Queen Mary
University of London

Randolph Quirk Fellow 2022

Professor Kathryn Davidson
(Harvard University)

Meaning across Modalities

12-15 September 2022

Workshops

ArtsTwo 3.16

Monday 12 September May, 14:00-16:00

Logical Connectives across Languages and Modalities

Tuesday 13 September, 14:00-16:00

Anaphora in a Semiotic Soup

Wednesday 14 September, 14:00-16:00

Quantification and Space

Workshops and lecture will be synchronous and live-streamed. For further information, including links, registration (for public lecture) and contact please consult the QMUL Linguistics Events website .

Public lecture

Skeel LT (People's Palace)

Thursday 15 September, 16:30-18:00

The Value of Symbolic Abstraction for Compositionality

Kathryn Davidson is the John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Humanities at Harvard Linguistics Department, where she directs the Meaning and Modality Lab. Her research is at the intersection of natural language semantics and pragmatics, with focus on crosslinguistic semantic data, especially from sign languages, as well as the use of experimental methodologies in semantics, semantic and pragmatic development, and language and cognition.

Kate received her PhD in 2011 in from the University of California, San Diego, and had postdoctoral appointments at the University of Connecticut and the Cognitive Science program at Yale University.

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Workshops

All workshops ArtsTwo 3.6

Monday 12 September, 14:00-16:00

Logical Connectives across Languages and Modalities

Negation, disjunction, and conjunction are simple symbolic operations, yet their counterparts in natural languages display wide variation in both forms and scope taking properties. I will discuss new evidence for underlying cross-linguistic similarities despite apparent appearance, and how depiction systems can interact with these operators.

Tuesday 13 September, 14:00-16:00

Anaphora in a Semiotic Soup

Within the formal semantic study of anaphora, a longstanding question is whether dynamic semantic accounts have advantages over static/situation-based accounts for connecting anaphora with their discourse antecedents. We will review the basic outlines of this argument and situate evidence from spoken and sign languages within it, building on new work on demonstratives and neopronouns.

Wednesday 14 September, 14:00-16:00

Quantification and Space

Quantification is a known source of linguistic and cognitive complexity, yet it is present in all human languages including the earliest stages of language conventionalization. I will discuss classical quantifiers in newer and established sign languages and how they build on the pronominal system , as well as on broadly available cognitive metaphors, to express domain restriction and quantificational scope.

Public Lecture

Thursday 15 September May, 16:30-18:00

The Value of Symbolic Abstraction for Compositionality

Although human language is the paradigmatic example of arbitrary symbols used to construct and communicate ideas, humans are also expert users of iconic depictions, which, like language, can be infinitely creative and precise. Given this, what is the value of having both systems? If we think in a symbolic Language of Thought, why do we also depict with icons? Conversely, given the creativity in iconic depiction, what's the additional value of symbolic abstraction? Is it simply that some things are more imageable than others? I suggest that the difference is not just what we can(not) picture, but what we can ask and answer: iconic representations inherently do not lend themselves to supporting inferences over alternatives e.g. for negation, question formation, focus and implicature. This difference explains some puzzles as well as absences in compositionality between the symbolic and iconic in spoken language, sign language, and gesture, and ultimately makes the case for a multi-format framework for modelling meaning in cognitive science.