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The Nanosemantics of Definiteness

Schwarz (2009) proposes that there are two kinds of definite articles associated with two aspects of definiteness: weak articles — uniqueness; strong articles — anaphora. In languages such as German, this distinction has a morphological reflex insofar as weak articles can/must contract with a preceding preposition („zum“) while the strong article must not contract („zu dem“).

In this talk, I will recast Schwarz' analysis in a nanosyntactic framework (Starke 2010; Caha 2009) showing how the intuition that the strong article contains the weak article, both morphologically and semantically, can be formalized. I will furthermore discuss some implications that Nanosyntax (and nonlexicalist approaches in general) has for semantic compositionality (e.g. mismatches between semantic denotations and morphosyntactic constituents, denotations of head sequences).

References:

Caha, P. (2009). The Nanosyntax of Case. PhD thesis, University of Tromsø.

Schwarz, F. (2009). Two Types of Definites in Natural Language. PhD thesis, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Starke, M. (2010). Nanosyntax: A short primer to a new approach to language. *Nordlyd*, 36(1):1–6.