

Aspects of subjunctive: obviation and temporal relations

Epistemic sources and subjunctive obviation

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Abstract

The talk targets the phenomenon of subject obviation in subjunctive clauses (e.g. Italian **Voglio che io parta*, lit. ‘I want that I leave’), which has drawn attention in the field of formal linguistics since the early 1980s. The fact that a pronominal cannot be coreferent with a noun phrase that is *not* a coargument was at that time puzzling in view of the Binding Principle B. A number of studies have addressed the question since. Some scholars have discussed it in view of Binding Theory, while some others have tried to account the phenomenon in terms of competition between subjunctive and infinitive clauses (**Voglio che io parta* vs. ^{ok}*Voglio partire* ‘I want to leave’) resorting to pragmatic and semantic principles such as ‘avoid pronoun’, ‘blocking’, or ‘anti-control’.

Despite an abundant literature on the phenomenon, obviation still remains in many respects mysterious. Binding-based approaches are unable to account for all of the data in a principled way; competition theories are empirically more powerful, but require some undesired stipulations.

This talk explores an alternative hypothesis, which brings into play the notion of self-knowledge, as generally understood in the field of philosophy of language and philosophy of mind, i.e. knowledge of one’s own mental state, which builds on a specific ‘source’ of information, introspection, and is highly epistemically secure. The hypothesis discussed in this talk states that obviation is caused by a clash between the semantic characteristics of the attitude predicate and those of the embedded proposition. Particularly, I suggest that since embedding predicates selecting for subjunctive clauses introduce the embedded proposition as epistemically indirect, obviation obtains when the embedded proposition is accessible through introspection.