Veridicality and (parenthetical) attitude predications   Christopher Potts, Stanford

In his 1973 paper 'Slifting', John Ross analyzed clauses like *Max, the papers said, is a Martian* as underlyingly (semantically) of the form *the papers said that Max is a martian*. On his approach, the discontinuous embedded clause raises and reassembles as an adjunct to the main clause. For this reason, he called such parentheticals *S(entence)-lifts* or *slifts*.

Many of Ross's arguments for this analysis are semantic: for the purposes of factivity, sequence-of-tense phenomena, and quantifier scope, the matrix clause behaves as though it were in the scope of the slift parenthetical. His syntactic analysis is extremely controversial, but the semantic aspects of it are not: even analyses that treat slifts as adverbials or grammaticized discourse markers assume that the main-clause is semantically subordinate.

The central question for this talk is how to square these semantic observations with the pragmatic fact that the main clause in these cases is typically taken to be *veridical* from the perspective of the speaker, i.e., that its content tends to become part of the speaker commitments. If I utter "Max, the papers said, is a martian", I am likely to be seen as committed to the proposition that Max is a martian. This seems initially at odds with semantic embedding. However, it is now widely known that "The papers said that Max is a martian" can also convey this level of commitment to the embedded clause. In both of these cases, *the papers said* plays an evidential role, indicating the speaker's grounds for asserting the complement.

Building on evidence drawn from the Penn Discourse Treebank,[1] the FactBank corpus,[2] and the Stanford pragmatic extension of FactBank,[3] I show that (i) both standard embedding and slifts frequently manifest evidential readings but (ii) slifts reliably generate stronger levels of speaker commitment. Point (ii) might seem to suggest that we need a special semantic analysis for slifted clauses, but I argue that this is not so: if we pay close attention to information-structuring principles and think of discourse as structured by abstract questions under discussion, then we can account for (i) and (ii) without departing from a standard semantics for epistemic predications.

---

[1] http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~pdtb/
[2] http://www.ldc.upenn.edu/Catalog/CatalogEntry.jsp?catalogId=LDC2009T23
[3] http://christopherpotts.net/ling/data/factbank/