

Debating Dynamic Semantics

April 22–23, 2026

This event is sponsored and organized by the Saul Kripke Center.

Location CUNY Graduate Center
Room Room 8301
Format All talks are 60 minutes, including Q&A.

Program at a glance

Wednesday, April 22

12:30–1:30 Matt Mandelkern & Richard Roth (joint, NYU)
1:30–1:45 Break / transition
1:45–2:45 Karen Lewis (Columbia)
2:45–3:00 Break / transition
3:00–4:00 Caleb Kendrick (Dartmouth)
4:00–4:15 Break / transition
4:15–5:15 Patrick Skeels (Kentucky)
5:15–5:30 Break / transition
5:30–6:30 Willow Starr (Cornell)

Dinner: 7:30

Thursday, April 23

9:30–10:30 Simon Charlow (Yale)
10:30–10:40 Break / transition
10:40–11:40 Eno Agolli (CUNY)
11:40–12:40 Lunch
12:40–1:40 Chris Barker & Daniel W. Harris (joint, NYU & CUNY)
1:40–1:50 Break / transition
1:50–2:50 Justin Bledin (Johns Hopkins)
2:50–3:00 Break / transition
3:00–4:00 Cal Howland (Rutgers)

Abstracts

Matt Mandelkern & Richard Roth

NYU

Title: Restriction and Dominance

A compelling way to argue that something must, might, could, should, or ought to be is to go over all the possible cases, and to argue that if each case is realised, it must, might, could, should, or ought to be. For example, you might prove that $n + n$ must be even by arguing that $n + n$ must be even if n is odd, and $n + n$ must also be even if n is even. I call this intuitive way of arguing dominance reasoning, and explore certain difficulties it poses for recent theories of restricted readings of modals and attitude verbs.

Karen Lewis

Columbia

Title: Pseudo-singular thought and talk

Dynamic pragmatics is an alternative to dynamic semantics that explains discourse dynamics in terms of pragmatic reasoning and general rationality. On a dynamic pragmatic account of anaphora, it is therefore even more pressing to ground the notion of a discourse referent than it is on a dynamic semantics. In previous work, I argue that discourse referents are best understood as mental files – vehicles for tracking the same object in cognition independently of any particular descriptive content (“Discourse Referents as Mental Files”, forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Language* Vol. 4). Mental files are private by nature; I treat discourse referents in the public, shared conversational context as intersubjective, coordinated, temporary files. On the proposed view, discourse referents are ways of cognizing content rather than contents themselves. Discourse referent mental files are (among other things) characterized by their role in non-satisfactional or pseudo-singular way of thinking. However, unlike the mental files of singular thought, discourse referents are not typically satisfied by a single, specific object (though they can be). Accordingly, I treat the contents of indefinite sentences and sentences containing expressions anaphoric on indefinites as having existential content (Lewis 2022, “Descriptions, pronouns, and uniqueness”, *Linguistics and Philosophy*). In this talk, I address the question of the relationship between a pseudo-singular way of cognizing anaphoric relations in discourse and the discourse itself (or sentences therein) having existential truth-conditions. I argue that while sentences containing indefinite descriptions typically trigger the creation of a discourse referent, they are not themselves cognized in a pseudo-singular way. By contrast, sentences containing anaphoric expressions (definites and pronouns) contain pseudo-singular restrictors that bridge the gap between the pseudo-singular form and the descriptive content.

Caleb Kendrick

Dartmouth

Title: Simplifying Donkey Anaphora

Extant dynamic theories of anaphora, like Dynamic Predicate Logic (Groenendijk and Stokhof, 1991), account for donkey anaphora by validating Egli’s corollary:

$$(\exists x Px) > Qx \iff \forall x(Px > Qx).$$

However, since Simplification of Disjunctive Antecedents (SDA) and Egli’s corollary are (essentially) equivalent, if ‘>’ is given a variably-strict semantics, Egli’s corollary does not immediately follow. In this paper, I derive Egli’s corollary based on a dynamic implementation of the Exh-based approach to SDA developed by Bar-Lev and Fox (2020). This account has two upshots. First, it predicts failures of Egli’s corollary in identificational sentences. Second, it offers a straightforward account of the \exists/\forall ambiguity in donkey sentences.

Patrick Skeels

Kentucky

Title: Testing for Coherence

In dynamic semantics for epistemic modals, dynamically consistent yet incoherent sentences can be bootstrapped to coherence when embedded under epistemic modal operators. This not only yields faulty felicity predictions, but also blocks a simple and satisfying explanation of the distinct, yet related, explanatory roles of coherence and consistency within the dynamic framework. After motivating the problem, I demonstrate that the test clause for epistemic modality tacitly appeals to the notion of dynamic consistency, but makes no such appeal to the notion of coherence. I establish desiderata that a dynamic semantics should satisfy, and, after demonstrating that the original test clause does not satisfy those desiderata, I demonstrate that a test clause which only appeals to coherence will similarly fail. I then provide a novel semantics called the “dual-test semantics” which demonstrates that an epistemic modal clause which appeals to both dynamic consistency and coherence can satisfy all of the desiderata, and thereby, solve the problem of modal bootstrapping while preserving the unique and attractive features of dynamic semantics.

Willow Starr

Cornell

Title: Dynamics of Social Meaning

Our bodies, words and other social displays have a distinctive kind of meaning. Our social groups and practices are cohered by norms which dictate what people like us do in situations like the one we're in. This means that social interaction depends crucially on interpreting bodies, words, and other displays as indicated what kind of agents we are, what kind of situation we're in, and what activity we're undertaking — that is their social meaning. This work explores the limitations of modeling the social meaning of various signals in a static framework where they have a specific content. I will argue instead that they have only a probabilistic potential to activate social norms. I apply this model to slurs, generic 'we' claims, and contested social kind terms like to show how a dynamic account of social meaning is both more empirically adequate and politically valuable than a static one centered on content transmission.

Simon Charlow

Yale

Title: Escape from PLA?

Questions of representational power and (inversely) explanatory depth occupy a central place in debates over dynamic theories of meaning. With a focus on anaphora, this talk argues that there is an irreducible complexity in the set of empirical facts to be captured, and an inherent set of tradeoffs in how that complexity is theorized. In a nutshell, any adequate account must enforce novelty for referent-introducing expressions, and familiarity for anaphorically dependent ones. Dynamic theories generally provide semantic operationalizations of these constraints – and this is precisely what makes them dynamic. While dynamic aspects of meaning can be moved to the syntax and/or pragmatics, the resulting theories are not, holistically, more constrained or representationally austere than their dynamic alternatives; they simply locate the inherent complexity elsewhere. We'll survey a range of variously dynamic theories, including some ostensibly static varieties of Dekker's Predicate Logic with Anaphora (PLA) that throw these tradeoffs into particularly sharp relief.

Cal Howland

Rutgers

Title: Carving Dynamicness at Its Joints

This talk tackles the issue of characterizing the distinction between a static and a dynamic semantics. Using a simplified version of Veltman’s (1996) semantics for modality as a proving ground, I show that van Benthem’s (1989) and Rothschild & Yalcin’s (2015, 2017) accounts of this distinction diverge in surprising ways. This “simplified Veltman” is dynamic by van Benthem’s lights, but static according to Rothschild & Yalcin. I conclude that although Rothschild & Yalcin extend van Benthem by capturing non-intersective systems, they analyze an importantly different class of languages as static. This opens up a question as to whether van Benthem’s analysis or Rothschild and Yalcin’s better describes the “intuitive” class of dynamic systems.

Chris Barker & Daniel W. Harris

NYU & CUNY

Title: Discourse referents span linguistic and extralinguistic cognition

Are discourse referents an exclusively linguistic device, or do they have a role in general cognition? Thesis: Donkey anaphora and presupposition projection show that mechanisms for manipulating discourse referents must be built into semantics, as in dynamic semantics. It is then tempting to think of discourse referents as strictly grammatical devices, and of discourse contexts as being under grammatical control (cf. Stojnić 2021). Antithesis: Goat updates, bridging, indirect communication, malapropism, and other related phenomena give us powerful reasons to adopt a dynamic *pragmatics*, in which discourse referents model extralinguistic mental representations of objects. These objects can be updated by nonlinguistic channels and inferences about speakers’ intentions, as well as by grammatical means (cf. Lewis 2021, 2022, forthcoming). Synthesis: we defend a hybrid view, in which the parts of the mind modeled by semantics and pragmatics each traffic in their own kind of object representations, which make up part of the interface between linguistic and extralinguistic cognition. On one hand, assignment functions are an internal bookkeeping device of the semantic system, used for tracking binding and grammar-governed anaphora. On the other hand, we have independent reasons to think that humans also use object representations (object/mental files) to track entities in perception and long-term memory. We develop a schematic proposal about what the interface between these two kinds of object representation might look like. We think of this proposal as an instance of a broader pattern: language includes grammatical devices for interfacing with many of the kinds of mental representations that serve extralinguistic cognition.

Eno Agolli

CUNY

Title: Dynamic Retraction

While standard propositionalist accounts—both contextualist and assessment-relativist—have debated the normative conditions under which retractions of epistemic claims are warranted, they say remarkably little about the resulting informational impact they have on the common ground. What actually happens to the common ground when an epistemic claim is taken back? Dynamic semantics offers a natural framework for answering this question, given its historical influence in modeling how assertions (of epistemic claims) impact (shared) bodies of information. However, because standard dynamic approaches treat epistemic modals as mere compatibility checks on the common ground, they face a conceptual hurdle: it is unclear what it is to retract a mere check on the common ground. In this paper, I advance a fully-fledged dynamic account designed to solve this issue. I propose that epistemic modals do not simply check the common ground, but rather impose persistent constraints on which possibilities remain live throughout discourse. I model retraction as a systematic lifting of these liveness constraints. I demonstrate that this framework formally captures three distinct patterns of informational change associated with retraction (which plain dynamic accounts fail to capture): trivial, purely structural, and genuinely backtracking. This approach recovers the core normative insights of propositionalism and provides a unified and formally explicit non-propositional mechanism for how speakers dynamically negotiate epistemic possibilities over time.

Justin Bledin

Johns Hopkins

Title: Free Choice With Arbitrary Variables

I develop a new account of ‘free choice (FC)’ items and effects within a dynamic semantic theory that distinguishes two kinds of variables, or discourse referents: non-arbitrary and arbitrary. Unlike familiar non-arbitrary variables, the identity of the value assigned to an arbitrary variable is understood to be immaterial: whichever value it takes could just as well have been any other, and so such a variable may stand for an arbitrary member of its range of values. I propose that the FC indefinite in a sentence like ‘Any owl is zygodactyl’ introduces an arbitrary variable ranging over owls, while the FC disjunction in a sentence like ‘You may have the whiskey or the gin’ contributes a variable whose value is an arbitrary choice between the whiskey and the gin. Because an arbitrary value selected from a range is taken to have all and only the properties shared by every member of that range, the characteristic universal and conjunctive force of these examples follows. The arbitrary variable analysis thus grounds an alternative mechanism by which speakers express generality in natural language—one that differs from the use of ordinary universal quantifiers and conjunction—and thereby opens up new explanations of a range of distinctive interpretive features associated with free choice constructions, as well as of their puzzling distributional restrictions.