence hierarchy, which is grounded in perceptual and phonetic factors:

Stressed phrase-final > Word final > Stressed > Non-final unstressed

The elevated prominence of domain-final syllables stems from cross-linguistically attested phenomena of phonetic lengthening which target the boundaries of prosodic domains (Turk & Shattuck-Hufnagel, 2007). In turn, the lengthened state of vowels provides for the blocking of reduction (Barnes, 2006; Lindblom, 1963; Flemming, 2005) and finally to the emergence of pausal forms. The formal analysis to be presented will be couched in the framework of Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky, 1993/2004).

The proposed analysis provides a metrically-consistent account of Tiberian Hebrew stress and reduction patterns, while being based on cross-linguistically attested patterns of phonetic domain-final lengthening and vowel reduction.

06.12.18

Stephen Crain
(in collaboration with Iain Giblin, Cory Bill, Jiawei Shi, and Peng Zhou)
Macquarie University
*The Spontaneous **EMERGENCE** of Recursion in Child Language*

It has been claimed that recursion is a basic property of human language [1,2]. Two observations are viewed as problematic for this claim. One is the apparent failure of adult speakers of one human language (Pirahã) to implement recursion [3,4]. The second putative problem is empirical. There is a paucity of sentences with recursion in the adult input to children, and in children's productions [5,6]. A survey of parent-child interactions in CHILDES [9] revealed 107 recursive possessive phrases by caretakers; 75 of the recursive possessive phrases (70%) conformed to a simple format: <proper name>'s + <common noun>'s + name (e.g., *Sue's baby's name*). A survey of three Mandarin corpora revealed no examples of DE-recursion by caretakers [10]. A previous survey of CHILDES reported that children younger than 6 do not produce or comprehend nominal recursion, with one possessive phrase embedded inside another [6]. Moreover, prior experimental studies report that children fail to produce or comprehend sentences with nominal recursion before 6 [7].

The present study offers evidence that, by 4, both Mandarin- and English-speaking children are able to comprehend and produce sentences with nominal recursion. A Truth Value Judgment task with an elicitation component [8] was designed to maximize the felicitous use of nominal recursion. One experimenter acted out stories in front of the child participant and a puppet, played by a second experimenter. Following each story, the puppet said what it thought happened in the story. On the critical trials, the puppet produced a false statement with a 1-level possessive phrase. Whenever child participants rejected the puppet's statement, they were asked to justify their rejection by telling the puppet "what really happened in the story". The test trials were such that a felicitous justification could be formed by embedding an additional possessive phrase inside the possessive phrase that had been produced by the puppet (e.g., Puppet: *The pirate's biscuit was stolen*. Child: *No, the pirate's frog's biscuit was stolen.*). The corresponding recursive expressions in Mandarin are formed by self-embedding the modification marker DE (e.g., *haidao de qingwa de binggan* 'pirate DE frog DE biscuit').

Every English- and Mandarin-speaking child participant in the present study evinced understanding of sentences with nominal recursion. Child participants consistently rejected the puppet's false statements on the test trials (Mandarin 98%; English 97%). More importantly, twenty-nine of the 30 4-year old Mandarin-speaking child participants produced at least one sentence with recursion, and 24 produced 3 or 4. Twenty-one of the 26 3- to 5-year-old English-speaking children produced at least 1 sentence with nominal recursion, and 16 produced 3 or 4. In total, 95 sentences with

nominal recursion were elicited from Mandarin-speaking children and 70 were elicited from English-speaking children. A control group of 33 Mandarin-speaking adults produced 125 sentences with nominal recursion (95% of test trials). To conclude, although both children and adults tend to avoid nominal recursive structures in their spontaneous productions, both children and adults readily produced recursive structures in the present experiment, without modeling. By extension, even if adult speakers of a particular language choose not to implement recursion at all, this would be unlikely to prevent child language learners from incorporating recursive structures into their grammars, and it is highly likely that children would produce them in appropriate contexts. The findings of the present study therefore blunt the force of the two main arguments against the claim that recursion is a basic property of human language.

References and Searches

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- [8] Crain, S., & R. Thornton. (1998). *Investigations in Universal Grammar: A Guide to Research on the Acquisition of Syntax and Semantics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- [9] Fifty-five English corpora from the CHILDES database (approximately 3.1 million utterances). Thirty-five of these corpora contained no instances of nominal recursion.
- [10] Three Mandarin corpora in CHILDES database: Zhou 1, Zhou 2, and Zhou 3.

29.11.18

David Gil
Max Planck Institute
Who Is Your Name?

Why does Indonesian ask *nama siapa?* ('name who'), rather than *What is your name?* as in English? English speakers are often puzzled by the Indonesian construction, believing that since names are inanimate, *what* should be used. Conversely, Indonesian speakers are often surprised to learn that English uses *what*, arguing that since names refer to people, it should be *who*. This paper poses the question whether the different choice of *Wh*-words in Indonesian and English reflects some more fundamental property distinguishing between the two languages, or whether it is a superficial feature without deeper typological ramifications. The answer that is provided is: a combination of both.

The first part of this paper presents the results of an ongoing world-wide cross-linguistic survey examining the choice of *Wh*-word in "What is your name?" questions, covering over 850 languages. The results show that the Indonesian *who* construction represents a cross-linguistically widespread option, spanning a wide range of seemingly typologically diverse languages, including, among others, Zulu, Amharic, Tsez, Mongolian, Dani, Tahitian, and Squamish. Moreover, the presence of areal patterning evident in the map shows that the choice of *Wh*-word is a feature that is readily borrowed across languages of different genealogical and typological groups. Thus, in large part, Indonesian uses *who* because it is a typical Insular Southeast Asian language, while English uses "What is your name?" because it is a run-of-the-mill Western European language.

However, the second part of this paper shows that in spite of such areal patterning, the choice of *Wh*-word does indeed also reflect deeper aspects of morphosyntactic organization. The choice between *who* and *what* is shown to correlate with the results of an in-progress cross-linguistic experiment on over 60 languages world-wide measuring the extent to which the assignment of thematic roles are grammaticalized. Specifically, *what* languages tend to exhibit more grammaticalization of thematic role assignment than *who* languages. Thus, while in English, *what* and *your name* are related via thematic role assignment, in Indonesian, *nama* and *siapa* are connected through a looser relationship of association.

The choice of *Wh*-word in "What is your name?" questions is thus partly arbitrary, reflecting the outcome of diachronic processes of language contact and borrowing, and partly principled, reflecting the degree of grammaticalization of thematic role assignment in the grammar. This case study underscores the way in which a single linguistic phenomenon may simultaneously reflect an ontologically heterogeneous potpourri of factors, some diachronic, others synchronic – there can be no one single story explaining everything.

22.11.18

Diane Lillo-Martin

University of Connecticut

American Sign Language Pronouns and Their Acquisition

Pointing is a ubiquitous activity that humans engage in from a very young age. For this reason, the analyses of index-finger pointing in sign languages and the development of these points in signing children has been a matter of great interest and some controversy. Traditionally, pointing is interpreted as pronominal in sign languages such as American Sign Language (ASL); however, differences are noted between pointing signs and pronouns, which have led some to consider the signs to be a mixture of linguistic and gestural. Here we report new data on asymmetries in the emergence of pointing in deaf signing children, hearing bimodal bilingual children, and hearing non-signers. These data show that children do not treat all points the same, and they contribute to reconsideration of the analysis of pointing and its role in the pronominal system of ASL.

15.11.18

Flóra Lili Donáti

Université Paris 8 - SFL, CNRS

A Non-Unified Account of Obligatory "Focused" Expressions in Hungarian

In Hungarian, *wh*-words, *only*-phrases and downward-entailing (DE) expressions must move to the preverbal Focus position. Although many aspects of this position were thoroughly investigated in the literature, a detailed analysis of the above constituents and their relation to this position seems to be lacking. This paper proposes a non-unified analysis: For *wh*-phrases, I argue that they move because of the *Wh*-Criterion (Rizzi, 1997), while the movement of *only*-phrases and DE expressions is triggered by their inherent negativity.

08.11.18

Kriszta Szendroi

(in collaboration with Zoe Belk and Lily Kahn)

University College London

No Case for Case (or Gender) in Stamford Hill Hasidic Yiddish

Yiddish was the everyday language spoken by most Central and East European Jews during the last millennium. As a result of the extreme loss of speakers during the Holocaust, subsequent geographic dispersal, and lack of institutional support, Yiddish is now an endangered language. Yet it continues to be a native and daily language for Haredi (strictly Orthodox) Jews, who live in close-knit communities worldwide. We have conducted the first study of the linguistic characteristics of the Yiddish spoken in the community in London's Stamford Hill. In this paper, we defend the claim

that current-day Stamford Hill Hasidic (SHH) Yiddish has no notion of case and gender. Indeed, as can be expected in a VO language with no morphological case (e.g., Neeleman and Weerman, 1999), Stamford Hill Yiddish speakers no longer allow adverbial scrambling or argument-over-argument scrambling. Thus we found evidence for implicational syntactic change. We also demonstrate that while the case and gender system of the spoken medium was already beginning to undergo morphological syncretism, case and gender distinctions were clearly present in the mental grammar of both Hasidic and non-Hasidic speakers of the relevant Yiddish dialects pre-World War II. We conclude the paper by identifying some of the language-internal, sociolinguistic, and historical factors that have contributed to such rapid and pervasive language change. We make the case for Hasidic Yiddish being recognised as a distinct variety of Yiddish, with substantially different typological features, which should be studied in more detail on its own right.

01.11.18

Ruti Bardenstein

Tel Aviv University

Grammaticalization Paths of Rectification Constructions

Rectification constructions are form/function associations (constructions in the sense of Goldberg, 1995) which include a rejection of an accessible claim/assumption X (=satellite) and a substitutive alternative claim Y (=nucleus), optionally mediated by an explicit connector of substitution. For example, the '*not X, but Y*' rectification construction includes an explicit satellite ('*not X*'), a nucleus ('*Y*') and an explicit connector of substitution ('*but*').

I will first introduce the semantic, syntactic, and prosodic components of rectification constructions in general. I will then present 17 different rectification constructions, dividing them up according to their evolutionary point of departure. Finally, I will offer a grammaticalization path for each rectification construction, relying on a diachronic analysis.

25.10.18

Kate Mesh and Hope Morgan

University of Haifa

Language from Gesture: Case Studies from Kenya and Mexico

It is widely assumed that the gestures used in day-to-day conversations become the raw material for the creation of new words in sign languages (e.g., Janzen & Shaffer, 2002; Wilcox, 2004; de Vos, 2012). However, there are very few accounts of this transmission. It is not known which gestures are more likely to enter a sign language, for example. Are all of the distinct, unambiguous, and portable gestures (emblems) used by hearing people

recruited into a sign language? Or do some emblems retain their status as gestures? Understandably, most studies tend to start from the point of view of the sign language and work backwards to locate the etymological roots in hearing gestures (e.g., Marsaja, 2008; Nyst, 2007). At the same time, non-grammaticalized gestures used by deaf signers may be overlooked because they are not considered part of the sign language. Here we present two lines of research that investigate how gestures are recruited for use in sign languages.

*Emblems and the KSL Lexicon:
Comparing Datasets from Gesturers and Signers*
Hope Morgan

The project described in this talk widens the scope of investigation to compare both domains – hearing gesture and deaf signing – in one particular ethnic group, the Luo of western Kenya. This project compares a study describing 71 gestures collected in western Kenya in 1970-72 from four ethnic groups (Creider, 1977) with the author's own corpus of 30+ hours of video with 25 Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) signers (Morgan fieldwork, 2011-2012) and the KSL Lexical Database (Morgan 2017).

Results show that in everyday interactions, nothing from the gestural repertoire is lost, though when gestures become signs, they become more specific semantically and are subject to syntactic and phonotactic constraints. Yet not all gestures turn into signs. Only 33 out of 53 Luo gestures listed by Creider have a lexical counterpart. For those that are lexicalized, further grammaticalization can occur, as demonstrated in the case of a gesture glossed as "no more, with disastrous implication", which has diverged in both form and meaning into two common KSL signs: the perfective FINISH and the intensifier HARASH.

Overall, this study reveals that patterns of grammaticalization in sign languages reach into the gestural substrate and suggest that a full account of sign language origins should involve an analysis of hearing gesture.

*Gestural Analogues and the Origins of Signs
in San Juan Quiahije Chatino Sign Language*
Kate Mesh

The projects presented here investigate gestural analogues – signs that share their form with conventional gestures – in San Juan Quiahije Chatino Sign Language (SJQCSL), a language emerging in an indigenous community in southern Mexico.

The first study, performed in collaboration with Dr. Lynn Hou (University of California, Santa Barbara), considers five such gestural analogues with negative meanings (Mesh & Hou, *under review*). We find that the gesturers and signers map a core set of negative meanings to the five forms. However, deaf signers alone have begun to map new meanings to the forms, as well. We propose that the changes introduced by the deaf signers may result from how they learn the meaning of the analogues, since they receive the gestures in the absence of the speech that often accompanies them.

A second study, performed in the same community, investigates which local pointing practices are integrated into SJQCSL (Mesh, 2017). Speakers in Mesoamerica share the practice of raising the height of the pointing arm to reflect the distance of the target – the higher the arm, the farther away the target, with a near-vertical point used to indicate the farthest targets (Levinson, 2003). SJQCSL Signers share the “up is far” principle, but they do not share speakers’ additional distance-marking practices, including pointing with extended arm and an open handshape. The divergence in signers’ and gesturers’ pointing forms may be due to the fact that arm extension and handshape already bear a distinct set of meanings in SJQCSL.

The findings from these combined studies suggest that signers do not simply “adopt” gestures into their languages wholesale. Rather, signers recruit features of gestures that are accessible to them, and adapt these features as they integrate them into emerging phonological, morphological, and syntactic systems.

References

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