Ont the role of aspect in deontic statements

Dr. Ana Arregui, University of Ottawa

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Room 129 Paterson Hall

In this talk I will investigate the role of aspect in deontic statements, dealing with both simple deontic claims and with conditional sentences. The kinds of contrasts that will interest me are illustrated in (1) and (2) (my discussion will be limited to deontic should):

(1) She returned the library book late.
   a. #She should return it on time. (null perfective aspectual head)
   b. She should have returned it on time. (overt perfective aspectual head)

(2) She returned the library book yesterday.
   a. #She should return it next week.
   b. She should have returned it next week.

It may be tempting to think that perfect have in examples like (1b) and (2b) is interpreted as a past tense that shifts an obligation to the past: PAST [ SHOULD...]] (for proposals along these lines for other modals, see a.o. Ogihara 2000, Condoravdi 2002, Ippolito 2003). (1b), for example could be understood as claiming that in the past, she had the obligation to return the library book on time. Since the book's due date is now past, she no longer has such an obligation, and (1a) is false. I will present an analysis along such lines following Feldman (1986), and argue against this view of the role of have. Instead, I will claim that aspectual heads may carry epistemic presuppositions that become visible in interaction with modality (Arregui 2005, 2007). I will argue for a distinction between a null perfective head (with epistemic commitments) and perfect have (lacking epistemic commitments). This contrast will allow us to understand simple deontic claims such as (1) and (2), as well as conditioned deontic claims such as (3):

(3) a. If her goldfish died tomorrow, she should give the body to the vet (but let’s not be overly pessimistic, it might make it...)
   b. If her goldfish had died tomorrow, she should have given the body to the vet (but since it died on a Sunday, she was right to throw the body to the garbage)

The material discussed in this talk is part of a larger project to understand the interaction between tense, aspect and modality. Kratzer (1981, 1991) has proposed a two-dimensional analysis of modals that takes into account a contextually given modal base and a contextually given ordering source. In this talk I will present an analysis of deontic should in a Kratzer-style situations framework (Kratzer 1989, 2002, 2009) and argue that some of the constraints that may have been thought to come from context can actually be derived compositionally through the interaction of the semantics of modals and the semantics of aspect.

Dr. Ana Arregui is an Assistant Professor in Linguistics at University of Ottawa. She received her Ph.D. at University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2004 with specialties in formal semantics, in particular, the semantics of modal expressions. Her research focused on the interaction between tense, aspect and modality: e.g., “Detaching if-clauses from ‘should’ (Natural Language Semantics, forthcoming), "On Similarity in counterfactuals (Linguistics and Philosophy, 2009)", "When aspect matters: the case of “would” conditionals (Natural Language Semantics, 2007)."