NOTA Conference 2: The Nature of the Objects of Thought and Assertions
Room 2115, Building 65, Avenue Campus
University of Southampton

September the 11th

9:30 – 11:00   Manuel García-Carpintero – A Metasemantic Argument against Assessment-Relativism

11:00 – 11:30 Coffee Break

11:30 – 13:00 María José Frápolli – Assertables and Thinkables. The Grounding Layer of Human Rationality

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch Break

14:00 – 15:30 John Collins – Sentence Meanings & Propositions: A Problem and a Solution

15:30 – 16:00 Coffee Break

16:00 – 17:30 Kristina Liefke – Mnemic meaning: The semantics of episodic representations

September the 12th

9:30 – 11:00   Justin D'Ambrosio – The Meaning of 'Means'

11:00 – 11:30 Coffee Break

11:30 – 13:00 Laura Delgado – How to Be a Multipropositionalist

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch Break

14:00 – 15:30 Peter Hanks – Stalnaker on Propositions

15:30 – 16:00 Coffee break

16:00 – 17:30 Bryan Pickel – Propositions as Familiar Objects

Abstracts

Manuel García-Carpintero – A Metasemantic Argument against Assessment-Relativism

In his influential "Does Tense Logic Rest upon a Mistake?", Evans made an important distinction between (in more recent terminology) the "non-indexical contextualism" defended by Kölbel and others, and the "assessment relativism" advocated by MacFarlane and others. The former is a view about propositions according to which one and the same proposition might be true relative to a standard of taste and false relative to another, the way one and the same proposition might be true "at" a possible world and false at another. The latter is a view on which it is the appraisal of a representational act made vis-à-vis a proposition (a "use" of a proposition, as he puts it) that may change: while an assertion might meet a truth norm when evaluated relative to the standard prevailing in the context in which it is made, it may come to be false, and hence wrong, when evaluated from another – and should accordingly be retracted. Evans argues that this is importantly different from NIC and more difficult to motivate. I'll elaborate on this by using metasemantic considerations. Thus understood, Evans' point doesn't question the rationality of particular moves in an assertoric practice legitimized by assessment relativism, but rather the rationality of such a practice itself – whether the norms the view advances might come to be enforced by rational beings. MacFarlane (2014, 306-319) and Dinges (2017) have addressed the sort of metasemantic objections I'll raise; the paper will also critically engage with them.

María José Frápolli – Assertables and Thinkables. The Grounding Layer of Human Rationality

Semantics is the "soft underbelly" of metaphysics and epistemology. A weak semantics obstructs the development of good philosophy, and the reductionist approach characteristic of some strands of analytic philosophy has hindered a proper understanding of what makes us human. We are, above all, producers and consumers of reasons—propositions advanced in support of or against other propositions. The web of reasons adduced, assumed, and rejected constitutes the very fabric of human rational life.
In this talk, I will argue that propositions, as abstract entities, can be fully characterised by their individuation and identification criteria. Following Frege, I will show that different scientific purposes call for different kinds of abstract entities to accompany sentences. To this end, I will examine the validity of the principle of compositionality and contrast it with principles that define an inferentialist approach to the content of linguistic and mental acts. My proposal is to rethink the semantic paradigm that has shaped the surface of much analytic philosophy over the past century and into the present.

John Collins – Sentence Meanings & Propositions: A Problem and a Solution

Propositions are asked to satisfy various desiderata. My focus will be on the idea that propositions should specify (more or less, some way or other), the meanings of declarative sentences. The paper will advance an argument that this condition cannot be plausibly satisfied. At best, sentence meanings provide constraints on the propositions they might be apt to express.

In light of this argument, it will be suggested that propositions are artefacts of our generalisations, which have the same status as appeals to languages, such as English or Basque.

Kristina Liefke – Mnemic meaning: The semantics of episodic representations

'Montague's thesis' (Bach, 1986) holds that natural languages can be described as interpreted formal systems. Its extension to other representational media (like pictures and film) claims that all public, systematic, and conventional representations can be described as interpreted formal systems (Greenberg, 2011). My talk argues that Montague's thesis can be further extended to mental representations — esp. to episodic memory representations (see Addis, 2020; Michaelian, 2016). This argument is based on the observation that mnemic and pictorial representations share many semantic properties (incl. reference, truth/accuracy, compositionality, perspectivity). As a result, the familiar tools from picture semantics (e.g. possible worlds, truth-conditions, geometrical projection) can be fruitfully applied to mnemic representations. My talk illustrates the fruitfulness of this application by showing how these tools make precise existing views and concepts from the memory sciences (e.g. mnemic contents, intentional objects, episodic recombination). Inversely, it shows how memory research can enrich state-of-the-art picture semantics (e.g. by demonstrating the importance of metarepresentation, and by identifying new accuracy concepts).

Justin D'Ambrosio – The Meaning of 'Means'

In this paper I defend a novel semantics for the verb 'means,' as it is used to specify the meanings of natural language expressions. On the view I defend—which I call the type polymorphism view— the type of the complement of 'means' shifts to match the type of the expression whose meaning it is used to specify. This view of the meaning of 'means' has important consequences for the foundations of semantics. In particular, proponents of higher-order approaches to natural language semantics—who state their semantic theories in a higher-order metalanguage—can and should see themselves as stating their semantic theories using the verb 'means.' But this approach is not available to proponents of first-order, model-theoretic approaches to semantic theorizing. As a consequence, only higher-order approaches can be seen as offering theories of meaning; the subject-matter of first-order theories is at best an approximation to meaning, and at worst something else entirely.

Laura Delgado – How to Be a Multipropositionalist

I defend multipropositionalism (MP)—the view that sentences can express multiple propositions in a single context— because it explains well several phenomena of natural language that are very common in everyday conversation. This talk defends multipropositionalism against a multicontextualist alternative according to which apparent cases of multiplicity of meaning really involve multiple contexts. Such view can be seen as a variant of MP, with a focus on utterances expressing many propositions. For example, von Fintel and Gillies (2011) argue that if utterances take place against a cloud of admissible contexts (rather than just one) then such utterances put

into play sets of propositions (also Caie (forthcoming)). But similar appeal to multiple contexts is used to argue that sentences only express one content per context (Andjelković and Williamson 2000), thus preserving a sort of monopropositionalism. I will try to show that some multicontextualist views are unsatisfactory on account of being artificial or explanatorily inert, since the fine-grained contexts postulated fail to play the role in content determination that (ordinarily conceived) contexts usually play. However, some implementations of a multicontextualist technique may be useful in preserving standard compositionality, or avoiding some truth-value multiplicity.

Peter Hanks – Stalnaker on Propositions

Frege conceived of propositions as a Platonic repository of abstract, truth-evaluable representations, which serve as a source of representational properties for thought and speech. For Russell, propositions are the objects of our thoughts and utterances - they are what we represent in thought and speech - and he accordingly identified propositions with worldly facts and events On the act-type theory, propositions are merely classificatory devices for characterizing and individuating mental states and speech acts, which serve no important role in the explanation of intentionality. Many contemporary theories about the nature of propositions can be usefully seen as falling into one of these categories: Fregean, Russellian, or classificatory. One tricky case is Stalnaker's theory of propositions. Stalnaker thinks of propositions as the "objective information" that is "contained or conveyed" by intentional mental states. Although his view can be hard to pin down, I'll argue that this is a version of the Russellian approach. I'll also challenge some alleged benefits of Stalnaker's theory concerning its neutrality about the form of representation and its compatibility with the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction.

Bryan Pickel – Propositions as Familiar Objects

Propositions—the things we think and say—are familiar objects. In ordinary practice, we characterise what agents think and say. These characterisations are supported by a robust network or "tangle" of evidence. Propositions also play various theoretical roles in explaining speech and action. We will explore the implications of this double role for propositions for (i) skepticism about propositions; (ii) the problem of multiple reductions; and (iii) higher-order accounts of propositions.