Randolph Quirk Fellow 2022

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Meaning across Modalities

12-15 September 2022

Monday 12 September, 14:00-16:00

ArtsTwo 3.6

Logical Connectives across Languages and Modalities

Negation, disjunction, and conjunction are simple symbolic operations, yet their counterparts in natural languages display wide variation in both forms and scope taking properties. I will discuss new evidence for underlying cross-linguistic similarities despite apparent appearance, and how depiction systems can interact with these operators.

Tuesday 13 September, 14:00-16:00

ArtsTwo 3.6

Anaphora in a Semiotic Soup

Within the formal semantic study of anaphora, a longstanding question is whether dynamic semantic accounts have advantages over static/situation-based accounts for connecting anaphora with their discourse antecedents. We will review the basic outlines of this argument and situate evidence from spoken and sign languages within it, building on new work on demonstratives and neopronouns.

Wednesday 14 September, 14:00-16:00

ArtsTwo 3.6

Quantification and Space

Quantification is a known source of linguistic and cognitive complexity, yet it is present in all human languages including the earliest stages of language conventionalization. I will discuss classical quantifiers in newer and established sign languages and how they build on the pronominal system , as well as on broadly available cognitive metaphors, to express domain restriction and quantificational scope.

The Value of Symbolic Abstraction for Compositionality

Public lecture

Thursday 15 September 16:30-18:00

SKEEL Auditorium, People's Palace

Although human language is the paradigmatic example of arbitrary symbols used to construct and communicate ideas, humans are also expert users of iconic depictions, which, like language, can be infinitely creative and precise. Given this, what is the value of having both systems? If we think in something like a symbolic Language of Thought, why do we also depict with icons? Conversely, given the creativity in iconic depiction, what's the additional value of symbolic abstraction? Is it simply that some things are more imageable than others?

I suggest that the difference comes down not just to what we can(not) picture, but what we can ask and answer: that iconic representations inherently do not lend themselves to supporting inferences over alternatives e.g. for negation, question formation, focus and implicature, etc. This difference explains some puzzles as well as absences in compositionality between the symbolic and iconic in spoken language, sign language, and gesture, and ultimately makes the case for a multi-format framework for modelling meaning in cognitive science.