

## Research statement

During the five years of my mandate as chair of the Department of French Studies (July 1, 2014 to June 30, 2019), I did not have much time to devote to my research. I continued to pursue the ideas behind my research through readings and discussions in graduate seminars, as well as through presentations (invited and at conferences), posters, and a conference proceeding.

## Presentations

“Phrase structure without head features”, paper presented at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Linguistics Association, University of Regina, May-June, 2018, Regina, Saskatchewan. (Refereed) Available in *Proceedings from the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Linguistics Association* at <http://cla-acl.ca/wp-content/uploads/actes-2018/Lamarche-2018.pdf>

“Interface under Combinational Mapping”, paper presented at the Conference *Language at the Interface*, University Simon Fraser, Vancouver, 14-16 April 2015. (Refereed)

“Combinational Mapping: Freeing Grammatical Analysis from Arbitrariness”, presented at Linguistics Talks at Western. February 9<sup>th</sup> 2015. Invited.

“Distinctions combinatoires et catégories grammaticales” paper presented at the conference *Les signes, leur combinaison, et les propriétés fondamentales du langage, Hommage à Denis Bouchard*. UQAM, Montreal, November 13-14, 2014. (video of the presentation at <http://web.lsq.uqam.ca/conference/index.html>). Invited.

“Logique grammaticale et sens: une approche combinatoire au sens grammatical”, Western French Studies Departmental Forum conference. September 30<sup>th</sup> 2014.

## Posters

“Lexical relations as label application”, Faculty of Arts and Humanities Research Day, Western University, March 2019.

“Grammatical Logic”, Faculty of Arts and Humanities Research Day, Western University, March 2018.

The following short statement outlines my current perspective (January 2020).

## The Semantics of Label Application

Over the last year or so, I have been developing an argumentation around the idea that natural language semantics should be grounded directly in the (real) world, instead of inside the head of the individual (i.e., as some kind of mental representation or concept) as is usually assumed in the literature. The reason for grounding semantics in the real world lies in the observation that nothing in principle regarding a lexical form motivates its association with a specific meaning: no matter how one wants to formalize meaning, its association with linguistic form at the lexical level is arbitrary. For a lexical form to be usable to communicate, then, each association between a form and a meaning must be based on a consensus amongst the Speakers of the community. Arriving at a consensus is only possible if both the form and the meaning are public realities, notions that exist outside the head of individuals, where they can be scrutinized and debated by

individuals if needed (see Putnam 1975, Burge 1979, 1986, and Brown 2016 for relevant discussions). For all intents and purposes, then, lexical meaning must be extensional.

To capture this extensional requirement, I proposed an approach for natural language semantics based on the idea of *label application*, under which expressions are understood much like the name tags participants wear at a conference. A label is an object in the world, independent of what it applies to: it is used conventionally to identify another reality of the world (an individual, a substance, a category, etc.). Under label application, the meaning of an expression is defined in terms of its *domain of application*, that is, whatever reality/realities in the world a given expression applies to. Because of arbitrariness, the domain of application of a *word* – which individual, substance, class of object it applies to – is a matter of social convention: there must be a consensus, a tacit agreement between Speakers, that a given form (say, *water*) applies to a given reality (say, this 💧). In contrast, the domain of application of a *complex expression* (*a glass of water, cold water, the glasses of waters*) is a function of its internal structure: the form of a complex label indicates whether it targets an individual, a mass, or a set of individuals, whether the label applies to new or old realities in the discourse, and so on.

The main arguments in favor of this approach are its inherent simplicity and its ability to derive notions that other theories take as primitives. Linguistic forms (labels) can be manipulated without any reference to what they apply to in the world. It is much simpler to manipulate labels than it is to manipulate abstract representations of the realities these labels apply to. The theory of grammar that emerges from label application is one where the distinctions that ‘drive’ composition of sentences in traditional terms (for example the type value of expressions) are not primitives of the theory: rather these distinctions emerge from the application of rules of combination.

A concrete illustration of this approach is presented in [Phrase structure without head features](#), where I show how nominal and adjectival positions in the NP can be defined making reference only to the form of a word without reference to any value-specific feature N or A, or meaning distinction.

## Reference

- Burge, T. 1979. "Individualism and the Mental," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 4: 73–121.
- Burge, T. 1986. "Individualism and Psychology," *Philosophical Review*, 95: 3–45;
- Brown, C. 2016. "Narrow Mental Content" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/content-narrow/>.
- Putnam, H. 1975. "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," in Keith Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind and Knowledge* (Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Volumes VII), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.