

Theme 3: Social Meaning & Semantics/Pragmatics

Thursday, 18 February 2021

13:55-14:00	Welcome
14:00-15:00	Elin McCready: Enriched dogwhistles and ideologies (11pm JST) <i>10 min break</i>
15:10-16:10	Roland Mühlenbernd: Politeness and Reputation <i>10 min break</i>
16:20-17:20	David Pietraszewski: Understanding oppressive speech through the lens of humans' evolved coalitional psychology <i>10 min break</i>
17:30-18:30	Julia Zakkou & Alexander Dinges: On Deniability <i>10 min break</i>
18:40-19:40	Eric Swanson: If You See Something, Say Something: On the Dynamics of Deniable Possibility Raising (11:30 am EST)
19:40-20:15	Optional round-table discussion

Friday, 19 February 2021

13:55-14:00	Welcome
14:00-15:00	Uli Sauerland: The division of socio-emotive and logical meaning from the meaning first perspective <i>10 min break</i>
15:10-16:10	Anton Benz: Precision and Vagueness: Social meaning in Bayesian games <i>10 min break</i>
16:20-17:20	Stephanie Solt, Andrea Beltrama & Heather Burnett: On the social meaning of (im)precision in context <i>10 min break</i>
17:30-18:30	Michael Franke & Chris Cummins: Modeling manipulative language use <i>10 min break</i>
18:40-19:40	Justin Khoo: Code words and community norms (12:40 pm EST)
19:40-20:15	Optional round-table discussion

ABSTRACTS: DAY 1

Enriched dogwhistles and ideologies

ELIN MCCREADY (Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo)

2 pm CET — 11:00 pm JST

Henderson and McCready (2018,i.a.) propose a classification of dogwhistles into two types: identifying dogwhistles, which indicate aspects of the speaker’s social persona, and enriching dogwhistles, which also alter the truth-conditional content of the sentence including the dogwhistle. This talk explores the mechanism of enrichment, proposing that recognition of the persona of the speaker produces ideologically mediated inferences about the speaker’s attitudes, which in turn induce conclusions about the content they intend to communicate.

Politeness and Reputation

ROLAND MÜHLENBERND (ZAS Berlin)

3:10 pm CET

Politeness in conversation is a fascinating aspect of human interaction that directly interfaces language use and human social behavior more generally. We show how game theory, as a higher-order theory of behavior, can provide the tools to understand and model polite behavior. We model and study how the polite communications of thanking and apologizing impact two different types of an agent’s social image: perceived warmth and perceived competence. Our analysis shows that in a society of agents who value status-related traits over reciprocity-related traits, both the less and the more polite strategies are maintained in cycles of cultural-evolutionary change.

Understanding oppressive speech through the lens of humans’ evolved coalitional psychology

DAVID PIETRASZEWSKI (Max Planck Institute, Berlin)

4:20 pm CET

Humans have an evolved psychology that operates with great precision but without our conscious awareness. This talk will explore how the basic information-processing requirements of one such element of our evolved psychology—our ability to represent and keep track of group relationships—provides novel insights into what, precisely, hateful and oppressive speech is doing to the minds of the sender, receiver, and bystanders. The pragmatics of oppressive speech, in other words, are a window into how our minds represent group conflict, and vice versa.

On Deniability

JULIA ZAKKOU (Bielefeld University) & ALEXANDER DINGES (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg)

5:30 pm CET

The notion of deniability has been variously invoked to explain why speakers choose to speak indirectly, why they use so-called “code words”, how lying differs from misleading and why there might be moral differences between the two, or to mark differences in how strongly a speaker is committed to the contents she communicates. Surprisingly little has been said about what deniability is. Our paper addresses this neglected issue, thereby shedding novel light on the

explanatory roles deniability can play.

If You See Something, Say Something: On the Dynamics of Deniable Possibility Raising

ERIC SWANSON (University of Michigan)

6:40 pm CET — 12:40 pm EST

Many speech acts raise the possibility that p in ways that are compatible with straightforwardly denying that p , for example by asserting that not p . This paper describes the dynamics of such speech acts and develops hypotheses about their social and political import.

ABSTRACTS: DAY 2

The division of socio-emotive and logical meaning from the meaning first perspective

ULI SAUERLAND (ZAS Berlin)

2:00 pm CET

Different categories of social and expressive meaning share a number of properties: projection, immediacy, and identity irrelevance. Why do they differ from logical meaning in this respect? I present a proposal based on the Meaning First view of Sauerland & Alexiadou (2020, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.571295).

Precision and Vagueness: Social meaning in Bayesian games

ANTON BENZ (ZAS Berlin)

3:10 pm CET

We present a case study on the use of precise vs. rounded numerals as a means for communicating social meaning. We consider a simple scenario in which speakers have to decide between stating the time as '7.58', '8', 'about 8', or 'exactly 8' when the true time is 7.58 or 8.00. We assume that the strategies depend on the speaker's level of competence (low/high) and the addressee's requirements on precision (low/high). We model the scenario as a problem of strategic communication in which both interlocutors have a joint preference for communicating the exact time whenever the hearer needs high precision, and low costs for communication. We set up a signalling game with clarification requests (Benz 2012). The pure equilibria of this game predict different communicative strategies that depend on the prior probabilities of speaker competence and the addressee's need for precision. Here, we consider two contexts. (Casual): the probability of the hearer requiring high precision and the speaker having high competence is low; and (Professional): here the respective probabilities are high. We will see that it is optimal for the speaker to always produce '8' in the casual context, and to produce exact expressions in the professional context. This is a preparation for the main issue: explicating the socio-linguistic notions of register, indexical meaning, and social meaning of signals. We consider a population with two different registers corresponding to optimal strategies in casual and professional contexts. If strategies can naturally intrude from one context into another, and if this in turn depends on the speaker's type, then approximate and exact signals can become indices of speaker type, and, thereby, become devices for intentionally communicating ones type.

On the social meaning of (im)precision in context

STEPHANIE SOLT(ZAS Berlin), ANDREA BELTRAMA (University of Pennsylvania) & HEATHER BURNETT(Université de Paris)
4:20 pm CET

TBA

Modeling manipulative language use

MICHAEL FRANKE (Osnabrück University) & CHRIS CUMMINS (University of Edinburgh)
5:30 pm CET

Linguistic theories of language use have focused very strongly on cooperative exchange of useful information. This neglects the fact that language is often used to manipulate opinions of an audience in subtle ways. We therefore propose an extension of recently popular probabilistic pragmatic models, couched in the Rational Speech Act framework, to also include an argumentative dimension. Drawing on earlier work on argumentative language use (Ducrot, 1973; Anscombe & Ducrot, 1983; Merin, 1999), we integrate a notion of argument strength derived from statistical measures of observational evidence into a model of the speaker's utterance choice.

Code words and community norms

JUSTIN KHOO (MIT)
6:40 pm CET — 12:40 pm EST

Community norms may limit promotion of certain types of racist or sexist policies or views by introducing social costs to their implementation and expression. But holding people accountable to such norms is costly as well; misapplying the norms can lead to sanctions by way of second-order community norms. I argue that coded speech is a way of exploiting the costs of community norm-enforcement—by creating unclarity regarding whether an action violates the norm, the actor can violate the norm while avoiding accountability to it. I argue that this way of thinking about coded speech motivates strong constraints on how it should be understood semantically and pragmatically and discuss the upshots for various theories.