Pragmatic Indecision

Chris Kennedy
The University of Chicago

Vague predicates are obligatorily tolerant (Wright 1973). For example, the positive form gradable adjective 'long' cannot be used to draw a sharp distinction, even when the facts of the context of utterance and the semantic properties of the sentence in which it occurs otherwise conspire to make such uses possible: in a context in which there are exactly two salient objects A and B, which are clearly but only slightly different in length, it is infelicitous to use "the long one" to refer to the longer of the two; we must say "the longer one." This despite the fact that the presuppositions of the definite article and the lexical semantic features of 'long' that underwrite a compositional account of the comparative ought to allow for such a use. In this talk, I will do three things. First, I will argue that no existing account of vagueness — neither epistemic nor expressivist nor contextual nor semantic nor cognitive nor distributional — provides a satisfactory explanation for why tolerance persists in examples like the one above. Second, I will show that attempts to eliminate the challenge presented by these kinds of examples through appeal to a grammatical decomposition of positive form adjectives into a non-vague root and a vague "pos" morpheme are also unsatisfactory, because they fail to generalize to other kinds of examples that manifest exactly the same behavior but cannot plausibly be analyzed in this way. And finally, I will outline an alternative, pragmatic account of vagueness, in which application of a vague predicate constitutes a "vote" for a particular resolution of linguistic indeterminacy, and tolerance emerges from a normative constraint treating such votes as subject to principles of social choice. This account is consistent with a transparent compositional relation between positive and comparative (in which the latter is derived from the former), and generalizes to non-adjectival cases of vagueness as well.

Reducing Uncertainty in Contact-induced Linguistic Change:
A case study of Cantonese

Ming Xiang
The University of Chicago

Language change could arise when the younger generation of speakers do not fully replicate the linguistic patterns produced by the older generation. The statistical learning literature has shown that children (and adults too under some conditions) tend to regularize the statistical patterns in their input, i.e. they reduce the amount of variation in the input data (Hudson Kam & Newport 2009). From the information-theoretic perspective, this process reflects the reduction of uncertainty (entropy) in the data. The regularization process over multiple generations has also been formalized using Bayesian models (Reali and Griffiths 2009). These studies, however, were based on artificial language learning paradigms, and the question remains whether and how similar regularization processes could arise in natural languages. In this talk I will present some recent work that investigates word order changes in Cantonese in the last 60 years. Two groups of native Cantonese speakers (18-70 years old, highly proficient speakers) were examined, one from Guangzhou and the other one from Hong Kong. Both Cantonese-speaking communities are in close contact with Mandarin Chinese, but the two communities also have substantial differences in their linguistic experiences and linguistic attitudes. Production data collected on ditransitive constructions revealed regularization patterns in Cantonese across generations in both communities, and crucially, this result is not an assimilation to the Mandarin patterns. A control group of Mandarin speakers in Beijing showed no changes in Mandarin on the same task. These results suggest that the effect of reducing uncertainty/variation is specific to bilingual/multilingual environments. I will also show some preliminary data that found the opposite pattern: in some situations Cantonese speakers also introduced more variants into their language, instead of reducing variants. I tentatively suggest that increasing variation could also be interpreted as uncertainty reduction if we distinguish speaker (production) oriented uncertainty vs. listener (comprehension) oriented uncertainty. Finally, if time allows, I will present a separate set of experiments, which suggest that it is likely the bilingual production pressure, instead of the tracking/encoding of the bilingual input, that led to the observed regualization behavior.

Suggestive Interrogatives

Itamar Francez
The University of Chicago

English and Hebrew formally mark *why* interrogatives that have directive, rather than inquisitive, sentential force, as in (1)

(1) Why don't you turn left at the right, please.

Suggestive interrogatives are subject to some peculiar descriptive generalizations. For example, they can only be negative, but cannot feature NPIs or concord items. I argue that they should be analyzed as a clause type, that their directive force is therefore conventional. I propose that an analysis on which they are not why-interrogatives with a negative radical, but rather why-not interrogatives with a positive subjunctive radical, explains the descriptive generalizations, both in English and in Hebrew.

**Clause size and modal flavor in the grammar of attitude reports:
A view from Mandarin *xiang* and beyond**

Thomas Grano
Indiana University

Cross-linguistically, complements to 'think'/'believe' verbs tend to resemble declarative main clauses whereas complements to 'want' tend to be structurally smaller. Mandarin Chinese illustrates this trend in a particularly striking way because it has a mental attitude verb 想 *xiǎng* that can be used to report both beliefs and desires, with a syntactic restriction: when the verb combines with a full CP, it reports a belief, whereas when it combines with a *v*P, it reports a desire. In this talk, I propose to relate this sort of phenomenon to an independent but similar cross-linguistic fact about modality: namely, epistemic modals combine with tensed complements whereas root modals combine with structurally smaller complements that do not include tense. Toward a unified account of the attitude facts and the modality facts, I propose that epistemic modals and belief predicates operate on world descriptions (i.e., propositions), which are encoded by full CPs, whereas root modals and desire predicates operate on temporally truncated, future-oriented situation descriptions, encoded by smaller pieces of structure. The upshot is that at least some of the grammar of mental attitude reports falls out from a more general grammar of modality, broadly construed.

On the expressive origins of expletive infixes

Alan C. L. Yu
The University of Chicago

Expletive infixes (e.g., fan-bloody-tastic in English or *ke1-mat1gwai2-si6me1* '*cashmere* 茄士咩 + *mat1gwai2*' 乜鬼 in Cantonese) are unique among infixes typologically not only because the morphemes being infixed are free morphemes, but their distributions are much more variable than grammatical infixes (e.g., they can appear inside a wide range of grammatical categories). These properties have led some to argue that they are not infixes at all. In this talk, I argue that expletive infixes may share with grammatical infixes in terms of their prosodic subcategorization requirements. Nonetheless, their unique distribution can be better understood when their expressive origins are taken into account.

Internal asymmetry of disyllabic coordinative verbs in Mandarin and an explanation

Dun Deng
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

We set four conditions to choose 400 disyllabic coordinative verbs in Mandarin Chinese (represented as XY) to investigate the (a)symmetry of X and Y. An annotation scheme is designed where semantic roles and lexical semantic features of the objects taken by X, Y and XY for all the 400 XYs are annotated. For each XY, after comparing the annotated results, we show that an H can be identified from X and Y, which is more like XY in terms of the annotated features of the objects. This means that the two roots X and Y inside each of the 400 XYs have unequal status in determining what kind of objects the XY takes and thus are asymmetrical. Based on statistical analyses of the annotation results, we find a generalization on the strategy of H identification: When the objects of X and those of Y have different numbers of semantic roles, the one whose objects have fewer semantic roles is more likely to be chosen as H. When the objects of X and those of Y have the same semantic roles, the identification of H is correlated with the similarity between the lexical semantics of X and that of Y. For an XY whose X and Y are more dissimilar in lexical semantics, the root with fewer annotated lexical semantic features is more likely to be identified as H. We provide an account for the generalization from the perspective of semantic composition, which is based on the fact that XYs came from coordinative phrases in the history. Our study shows that symmetry based on syllable numbers of constituents and asymmetry based on syntax and semantics of constituents often coexist in the language, whose analysis is crucial for grammatical research and should be taken care of with great caution.

A Semantic Typology of Completives

Anqi Zhang
Nanjing University

In Mandarin, it has been claimed that Mandarin lacks inherent bare transitive accomplishment verbs. To entail event culmination, a resultative verbal compound (RVC) construction, such as *xiu-hao* 'fix good', can be used instead of bare verbs. Among these resultative markers, a special subclass consisting of members such as *wan* 'finish', *diao* 'drop', *hao* 'good', *cheng* 'succeed' have been singled out as general completive markers. While in many situations these completive markers can be used more or less synonymously, they nevertheless exhibit subtle differences in their syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic distributions. Although these differences have been described quite extensively in the descriptive linguistic literature, they have not been studied quite well in formal semantics.

A recent formal semantic study by Gu (2023) examines the semantic difference between *wan* 'finish' and *diao* 'drop' and claims that these two are maximizers in the time domain and the individual domain respectively, and that *wan* 'finish' denotes termination, while *diao* 'drop' denotes true culmination maximalizing the theme. However, her paper has mostly focused on consumption verbs, and the semantic effects of other completive markers have yet to be explained further.

Mostly agreeing with Gu's (2023) generalization, this paper modifies and modifies her analysis towards other completive markers. This paper sets up a preliminary framework of the semantic typology of completive markers in Mandarin, by offering a finer examination of the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic distributions of these markers. It shows that Mandarin completive markers can be formally classified by factors such as domains, degrees of completion, directions of change, and event participants measured against. Besides the time domain and the individual domain, this paper discovers that the domain of degrees and the domain of world variables are also possible for the semantics of completives.

Removing variable telicity with Mandarin *le*

Yenan Sun (The Chinese University of Hong Kong)
Lawrence Yam-Leung Cheung (The Chinese University of Hong Kong)
Jackie Yan-Ki Lai (City University of Hong Kong)

This paper supports the connection between the referentiality of objects and the variable telicity of accomplishments (Pinõn 2008; Kennedy 2012; Zhang 2020) by demonstrating that there is a telicity marker in Mandarin (telic *-le*), that exactly selects the class of accomplishments whose non-culminating potential is introduced by referential objects. We propose the first formal semantic analysis of telic *-le*, whereby the marker removes this non-culminating potential by encoding the maximal affectedness of the theme on the scale introduced by a covert partitive operator $PART_{inc}$, building on Kennedy (2012) and Zhang (2020). The proposed analysis can account for the puzzling referentiality constraint of telic *-le* and its (sometimes optional) semantic effects. Moreover, the current results lend further support to the claim that telicity markers with apparently similar semantic contributions in Mandarin can have different lexical semantics (as in Gu 2022, Luo and Zhang 2020), and demonstrate that the referentiality of Mandarin objects plays a role in a wider range of non-culminating accomplishments than originally proposed in Zhang (2018, 2020).

Non-agreeing resumptive pronouns in imperatives

Xuetong Yuan (University of Connecticut)
Ka-Fai Yip (Yale University)

Imperative clauses are identified as the sentential clause type which is typically used for directive speech acts, including canonical and surrogate imperatives (i.e. exhortatives) (Potsdam 1996; Portner 2007; Zanuttini 2008; Zanuttini, Pak, and Portner 2012; Pak, Portner and Zanuttini 2022; Kaufmann 2012; Alcazar and Saltarelli 2014; Liao and Wang 2022, i.a.). It is well known that imperatives in Mandarin Chinese are not necessarily morphosyntactically-marked (except prohibitive negation, Yuan 1993; also Liao and Wang 2022 for Taiwan Southern Min). This study reports a morpho-syntactic phenomenon from Mandarin which is particularly sensitive to imperatives. The core data comes from non-agreeing resumptive pronouns (NRPs) in Mandarin Chinese (first reported by Xu 1999): an NRP is strongly preferred when an object is topicalized in an imperative. We demonstrate that the NRP in Mandarin are licensed by imperative clauses/performatively used modal contexts. Informed by the distribution of NRPs in Mandarin, we propose that the licensing conditions of NRPs in Mandarin can be accounted by if we assume that canonical and surrogate imperatives are modalized propositions (Kaufmann 2012). We argue that NRPs can be viewed as markers of (canonical and surrogate) imperative clauses in Mandarin Chinese, which offers support for an implicit modal approach to imperatives. Lastly, NRPs are also required in imperative clauses with topicalized objects in other Sinitic languages such as Cantonese and Shanghainese (though they have a wider distribution than Mandarin, Xu 1999; Man 1998; Yip and Ahenkorah 2023). We also discuss the distribution of NRPs in Cantonese and Shanghainese and present preliminary generalizations.