

Unnatural Language Semantics

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Unnatural language semantics is the study of the meaning of words and expressions in languages that are very unlike natural languages. In this talk, I will present several case studies about how unnatural language semantics can inform us about the structure of natural languages. In particular, I will explain and present several case studies of two methods for explaining semantic universals (shared properties of meaning across the languages of the world). One method argues that, at the individual word level, such universals arise due to ease of learning. The other method suggests that, at the language level, they arise due to optimally trading-off between competing pressures of simplicity and informativeness. The talk will conclude with some discussion about the connections between the two approaches as well as other applications where unnatural language semantics can be helpful.