

The Future of Meaning - Pragmatics before Semantics

May 28
& May 29

Workshop „The Future of Meaning - Pragmatics before Semantics“
with Prof. Colin Allen, Indiana University, Bloomington

MAY 28 – M3.003 (Seidenstraße 36, 3. Floor)

Session 1 – 15.30-17.00

Scaffolded meaning: the role of symbols and sounds in communication and cognition

MAY 29 – M3.003 (Seidenstraße 36, 3. Floor)

Session 2 – 10.30-12.00

Meaning and group cognition: internal x external, not internalism vs. externalism

Session 3 – 14.00-15.30

Shared meaning despite cognitive diversity: when is semantic abstraction useful?

Noam Chomsky famously wrote that one cannot have a theory of pragmatics because it would have to be a theory of everything. Jerry Fodor reiterates the point by arguing that the process of interpretation is global, not local, and because information from any domain is potentially relevant to interpretation, the process cannot be studied scientifically. Peter Marler argued however that what the study of animal communication needs is an approach based in pragmatics, not semantics. In this workshop we will investigate the possibility of reversing the usual order of explanation of context-sensitive interpretation. Instead of viewing meanings as Grice-style inferences from prior known, fixed or literal meanings, we will consider the possibility that so-called literal meanings are, rather, abstractions from a sea of variable interpretations -- a kind of modeler's fiction that nevertheless is useful for explanation and prediction. In this approach, information-theoretic and semiotic approaches to communication converge on an account of human and animal communication that holds out the prospect for a more continuous understanding of the evolution of communication and language that does not exaggerate either the similarities or the differences between human language and other forms of animal communication. The work to be discussed is preliminary and tentative, so it is hoped that collectively the ideas can be sharpened and defended.

Organization and information:

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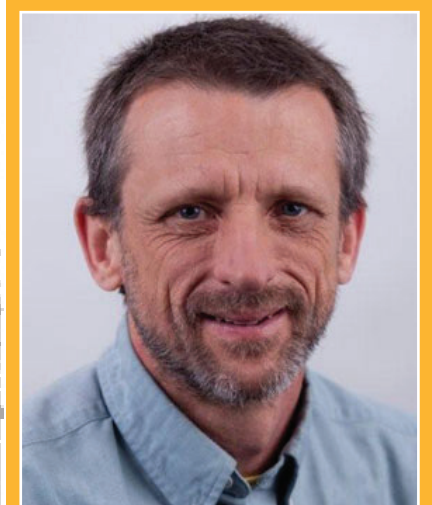
Dr. Christoph Michel: christoph.michel@philo.uni-stuttgart.de

Participation is free, but please register!

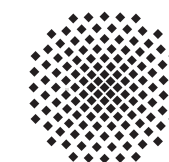
Public Evening Lecture from Prof. Colin Allen: Expertise with Words

MAY 28 – 19.00 in M17.11 (Keplerstraße 17)

Words are central to most of the humanities, and whether the aims of individual scholars are directed towards literary, historical, or argumentative interpretation, traditional scholarship typically involves close reading of texts. The ability to model words and their relationships by computational means is therefore central to much of the digital humanities. But the methods developed thus far are inadequate if we wish to capture the ways in which traditional experts bring different sorts of expertise in words to bear on the problems of finding and making meaning by reading texts closely. For the digital humanities to make enduring contributions to the questions that drive much of humanities scholarship, it becomes necessary to go beyond fascination with larger and larger corpora, by also understanding and modeling the human-scale expertise of readers and authors. In this talk, using examples from various sources including the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy and a selection of late 19th and early 20th century books on animal minds from the Hathi Trust Digital Library, I will describe systems that my InPhO group at Indiana University have built to allow relationships among words to be modeled at multiple scales. Our methods support various analyses, from high-level overviews to detailed digging into specific, historically important arguments. I will also describe how these systems may be extended to provide models of expertise, allowing the models to be used in a variety of new and exciting ways to answer questions of interest to traditional scholars in the humanities and the cognitive sciences.



Prof. Colin Allen
Picture: Courtesy of Indiana University.



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