
Aesthetic Interpretation

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This talk focuses on the language of art, which has had little attention in formal semantics and pragmatics. There is extensive work on truth and interpretation in fiction, which extends the formal semantic toolkit and its concern with language-world connections to the worlds developed within fiction (Lewis 1978, Maier and Stokke 2022). But the main aim of literature is to produce affect in the reader; without a theory of how this works, and what the mechanisms are, we leave out the main point of literary texts. This paper develops a theory of *aesthetic interpretation* which aims at rectifying this situation.

Aesthetic semantics. The main formal tool by which this kind of interpretation is accomplished is a function A which assigns affective values to linguistic objects. The full story about how affect is assigned relates to general mechanisms of emotional response and (dis)approval which in turn relate to the associations speakers have with particular words, structures and concepts. The talk separates sources of affect into somatic, ideological and formal sources, where the first involve the body and bodily experience, the second social identities and beliefs, and the third aspects of the form of the literary work. These three sources shape the output of the function A , which takes pairs of natural language expressions and their denotations as input. The result after normalization, for any text, is a real number in the interval $[0,1]$. A given text is then deemed aesthetically significant if its A -value exceeds a contextually given threshold (Kennedy 2007, McCready 2015). Since A is relativized to individual agents, a given text may be significant for one agent and not another (Barthes 1977).

Aesthetic pragmatics. The talk gives several examples of how different settings of A can give different interpretations for different agents on the assumption that affect is able to influence pragmatic choice in cases of underspecification and ambiguity (McCready 2012), and then turns to giving a pragmatics for literary texts stated in terms of the semantics so far, together with notions of cooperation and trust for this domain taking as starting point the theory trust in repeated games of McCready 2015 together with recent work in aesthetics by Nguyen (2021).

References: • Barthes, R. (1977). The death of the author. In R. Barthes (ed.), *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana, 142–148. • Kennedy, C. (2007). Vagueness and gradability. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30, 1–45. • Lewis, D. (1978). Truth in fiction. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15(1), 37–46. • Maier, E. & A. Stokke. (2022). *The Language of Fiction*. Oxford: OUP. • McCready, E. (2012). Emotive equilibria. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 35, 243–283. • McCready, E. (2015). *Reliability in Pragmatics*. Oxford: OUP. • Nguyen, C.T. (2021). Trust and sincerity in art. *Ergo* 8, 21–53.