

Comments on Krifka

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<http://kvf.me/krifka>

Prehistory

All the things we do with words

The speaker of

We saw the Brandenburg Gate yesterday.

- utters an English sentence with all its complexity (locutionary act)
 - the locutionary act is made up of many parts that are also acts
- asserts that they saw the Brandenburg Gate yesterday (illocutionary act)
- perhaps: turns down your invitation to take them there (perlocutionary act)
- presupposes that there's a unique Brandenburg Gate (and other presuppositions)
- refers to several entities
- ...

The Performative Hypothesis

To account for the syntax and semantics of various utterance-oriented expressions, the illocutionary act is effected by an elided performative prefix (\approx *I hereby state to you that*) in the actual object language syntax.

NB: among the many things we do when we utter a sentence, the illocutionary act is the only one that the PH syntacticizes.

Some problems with the Performative Hypothesis

- Not integrated with a formal semantics
- Implausible: why should speech acts be the only things that we can only do when we say that we are doing them?
- Redundant: any semantics for utterance-oriented expressions can refer to speaker, addressee, speech act because they are available in the context of utterance [Searle 1975, 1976]
- The Performadox: truth-value judgments target only the core proposition

A sociological problem

The analysis of the meaning of utterance-oriented expressions fell into relative dormancy with the rejection of the Performative Hypothesis in formal semantic circles. An achievement of the modern Neo-Performative movement is to bring this part of language back into focus. But what's scientifically and sociologically problematic is that there is not much competition. There is very little work on explicit alternative views of utterance-oriented expressions that do not rely on speech act operators.

Krifka's layers

(At least) three layers on top of the core

Act Phrase - Commitment Phrase - Judgment Phrase - Core Proposition (TP)

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The conceptual motivation is a mashup:

- Frege:
 - private judgment that the core proposition is true +
 - public announcement of this judgment
- many people:
 - public commitment to the truth of the core proposition

Danger

Putting one on top of the other risks making the wrong prediction that asserting
 \approx publicly committing to having privately judged the core proposition to be true

But Krifka's judgment operator is actually not Fregean (as we'll see)

The selling point

Rather than merely postulating a hierarchy of functional projections and a mapping between utterance-oriented modifiers and the functional projections they modify, Krifka's proposal is meant to

- explain the hierarchy of functional projections via their semantics (commitment must be above judgment, etc.)
- explain which functional projection a modifier modifies based on how its semantics meshes with that of the functional projection

So, to evaluate the system, we need to determine whether this goal is in fact achieved.

Four types of modifiers, some examples

TP objective epistemic adjectives (*probable, möglich*)

JP subjective epistemic adverbs (*certainly, vielleicht*)

ComP *definitely, ehrlich*

ActP *frankly, ehrlich gesagt*

Layer 1: Judgment

- Krifka's judgment operator $J-$ controls a contextual judge parameter
 - see work on judge-dependent expressions (such as predicates of taste; pioneering contributions: Lasersohn, Stephenson, and others)
- $J-$ takes a TP (a proposition that, NB, was potentially assembled with some parts whose meaning is judge-dependent)
- it returns an $\langle e, st \rangle$ -type meaning which applies to an individual and feeds it as the judge parameter to its sister
- $\llbracket J- \phi \rrbracket^{s,a,j} = \lambda x. \llbracket \phi \rrbracket^{s,a,x}$
- NB: Krifka envisions a system by which the judge parameter is not available above JP.

Comments

- there's no act of judgment encoded in this semantics, even though one might have expected this from the initial discussion
- it's unclear why this semantically very thin operator is actually needed; in a judge-dependent semantics, it is usually assumed that the utterer will be the default value for the judge parameter
- judge-dependent predicates are known to have exocentric readings; how does this fact interact with the JP?
- In the Declaratives paper, Krifka suggests that the JP head $J-$ may be present only if there are subjective expressions, but if the JP-layer (which converts *st* propositions into *est* properties) is optional, then the Commitment Operator above it will have to deal with two different argument types depending on the presence/absence of JP

Assessment

As an explanation for the hierarchical position of judge-relative utterance modifiers, there are two issues with Krifka's proposal:

- as we said, it's unclear why the utterer wouldn't be available as a judge higher up; in fact, we need the utterer to be the judge that the ComP-modifier *ehrlich* and the ActP-modifier *ehrlich gesagt* are anchored to, both of which seem to be judge-dependent (certainly, their TP-cousin *be honest* is);
- canonical judge-dependent expressions appear inside the TP (*be fun, be tasty, be immoral, be honest*)

So, it's not clear why we would get a clear prediction about the attachment site of judge-related utterance modifiers.

Layer 2: Commitment

- The operator \vdash as the head of ComP relates four arguments: an *est* JP-meaning, an individual x (destined to be the speaker), an evaluation point i (say, a world), and an event e
- It feeds x to the JP-meaning, which sets x as the judge and computes a proposition and then expresses that the individual x is at i committing in event e to that proposition
- $\llbracket \vdash \rrbracket^{s,a,j} = \lambda \text{JP}_{est} . \lambda x . \lambda i . \lambda e . x \vdash_{i,e} \lambda w . \text{JP}_w^{s,a,x}$
- The x, i, e arguments are left open, to be dealt with from above by ActP.

Assessment

- The individual x and event e are still to be provided; this means that we would expect that even above the scope of \vdash we can still provide information about the event; so, commitment-event modifiers are not excluded from occurring outside of ComP
- whether this system gives adequate semantic analyses of modifiers like *definitely*, *ehrlich* has to be seen; the idea must be that they can be analyzed as predicates of the commitment event, but no lexical semantics exists so far

Layer 3: Action!

- The commitment phrase left us with a complex meaning of type $\langle e, \langle s, \langle v, t \rangle \rangle \rangle$.
- The default act operator, written as \bullet takes this meaning and returns a context change potential $\langle st, st \rangle$.
- To the ComP meaning, it feeds the speaker as the individual argument and existentially closes the event argument. We then essentially have a proposition that is true at an index i iff there is an event e at i by which x is committing to the truth of the core proposition (with x also as the judge).
- The final thing \bullet does is to convert this proposition into a context-change potential.
- In a non-performative system, we would expect that this proposition would then be used to eliminate from the input context all indices at which the proposition is not true.
- But the idea here is that the update is a “performative” one: it changes all the indices in the input context to ones where the proposition is true. (An idea due to Anna Szabolsci in a 1982 article)

If we had time ...

- We would love to discuss the Szabolcsi-Krifka notion of performative updates and compare it to the Stalnaker-Mandelkern idea of meanings targeting the prospective common ground
- And we would love to discuss the fact that Stalnakerian contexts involve much more change than recognized in Krifka's papers.
- But that will have to wait another occasion.

The ActP is not an action

- We call context-change potentials (or illocutionary act potentials) dynamic, but that doesn't make them actions.
- We still need a truly pragmatic step: *If a speaker utters a sentence that denotes a context change operation, this operation is thereby applied to the context.* (Lauer 2015: 43).
- So, in a sense there is a much reduced set of speech acts in this system: we compute context-change potentials in the semantics and then we have one kind of speech act: applying the CCP to the current context.
- NB: It won't help to posit yet another object language operator that would effect that application of the CCP to the current context. We would still have to have an extra-semantic action of letting that operator loose on the context. [This is reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's tortoise's resistance to Modus Ponens.]

ActP modifiers

- Can this dynamic semantics for root clauses explain the meaning and distribution of utterance-oriented expressions like *ehrlich gesagt*, *frankly*?
- Not obviously, since it's hard to see what it would be about a function from contexts to contexts to be frank or honest.
- The only event in the layers of assertive clauses is the commitment event and that's not supposed to be the one that ActP modifiers modify.
- Informally, Krifka 2023 says: “*ehrlich gesagt* is an act specifier indicating that the speech act is an honest one”.
- NB: The speech act is not syntactically represented. So, there needs to be a workaround or direct reference to the contextually salient speech act.
 - Krifka 2023:p.151 sketches an LF where *ehrlich* is predicated of a triple: speaker, input context, output context

Fazit

- Krifka develops a rich and ambitious system.
- We have many questions about how it works & whether it achieves its ambitious goals.
- But there's little competition. Two radical alternatives could be pursued:
 - build a grammar of lots of actions (cf. David Beaver in unpublished work on “action grammar”)
 - refer to speech acts (and their component acts) but without representing them in the object language
- In ongoing work, we are trying to develop a proof-of-concept analysis of what we call “unasked questions” (\approx non-intrusive, conjectural questions) without assuming speech act operators.