

A formal semantics for the Singaporean English discourse particle *wàt*

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One of the analytical challenges posed by a discourse particle—a function word that signals the S(peaker)’s evaluation of information in a discourse (Zimmermann, forthcoming)—lies in reconciling its use in a disparate variety of contexts with the native speaker’s intuition that its different guises may ultimately reflect a common core meaning. Two examples of sentence-final *wàt* in Singaporean English demonstrate this.

- (1) Context: Two people trying to find their way from one building to another.
 A: This way cannot *la*. ‘C’mon, we can’t go by this way!’
 S: The door over there is open *wàt*. ‘But the door over there is open!’

- (2) Context: Two schoolboys on a bus on their way to play football.
 A: That one always come late one.
 S: Captain *wàt*! Sure can come late. (Smith 1985, n°B1, B5)

In (1), *wàt* signals that S objects to a claim by A he considers “unjustified” (what Smith (1985) terms the ANCHOR). S bolsters his objection by pointing out a reason he thinks should have been obvious to A (the REBUTTAL). What is initially puzzling about (2) is that S emphatically *agrees* with what A has uttered, yet *wàt* still carries the force of an objection. The semantics I propose for *wàt* unifies such uses and provides a principled account of how the particle’s meaning varies systematically with context.

First, I show that the variability in the use of *wàt* lies principally in the explicitness, source and content of its ANCHOR (formalized in (5) as a free variable q over propositions whose value is supplied by context). What is common to all its uses, S’s REBUTTAL, is a proposition that S asserts is incompatible with the ANCHOR (formalized in (5) as a propositional update to cs_S). In cases where S appears to be agreeing with A, *e.g.* (2), this is because the REBUTTAL is not targeted at the proposition that A has just explicitly uttered (which S may in fact agree with), but at an implicit proposition that that utterance has induced. The suggestion that the REBUTTAL is ‘obvious’, seen most clearly from a felicity condition requiring the REBUTTAL to be epistemically ‘accessible’ to A, is formalized as a presupposition on the Common Ground.

To formalize the meaning of *wàt*, I draw upon Gunlogson’s (2003) definition of a discourse context as constitutive of interlocutors’ *commitment sets*, and of the effect of a falling declarative as updating the Speaker’s cs but not the Addressee’s (4):

- (3) Let a discourse context $C_{\{A,S\}}$ be $\langle cs_A, cs_S \rangle$, where:
 $cs_{X \in \{A,S\}} = \{w \in W : \text{the propositions representing X’s public beliefs are all true in } w\}$
 where p is a public belief of X iff ‘X believes p ’ is a mutual belief of all discourse participants, and where a mutual belief is not only shared by all participants but recognized by all to be shared

- (4) $C + \downarrow S_{\text{decl}} = C'$ such that: a. $cs_{S_{\text{prk}}}(C') = cs_{S_{\text{prk}}}(C) + S_{\text{decl}}$; b. $cs_{A_{\text{addr}}}(C') = cs_{A_{\text{addr}}}(C)$

- (5) $\llbracket wàt \rrbracket = \lambda p \lambda q \lambda \langle cs_A, cs_S \rangle [cs_A \cap cs_S \subseteq p] \cdot \langle cs_A, cs_S + (\lambda w . \neg(p(w) \wedge q(w))) \rangle$

Given appropriate notions of contextual bias and interlocutors’ discourse goals, it can be shown that the *force* of the objection arises from what the particle indicates about the shape of the context together with assumptions about what makes a good discourse. It thus has a real pragmatic character (and is not just written directly into the denotation of the particle). The analysis in (5) also sheds light on an otherwise puzzling pattern in the possible uses of *wàt* in replies to questions.

Finally, it should be noted that *wàt* has broader crosslinguistic and theoretical relevance as it has close analogs in other languages, *e.g.* German *doch* and Russian *že*. Their striking similarities beg an explanation for why their meanings cluster and get grammaticized in otherwise unrelated languages.

References

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