

Reasoning with topoi in dialogue

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Interacting with others frequently involves making common-sense inferences linking context, background knowledge and beliefs to utterances in the dialogue.

These inferences are often enthymematic, that is, the premises given do not by necessity lead to the conclusion [Breitholtz, 2020]. For example, consider the utterance in (1) from the BNC:

(1) A: the monarchy are non political <pause> and therefore, when they choose to speak it's usually out of a genuine concern for that problem. [BNC: FLE 233]

In the example above the premise that "the monarchy are non political" does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that when (representatives of) the monarchy speak, it is out of genuine concern. If a dialogue participant accepts certain assumptions regarding the independence of elected officials the enthymematic argument makes sense. However, an interlocutor involved in this interaction with A must themselves provide a warrant linking not being political to speaking only out of genuine concern. These warrants are often referred to as topoi [Aristotle, 2007, Ducrot, 1980].

In this talk we will show that topoi are often essential to the production and interpretation of utterances involving inference -- even assuming overarching principles of pragmatic reasoning such as Gricean maxims [Grice, 1975] or the principle of relevance [Sperber and Wilson, 1986]. Drawing on topoi allows a speaker to communicate implicit meaning and sometimes also social meaning [Eckert, 2012, Breitholtz and Cooper, 2018].

Using dialogue gameboards [Ginzburg, 2012] to track dialogue updates, our approach allows us to account for interactions involving disagreement and misunderstanding in a precise way. This means we can explain mismatches in inferences, in argumentative dialogues as well as in cases of misunderstanding as participants having access to, or accepting, non-identical sets of topoi.

References

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