

Context Structure and Polarity Particles

Donka F. Farkas
UCSC

Abstract

Based on an enlarged context structure which makes room for treating assertions as *proposals* to change the context in a particular way, the first part of the paper argues that assertions and polar questions are conversational moves whose conversational effects are partially overlapping.

The second part of the talk provides empirical reasons for having such a treatment by examining the behavior of *polarity particles*, particles such as *yes* and *no*, which can function as positive or negative reactions to assertions or polar questions. I will be concerned in particular with languages such as Romanian and French, which have three particles (used in different ways). Polarity particles are analyzed as expressing conversational moves called *reactive commitments*, moves that commit their author to a proposed proposition or its opposite. Reactive commitments are characterized by a set of two binary polarity features. Polarity particles in their turn express particular combinations of polarity features. The behavior of Romanian *da*, *nu* and *ba da/ba nu*, as well as of French *oui*, *non* and *si* will be examined in detail and typological predictions concerning possible/impossible polarity particles will be made and discussed.