

Keeping world and will apart: A discourse-based semantics for imperatives

Christopher Potts
UMass Amherst

Over time, and especially since the advent of dynamic theories of interpretation, linguistic semanticists have taken on more and more of speech act theory. With declarative sentence meanings as context-change potentials, for instance, assertive illocutionary force and propositional semantic content are unified. Dynamic theories of questions similarly blur the line between content and discourse effect (Groenendijk 1999). In many respects, these are positive developments. The question is how to square them with the fact that illocutionary force and semantic content are linguistically and conceptually distinct (Stalnaker 1999). The overarching goal of this talk is to describe how this distinction can be maintained in the setting of a model-theoretic semantics. I pay particular attention to imperatives and other constructions with a typically command-like force.

Seegerberg (1990) strives “to keep world and will apart” (p. 206): imperative force is distinct from propositional content. Building on joint work with James Isaacs (itself built on work by Searle (1969), Han (1998), Lascarides and Asher (2003), Paul Portner, and others), I offer a literal interpretation of this tenet, by developing a theory of imperatives in which their connection to the propositional semantics is discourse-mediated. The meaning of an imperative is not a propositional update of the sort familiar from dynamic semantics, but rather an addition to the *to-do list* of one of the discourse participants. This treatment ties imperative content to the discourse, explaining why imperatives never embed syntactically or semantically. The imperative operator is formulated generally enough to describe standard speaker-to-addressee imperatives, as well as self-directed imperatives (promises) and discourse-inclusive (*let's*) imperatives. The semantic grammar that I offer also captures the hidden imperative force that inheres in modifiers like *confidentially* in *Confidentially, is Ed dead? (Answer me confidentially: Is Ed dead?)*.

The structures that support this analysis are designed to model discourses, the locus of commanding. I close the talk by showing how they provide the basis for a theory of both assertions and requests for information as well.

References

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