

Title: Four ways to Be: event structure and semantic contrasts in the multi-copula system of Bangla

Abstract: Much of declarative language involves predication: attributing a property to a subject. While 1-4 below appear to have similar structures, do they involve a uniform relation between subject and predicate? If not, where in the structure are the differences located?

1. Mini is busy (now).
2. Mini is busy (on Mondays).
3. Polar bears are white.
4. Polar bears are popular.

Formal analyses often treat the copula in such clauses as semantically empty (*is* = $\lambda P.P$). However, many languages have multiple copulas with systematic distributions across predicational clauses. For instance, Bangla (Eastern Indo-Aryan) uses a different verb for each of the four *is*'s above. This challenges both the supposed semantic “emptiness” of copulas and the view that predication is monolithic. Instead, multi-copula systems make linguistically relevant distinctions in predication overt—distinctions that languages like English typically convey via adverbs or contextual cues.

This talk presents ongoing work on the four-copula system of Bangla—*hO*, *thak*, *ach*, and a null strategy (ϕ), asking two questions: (i) What semantic contrasts are encoded by the distribution, and (ii) How; i.e. what meanings do copular expressions contribute in the clause, and how does this interact with the broader verbal system?

I show that the distribution of copulas tracks at least three contrasts: episodic vs. characterizing claims about an individual, accidental vs lawlike generalizations about members of a kind, temporary vs. permanent properties. I argue that these arise from interaction between the lexical meaning of the copulas and sentence-level grammatical aspect. Specifically, contrasts result from variation along two dimensions: event plurality and temporal contingency, which cross-cut across the four copulas. Drawing on the idea that predicate denotations contain both singular and plural eventualities (Kratzer, 2007), and a mereology-based semantics of the imperfective (Ferreira, 2016), I sketch an account in which copulas combine with small clauses to modify their mereological properties, which constrains the availability of aspect operators, deriving the observed patterns.

References:

- Kratzer, A. (2007). On the plurality of verbs. *Event structures in linguistic form and interpretation*, 269(300), 2.
- Ferreira, M. (2016). The semantic ingredients of imperfectivity in progressives, habituais, and counterfactuals. *Natural Language Semantics*, 24(4), 353-397.