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Title: Wh-exclamatives & Negation

Abstract: This talk focuses on the semantics of wh-exclamatives. I begin by introducing the broader notion of exclamation, and then turn to a dedicated sentence type for exclamation, namely wh-exclamatives. As their morphosyntax reveals cross-linguistically, wh-exclamatives have much in common with wh-interrogatives. Despite these important similarities, I argue that the two are not the same, and that wh-exclamatives are not reducible to wh-questions.

I revisit the typology of embedding predicates and argue, against a common view, that “surprise” embeds declaratives and exclamatives, but not questions. I discuss a related puzzle, namely the absence of yes/no and alternative exclamatives; all wh-words but ‘whether’ can appear in wh-exclamatives across languages. I then present a working hypothesis about the meaning of wh-exclamatives, according to which they involve a covert SURPRISE operator. This in turn raises a puzzle for embedded exclamatives: if exclamatives contain a covert speech-act-like operator, what becomes of that operator under embedding? I discuss this puzzle and explore its consequences for the broader theory of embedded clause types.

In the second half of the talk, I turn to a cross-linguistic puzzle concerning negation in exclamatives. In many languages, negation in wh-exclamatives appears at first glance to be semantically vacuous. I argue, however, that exclamatives with and without negation differ in truth conditions, even when they seem superficially equivalent. More specifically, I show that negation contributes a quantity effect of sorts: for example, an exclamative like “Oh my, what didn’t he eat?!” conveys that he ate very many things. I propose an analysis of how this reading arises and discuss what it reveals about the semantics of wh-exclamatives more generally.