

Tree growth and the construal of indefinites

Ruth Kempson and Masayuki Otsuka

King's College London

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In this talk, we argue that the scope ambiguity of indefinite noun phrases is a phenomenon paralleling that of pronoun construal in having an input lexical specification which only partially determines their interpretation, an underspecification which is resolved during the process of logical form construction. Indefinite noun phrases will be analysed as providing instructions for constructing epsilon terms, with a constraint that the resulting term must take narrower scope than some other term in the structure under construction, the choice of term on which to define such a scope relation being (in English) otherwise free. This analysis is set within the Dynamic Syntax framework of Kempson, Meyer-Viol and Gabbay 2001, in which interpretation is modelled as a process of tree growth leading to a logical form following the left-right sequence of words in a sentence. We shall see that this account enables us to express a range of cross-linguistic and lexically imposed variation in scope potential. Evidence confirming both this specific application of the epsilon calculus, and the more general claim of Kempson et al that the defined process of tree growth constitutes the basis for syntactic explanations of natural language phenomena, is the explanation the account provides for the syntactic puzzle posed by so-called head-internal relative clauses (in Japanese), whose E-type form of interpretation emerges as an immediate consequence of the analysis.