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Rethinking Sequence of Tense

Past-under-past embeddings have two readings, a simultaneous and a backward-shifted one. While most existing accounts derive these readings via distinct mechanisms, be it by means of an ambiguity at the level of LF or via blocking of a cessation implicature, in this talk we propose an alternative account which avoids such ambiguity. For us, the meaning of a past tense morpheme, like *-ed*, is comprised of two components. Syntactically, every past tense morpheme carries an uninterpretable past feature [uPAST], to be checked by a (single) covert past tense operator carrying an interpretable feature [iPAST]. Semantically, the past tense marker encodes a relative non-future with respect to its closest c-commanding tense node (informally: `not later than'), immediately yielding the two distinct readings.

While the account for embedded past tense makes up the main part of this talk, we also present an extension of the approach to (embedded) present tense and show that it successfully accounts for its both simultaneous and double-access interpretations in addition to the intuitive present-tense meaning.

Lastly, since our underspecification approach no longer has to derive the backward-shifted reading in a separate way, it opens up the way to unify SoT and pronominal tense semantics. Demonstrating that our approach can be fully captured in pronominal terms constitutes the last part of our talk.