LOGOS Workshop on Reference and Experimental Data
Barcelona, Tuesday February 17th 2015

Program

9:00-10:15  Genoveva Martí: “Ambiguity, Hybrid Theories of Meaning and Empirical Data”
10:15-10:30  Pause
10:30-11:45  Michael Devitt: “Testing Theories of Reference”
11:45-13:00  Nicolas Porot: “Improving Methods for Testing Usage”
13:00-15:00  Lunch
15:00-16:15  Åsa Wikforss: “Evidence in Semantics and Semantic Intuitions”
16:15-17:30  Sören Häggqvist: “The Expertise Defence: Williamson vs Williamson”
20:00  Dinner

Venue: Sala Gran (Facultat de Filosofia, UB, C/ Montalegre, 6, planta 4.ª, Barcelona)

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There are no registration fees but if you are attending, please send a message to logos.barcelona@gmail.com.
Abstracts

Michael Devitt: “Testing Theories of Reference”

How should we test theories of reference? The accepted practice is to test them against the referential intuitions of philosophers. Machery et al (2004) wonder why it is appropriate to rely on the intuitions of philosophers rather than those of the folk. I wonder why it is appropriate to rely on referential intuitions at all.

We should not go along with the common philosophical view that these intuitions are a priori. Philosophers might follow linguists in thinking that linguistic intuitions are “the voice” of our linguistic competence. I have argued against this view and urged that referential intuitions are empirical theory-laden central-processor responses to linguistic phenomena, differing from many other such responses only in being fairly immediate and unreflective. So we should rely on the intuitions only to the extent that they are reliable indicators of the nature of linguistic reality. And, at best, they are only indirect evidence. We should be seeking more direct evidence by examining the linguistic reality that these intuitions are about: we need to examine linguistic usage. The results of this direct examination can then also be used to assess the reliability of referential intuitions.

Referential intuitions differ among themselves in several significant ways. There are the perceptual ones, memory ones, and ones formed in thought experiments. Among the latter there are ones about humdrum hypothetical cases and ones about fanciful hypothetical cases. And among them all there are differences in the degree to which their reliability depends on expertise. I conjecture that referential intuitions about humdrum cases, whether perceptual or not, are likely to be fairly reliable without much expertise about language. In contrast, referential intuitions about fanciful hypothetical cases, like the ‘Gödel’ cases tested by Machery et al, probably require a good deal of expertise.

Finally, I address the problem of testing theories of reference more directly against the evidence of linguistic usage. One source of this evidence is the corpus. I illustrate this with some material used by Genone and Lombrozo in their experiment testing theories of reference. Many of their uses of the invented term ‘tyleritis’ seem to be inconsistent with what description theories of ‘tyleritis’ would predict. But there are notorious difficulties in using the corpus as evidence. So, philosophers should follow linguistics in using the method of elicited production to test their theories of language. But it has so far proved difficult to come up with a satisfactory experimental test because of the ‘implicit-scare-quote’ problem. The problem is that elicited usage, indeed the corpus, provides the evidence we need only if speakers are not implicitly distancing themselves from their usage. We need experiments that control for this worry. The experiments conducted so far have not managed this.

Sören Häggqvist: “The Expertise Defence: Williamson vs Williamson”

In The Philosophy of Philosophy and elsewhere, Tim Williamson has offered a sophisticated account of thought experiments and of modal epistemology. More recently, he has also engaged in a variant of the so-called “expertise defence” of traditional philosophical methodology, in the face of criticisms from experimental philosophers (Williamson 2009, 2011). In this paper I argue that Williamson’s own modal epistemology threatens to undermine his version of the expertise defence.
**Genoveva Martí:** “Ambiguity, Hybrid Theories of Meaning and Empirical Data”

I will examine two sets of experimental results about the semantics of general terms, by Genone and Lombrozo and by Nichols, Pinillos and Mallon. The results of the two experimental studies allegedly reveal significant variations in semantic intuitions among participants as regards the correct application of general terms. But the two sets of authors propose different semantic treatments of general terms in order to explain the significance and the impact of those results. Genone and Lombrozo espouse a hybrid semantics whereas Nichols, Pinillos and Mallon are inclined towards an explanation that appeals to ambiguity. I will argue in favor of the ambiguity approach. Nevertheless, I will argue that the sort of ambiguity Nichols, Pinillos and Mallon postulate is easy to incorporate to (and is in fact already contemplated by) non-descriptivist approaches to the semantics of general, as well as singular, terms.

**Nicolas Porot:** “Improving Methods for Testing Usage”

Recently, philosophers have begun to reassess the previously crucial role of philosophers’ intuitions in philosophical semantics. Some experimental philosophers have questioned the traditional reliance on semantic intuitions of Western philosophers (e.g. Machery et al 2004). Michael Devitt has rejected the reliance on intuitions altogether (Devitt, 1996, 2006, 2012), proposing an alternative methodology for testing theories of reference: tests of natural language use. In a pair of recent experiments, Devitt and his colleagues attempted to apply this methodology both to proper names and to artifactual kind terms. The data of those experiments proved inconclusive for a number of reasons. However, the design of those experiments may have been flawed in ways that could be addressed with minor changes to the methods. In this talk, I will briefly revisit the design and data of the experiments. I will also discuss three design problems common to those experiments: potential implicit scare quoting, experimenter-demand biasing, and task difficulty. And I will propose some solutions for those problems and a revised set of experiments testing reference with usage.

**References:**

**Asa Wikforss:** “Evidence in Semantics and Semantic Intuitions”

In the wake of recent discussions over experimental philosophy the nature and evidential value of intuitions have been much discussed, in particular within epistemology. In my talk I focus on semantic intuitions. I suggest that these are a subclass of linguistic intuitions, and that they are set apart by their content. I also suggest that we should distinguish semantic intuitions proper from ordinary, non-reflective judgments about semantic properties. Although the latter have been the focus of the experiments on reference, and are typically classified as ‘intuitions’, I argue that their evidential value has a different source than that of intuitions. I also argue against the constitutivist proposal (Jackman 2009, Cohnitz&Haukioja 2015) according to which semantic intuitions do not provide evidence for semantics since they do not track an independent reality but constitute it.