

PRIOR THEORIES, PASSING THEORIES, AND COMPOSITIONAL SEMANTICS

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A DAVIDSONISH ARGUMENT

1. Languages are individuated by their semantics
2. Semantics + context determines what is said
3. Only passing semantic theories can play this role.
4. We don't share passing theories.

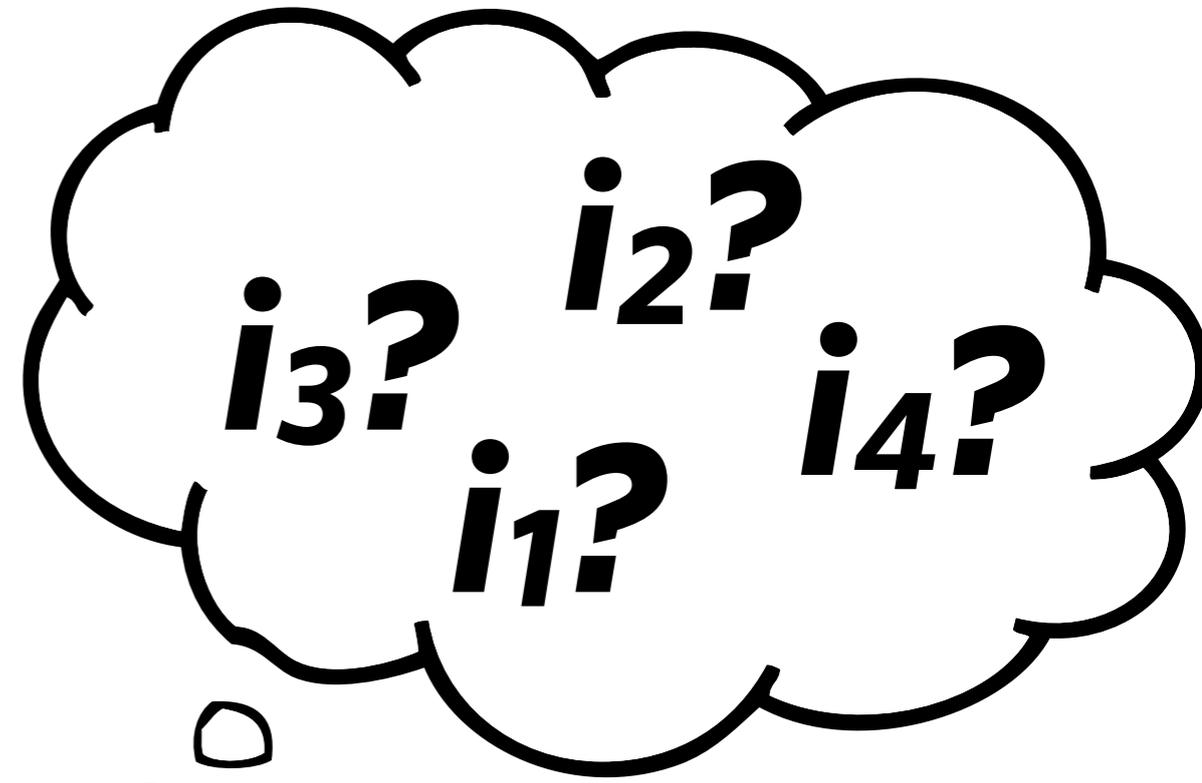
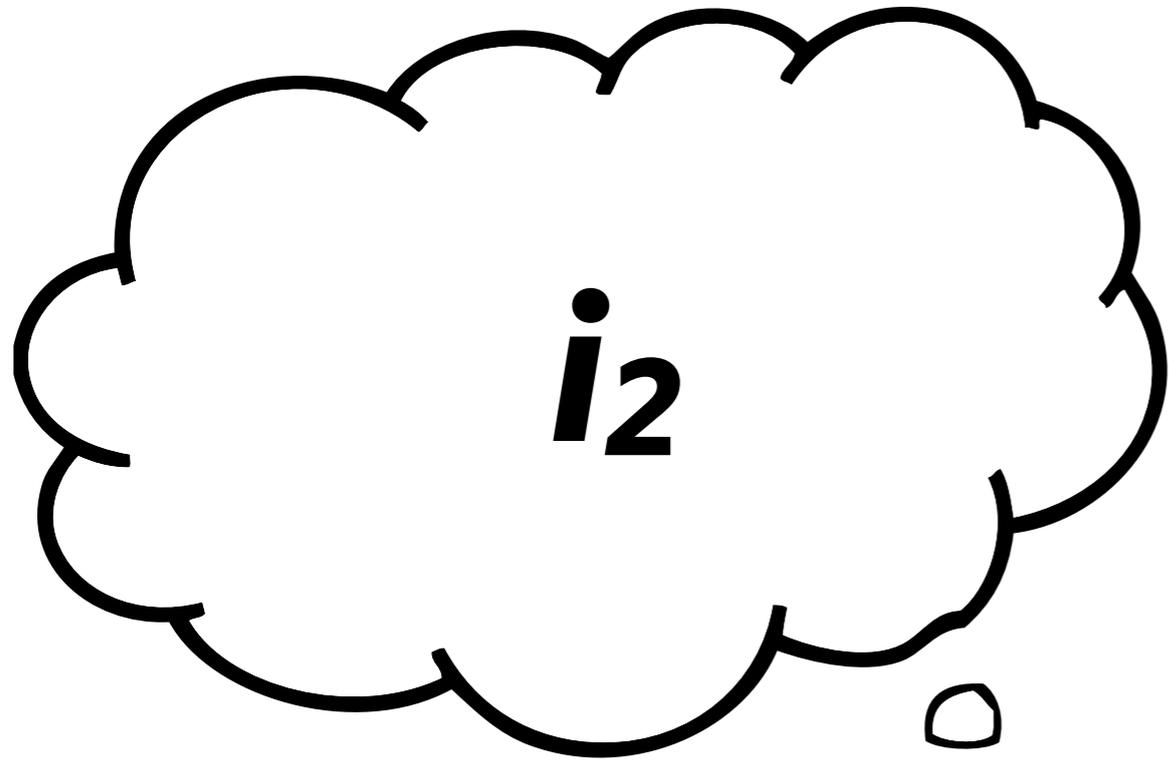
5. So: no shared language

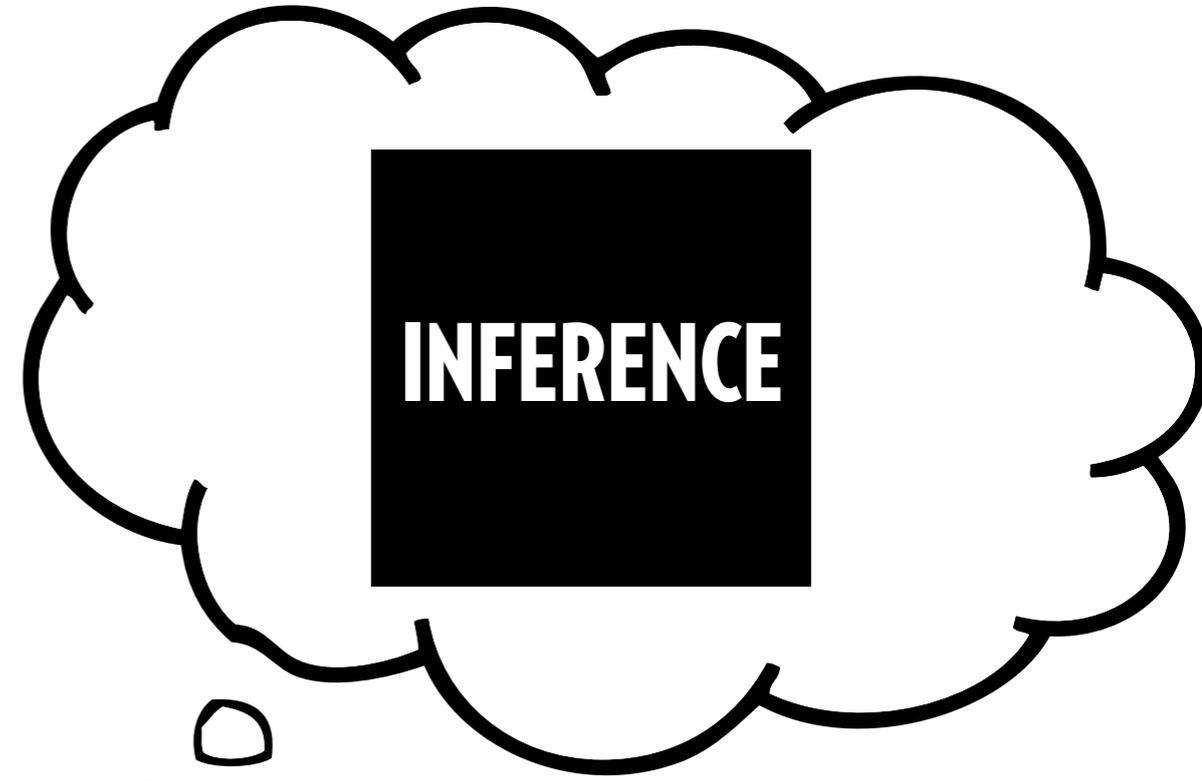
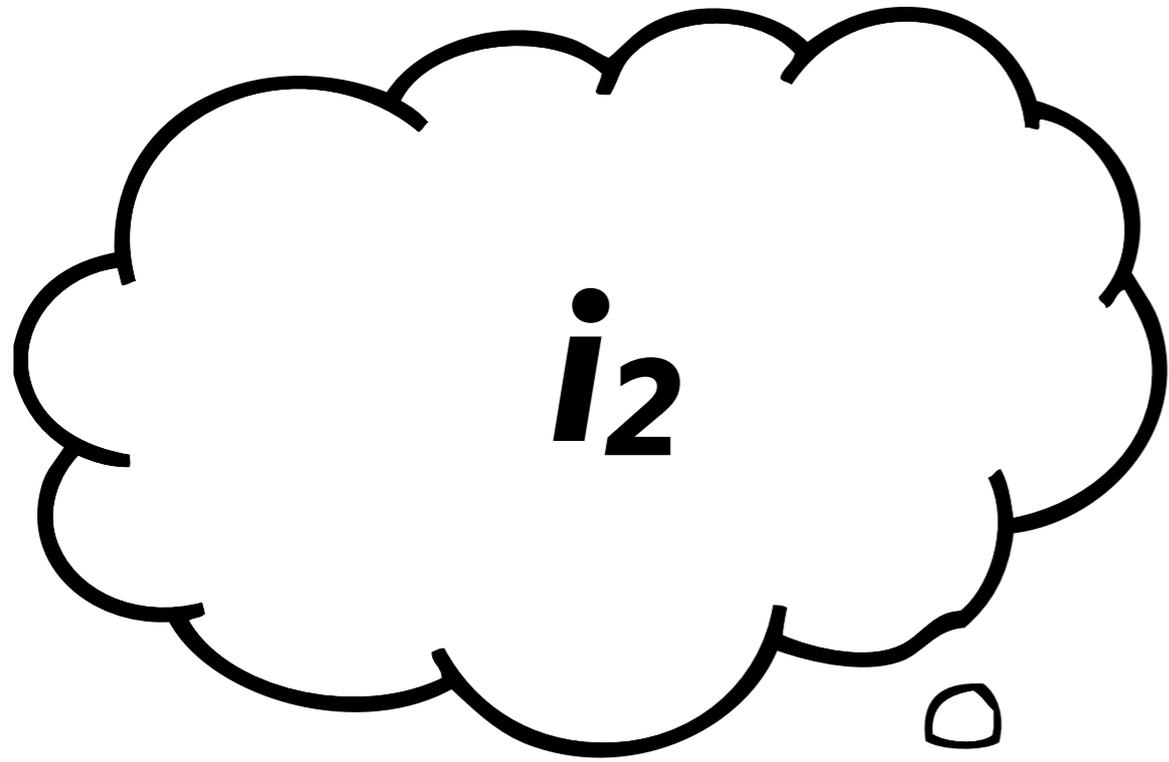
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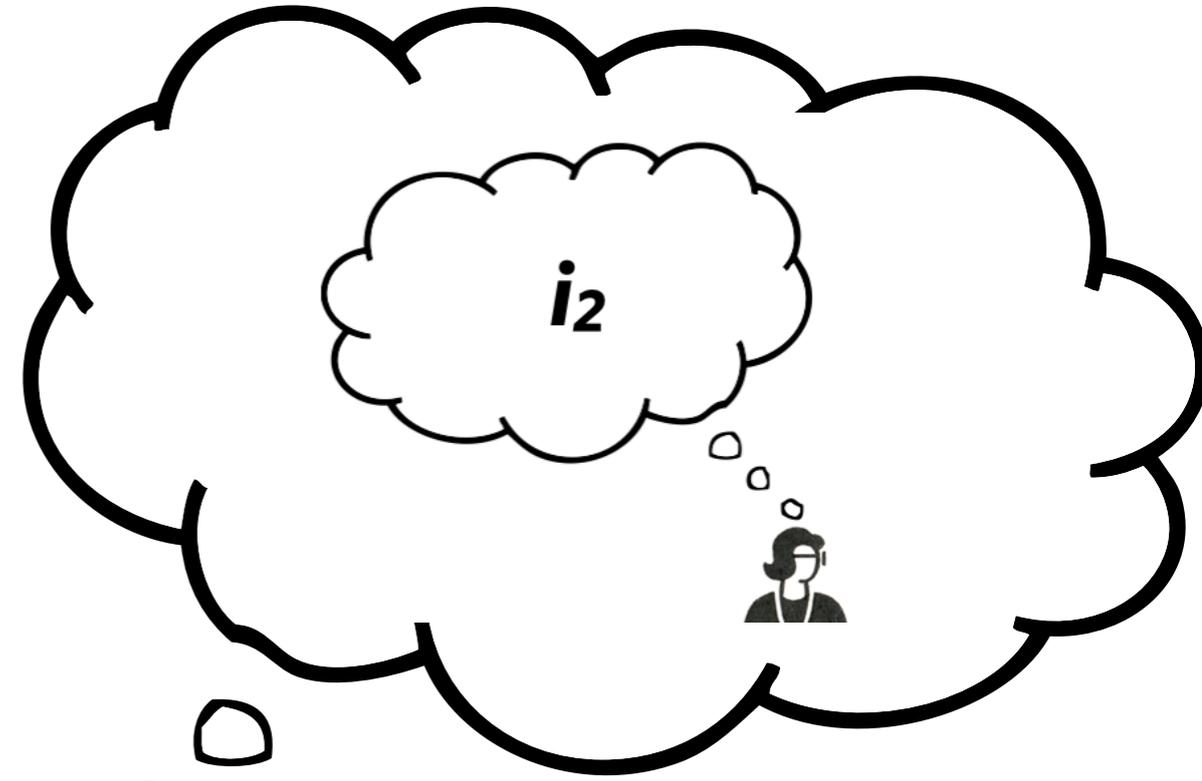
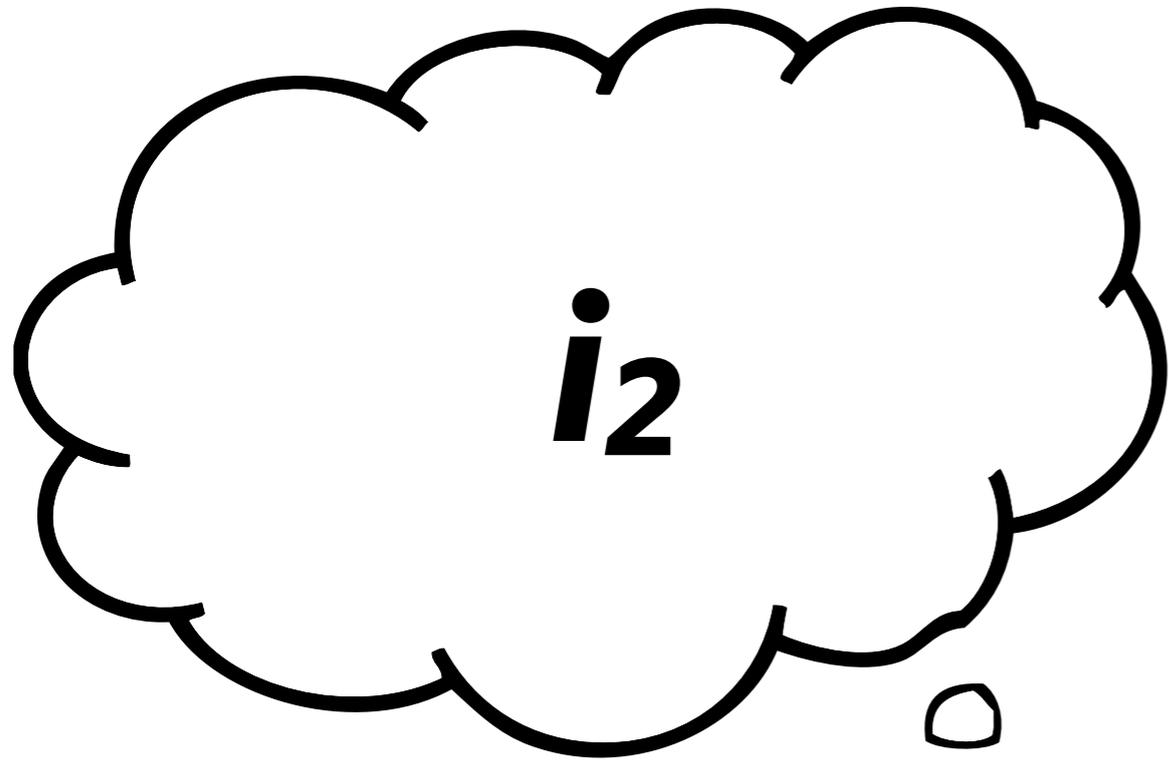
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-
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POSITIVE VIEW

Semantics is the study of a modular cognitive system that encodes and decodes incomplete and defeasible perceptual evidence of what speakers intend by their utterances.







MEANING AND INTENDING

By doing something, x , S , **MEANT** something iff, for some audience, A , and response **R**, S did x intending

(i) A to have a certain response **R**

(ii) A to recognise that S did x intending (1)

IMPLICATING (SUPER-GRICEAN VERSION)

(from forthcoming work with Stephen Neale; cf. Keiser (forthcoming))

U **INDIRECTLY MEANT** that p in addressing an utterance of x to A iff:

- (i) S meant that p by uttering x ;
- (ii) There is some q such that
 - (a) S meant that q by uttering x and
 - (b) S uttered x intending A to recognize that S intended A to believe that p on the basis of recognizing that S intended A to believe that q .

SAYING (SUPER-GRICEAN VERSION)

(from forthcoming work with Stephen Neale; cf. Keiser (forthcoming))

S **DIRECTLY MEANT** that p in addressing an utterance of x to A iff:

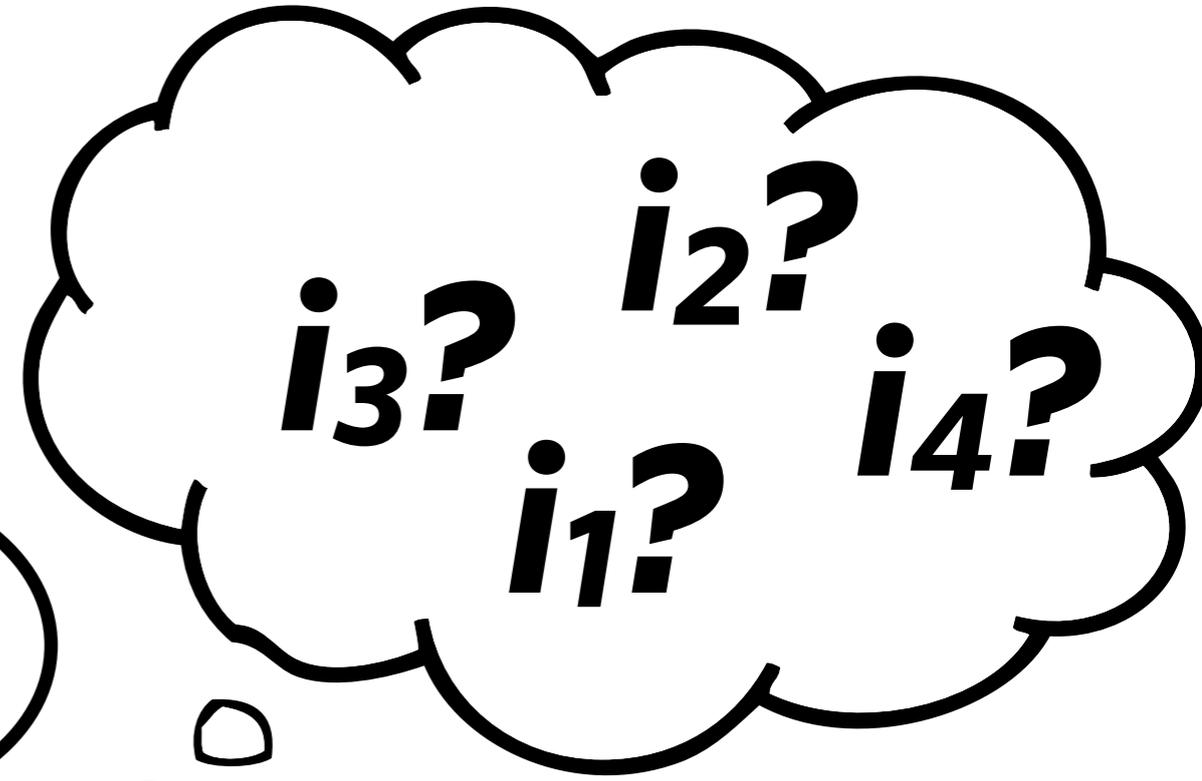
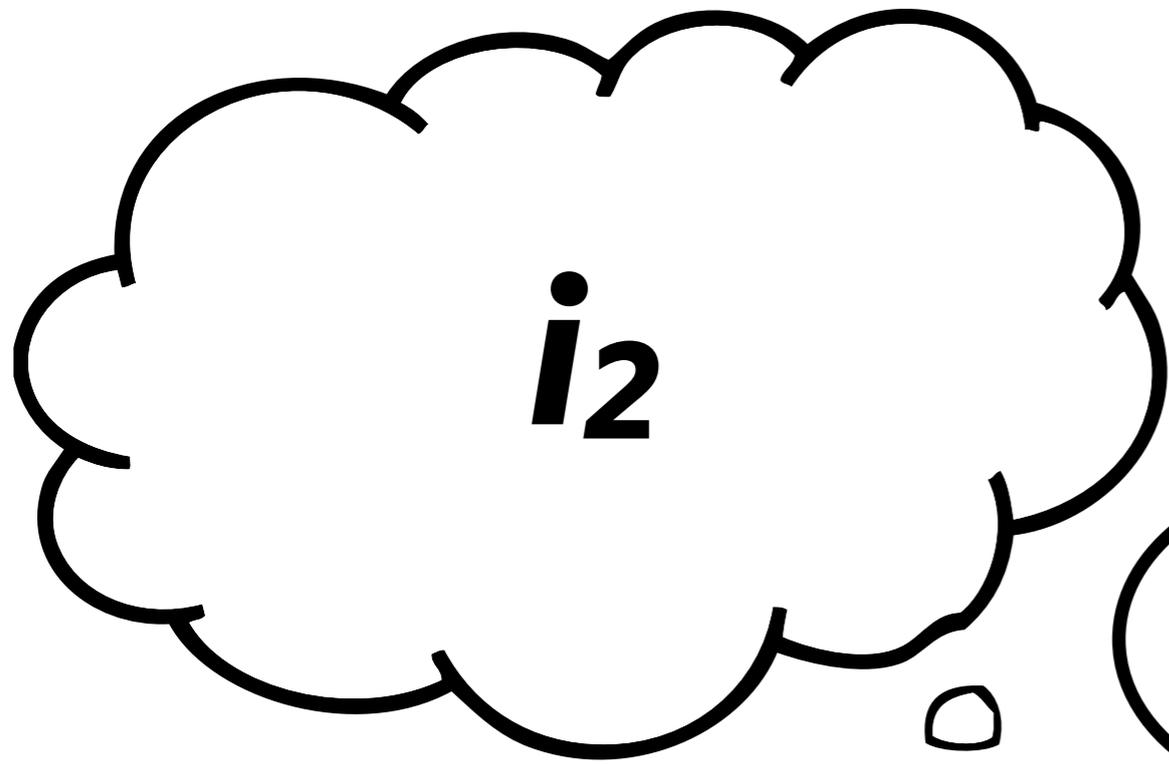
- (i) S meant that p by uttering x ;
- (ii) There is no proposition q such that
 - (a) S meant that q by uttering x and
 - (b) S uttered x intending A to recognize that S intended for A to believe that p on the basis of recognizing S 's intention that S intended A to believe that q .

INDIRECT MEANING WITHOUT LANGUAGE

- (1) By yawning ostentatiously, I **DIRECTLY MEANT** that I was tired.
- (2) By yawning ostentatiously, I **INDIRECTLY MEANT** that you should leave.

WHAT IS SAID NEEDN'T MATCH SEMANTIC MEANING

By saying 'Texas has a lot of electrical votes', Yogi Berra **DIRECTLY MEANT (SAID)** that Texas has a lot of electoral votes.



i_2

$i_3?$ $i_2?$
 $i_1?$ $i_4?$

i_{2-3}



i_2

i_{2-3}

$i_3?$ $i_2?$ ~~$i_1?$~~ ~~$i_4?$~~



*intention to
refer to **this
month***

now

***this month?
this minute?
yesterday?
Nov. 3rd?***



*intention to
refer to **this
month***

now

***this month?
this minute?
~~yesterday?~~
~~Nov. 3rd?~~***



$i_1?$
 $i_2?$
 $i_3?$
 $i_4?$



i_2

$i_1?$
 $i_2?$
 $i_3?$
 $i_4?$

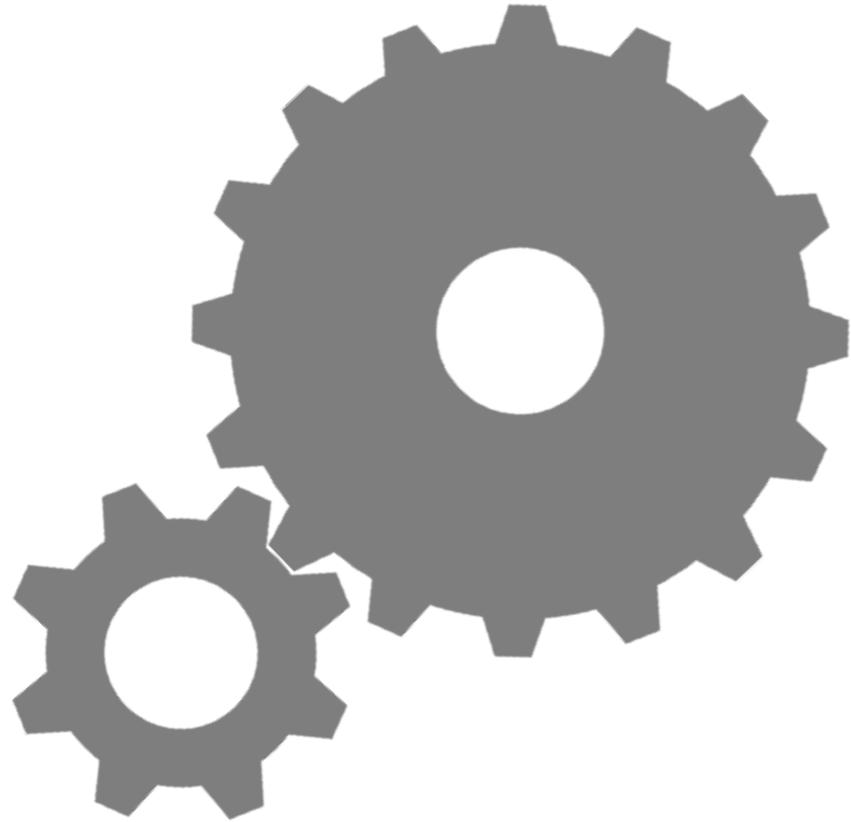


$i_2?$
 $i_3?$



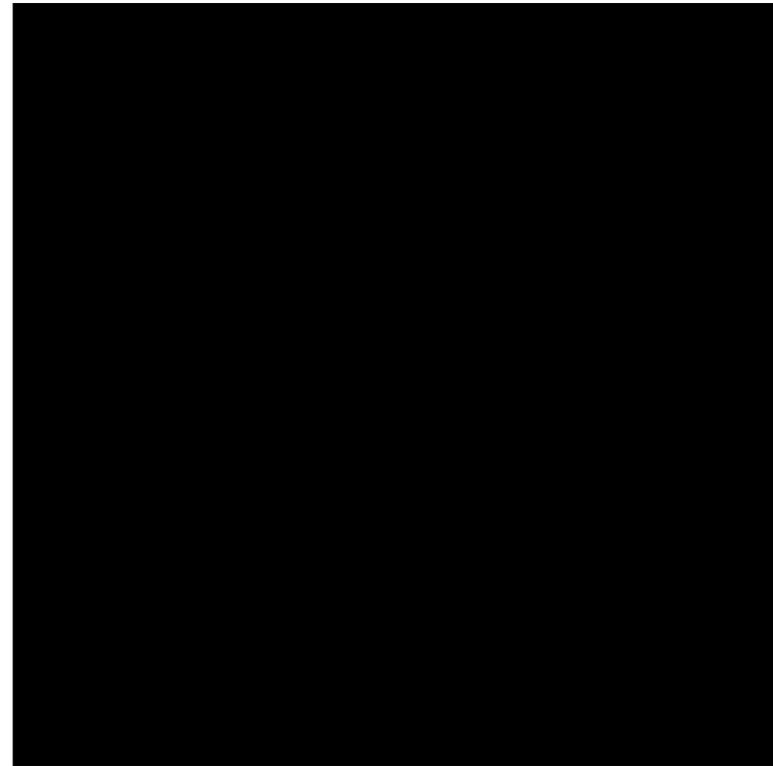
i_2

MODULAR PROCESSES



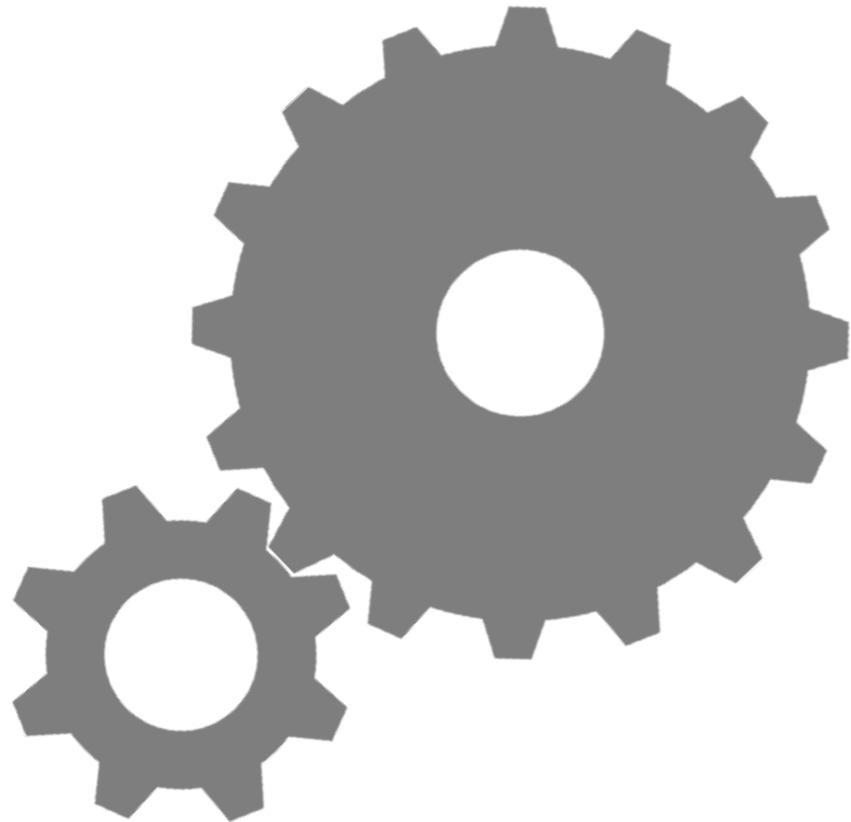
- encapsulated
- domain-specific
- fast, automatic
- algorithmic

CENTRAL PROCESSES



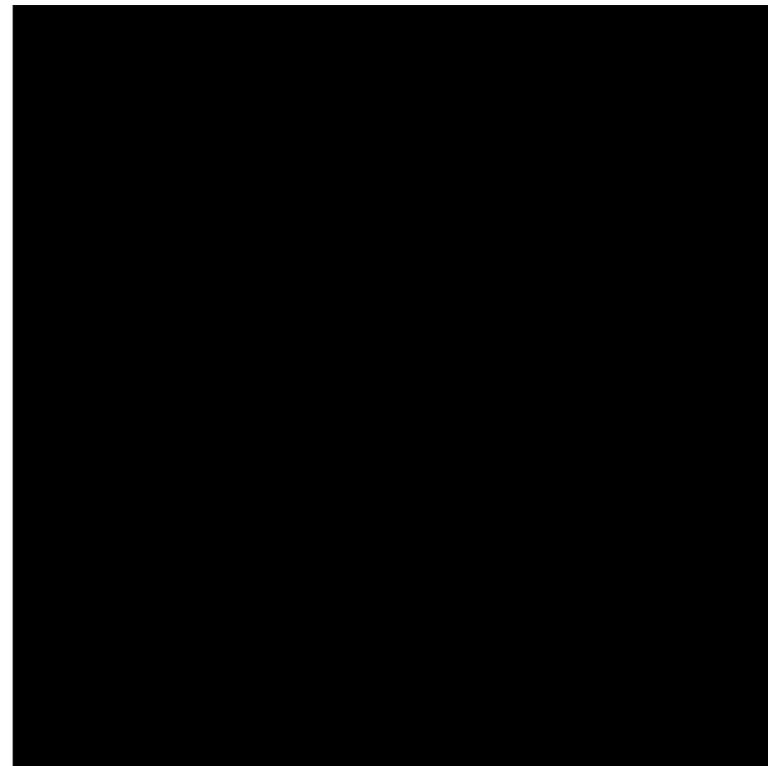
- isotropic
- general-purpose
- slow, effortful (sometimes)
- abductive

SEMANTIC COMPOSITION



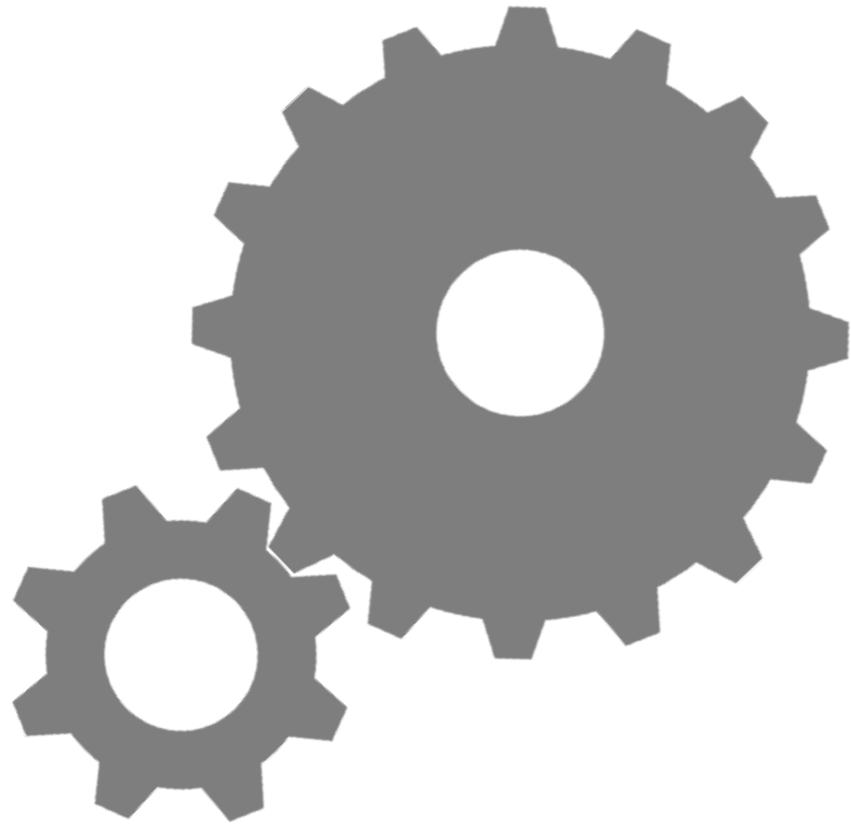
- encapsulated
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PRAGMATIC INFERENCE



- isotropic
- general-purpose
- slow, effortful (sometimes)
- abductive

SEMANTIC COMPOSITION



- encapsulated
- domain-specific
- fast, automatic
- algorithmic

REFERENCE RESOLUTION



- isotropic
- general-purpose
- slow, effortful (sometimes)
- abductive

$$\llbracket \text{every} \rrbracket^w = \lambda \Phi_{et} . \lambda \Psi_{et} . (\forall x_e) \Phi(x) \Rightarrow \Psi(x)$$

“He’s drinking again!”

COMMUNICATION & COGNITION

**m-intention for
A to believe p**

S

A

COMMUNICATION & COGNITION

**m-intention for
A to believe p**



**encodes a
rough-grained
property φ of p
in a sentence σ**

S

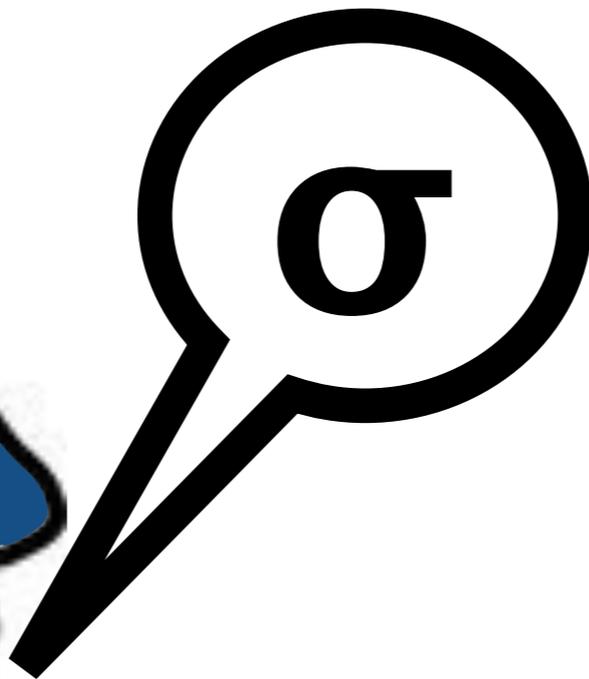
A

COMMUNICATION & COGNITION

**m-intention for
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S

A

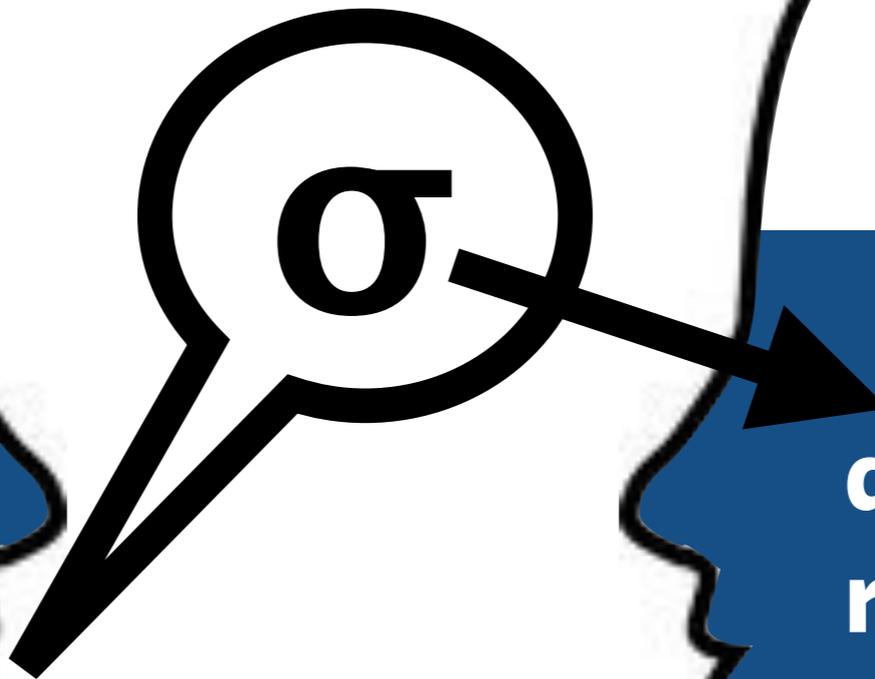
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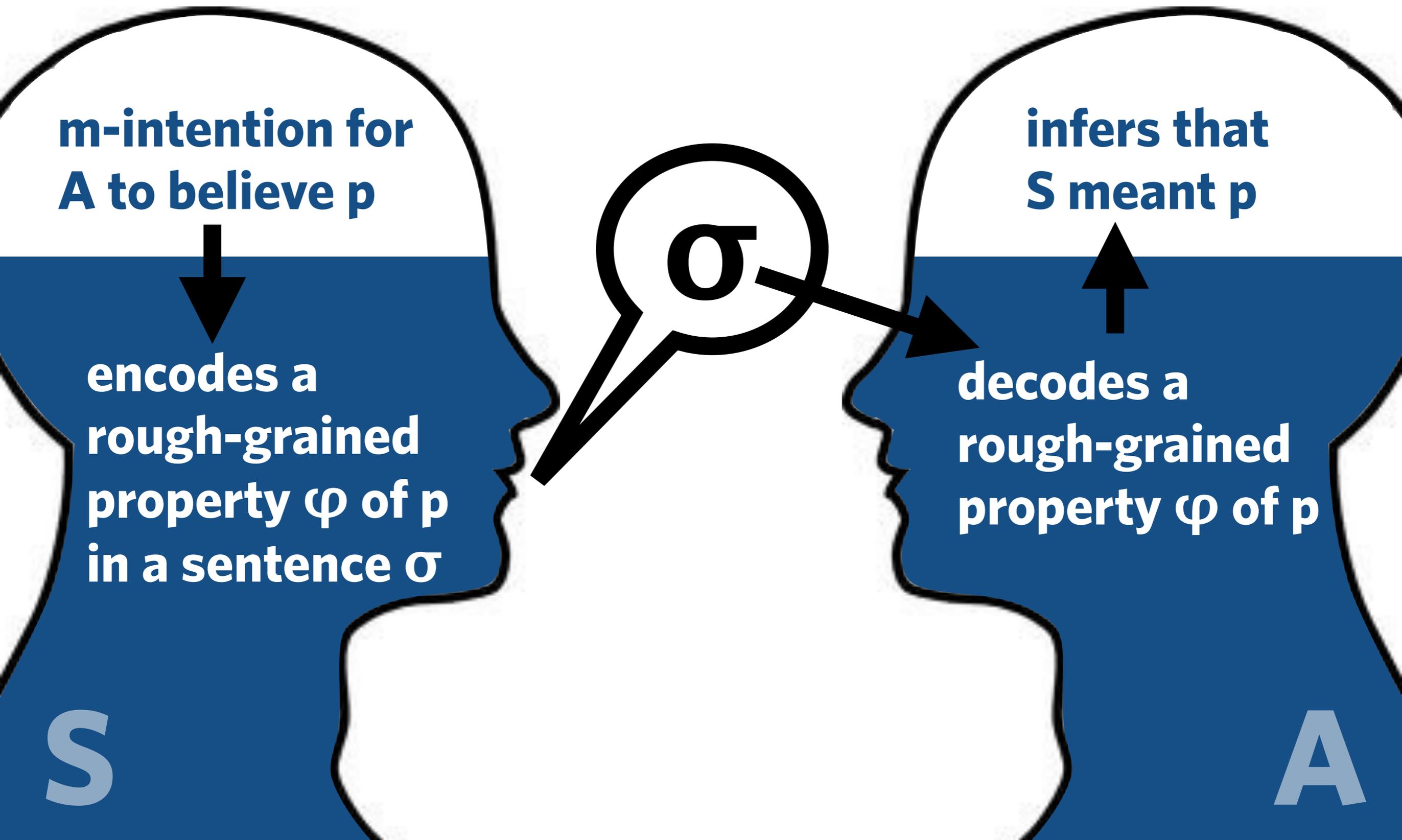
S



**decodes a
rough-grained
property φ of p**

A

COMMUNICATION & COGNITION



**m-intention for
A to believe p**



**encodes a
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S

σ

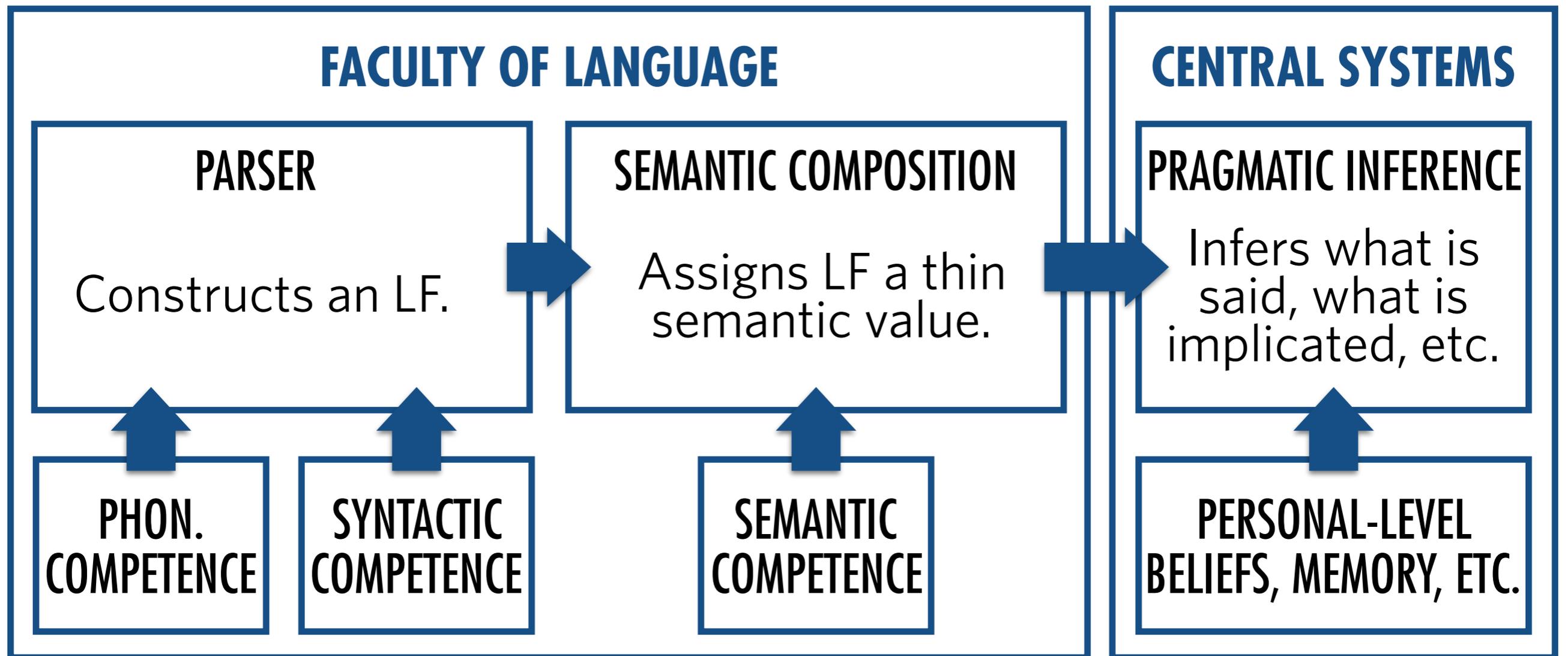
**infers that
S meant p**



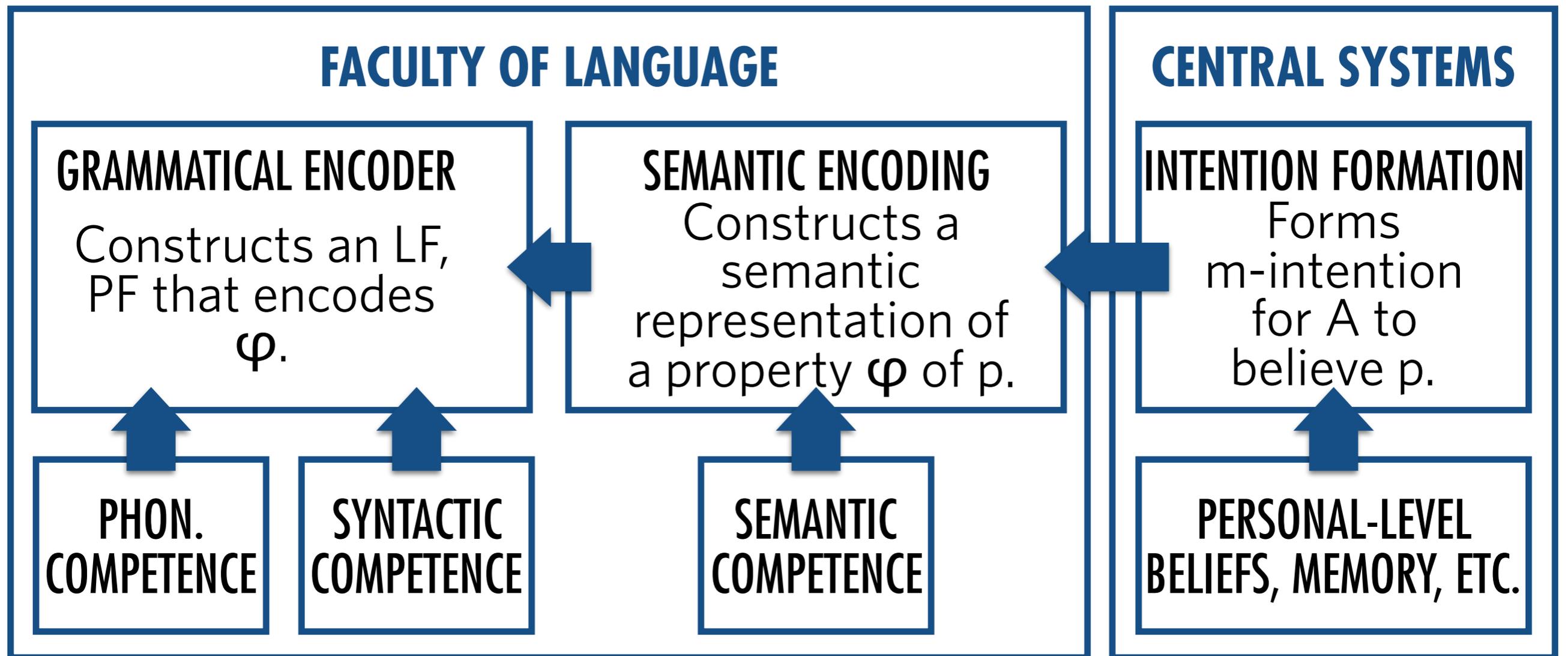
**decodes a
rough-grained
property φ of p**

A

SPEECH COMPREHENSION



SPEECH PRODUCTION



INCOMPLETE EVIDENCE

The semantic value of a sentence is not a context-relativized proposition

It is a rough-grained property of propositions that tells hearers what general kind of proposition is “normally” meant with the sentence.

VON FINTEL & HEIM (2011):

$\llbracket \text{He}_1 \text{ smokes} \rrbracket^g = \lambda w . g(1) \text{ smokes at } w$

UPDATE:

$\llbracket \text{He smokes} \rrbracket$
 $= \lambda p_{st} . (\exists x_e : x \text{ is male})(p = \lambda w_s . x \text{ smokes at } w)$

(details in my paper, "Semantics without Semantic Content")

VON FINTEL & HEIM (2011):

$\llbracket \text{John smokes} \rrbracket^g = \lambda w . \text{John smokes at } w$

UPDATE:

$\llbracket \text{John smokes} \rrbracket$

$= \lambda p_{st} . (\exists x_e : x \text{ is called John})(p = \lambda w_s . x \text{ smokes at } w)$

(details in my paper, "Semantics without Semantic Content")

RUSSELL, SOAMES:

$$\llbracket \text{He}_1 \text{ smokes} \rrbracket^g = \langle g(1), \text{SMOKES} \rangle$$

UPDATE:

$$\begin{aligned} & \llbracket \text{He smokes} \rrbracket \\ = & \lambda p_{st} . (\exists x_e : x \text{ is male})(p = \langle x, \text{SMOKES} \rangle) \end{aligned}$$

If there exists an x such that a speaker of 'he smokes' refers with the utterance of 'he' therein to x and to nothing else, then this sentence, as uttered on this occasion, is true if and only if x smokes.

cf. Higginbotham (1994): 'Priorities in the philosophy of thought', pp.92-3

DEFEASIBLE EVIDENCE

If the speaker of 'he smokes' refers with the utterance of 'he' therein to x and to nothing else, then this sentence, as uttered in this context, is true if and only if x smokes.

—Higginbotham (1994): 'Priorities in the philosophy of thought', pp.92-3

“He’s a fine friend.”

MAKING AS IF TO MEAN

(from forthcoming work with Stephen Neale)

S **MADE AS IF TO MEAN** p in addressing an utterance of x to A iff:

S intended A to consider and reject the possibility that S meant p , for some further purpose...

“He’s a fine friend.”

CANCELLABILITY

“They had a baby and got married, but not in that order.”

Alice and Sarah are in a crowded train; Alice, who is obviously able-bodied, is sprawled across two seats, and Sarah is standing. Sarah says to Alice: 'I'm curious as to whether it would be physically possible for you to make room for someone else to sit down.' The implicature is that Alice should make room. [...]

Suppose now that Sarah adds: 'Not that you should make room, I'm just curious.' This has the form of an explicit cancellation of the implicature. Nevertheless, the implicature is not cancelled. Sarah is still suggesting, even more rudely, that Alice should make room. (Weiner 2006: 128)

MALAPROPISM

“Texas has a lot of electrical votes.”

NEOLOGISM

“I have found my first visit to Tampa to be extremely blork.”

“I have found my first visit to Tampa to be extremely blork.”

$\llbracket \text{Tampa is blork} \rrbracket = \lambda p_{st} .$

$(\exists F_{et} : F \text{ is what the speaker meant by 'blork'})$

$(p = \lambda w_s . \text{Tampa is } F \text{ at } w)$

SHARED LANGUAGE?

[.]

COMMUNICATIVE DISPOSITIONS

PERFORMATIVE DISPOSITION

If I were to have an intention of kind X, I would produce an utterance of kind Y.

INTERPRETIVE DISPOSITION

If you were to observe me producing an utterance of kind Y, you would make a provisional perceptual judgment that I produced it with a intention of kind X.

$$[\cdot] = \{\langle e^1, m^1 \rangle, \langle e^2, m^2 \rangle, \langle e^3, m^3 \rangle, \langle e^4, m^4 \rangle \dots\}$$

$$\{\langle e^1, m^1 \rangle, \langle e^2, m^2 \rangle, \langle e^3, m^3 \rangle, \langle e^4, m^4 \rangle\}$$

$$\{\langle e^1, m^1 \rangle, \langle e^2, m^3 \rangle, \langle e^3, m^2 \rangle, \langle e^4, m^4 \rangle\}$$

$\{\langle e^1, m^1 \rangle, \langle e^2, m^2 \rangle, \langle e^3, m^3 \rangle, \langle e^4, m^4 \rangle\}$

$\{\langle e^1, m^1 \rangle, \langle e^2, m^3 \rangle, \langle e^3, m^2 \rangle, \langle e^4, m^4 \rangle\}$

CONVENTION?

A GROUNDING QUESTION

In virtue of what facts at t are the members of a given community coordinated at t ?

A CAUSAL QUESTION

How do states of coordination arise and persist?

CONCLUSIONS

- Semantic theories are prior theories, not passing theories.
- A prior theory is a theory of semantic competence.
- Semantic competence is a body of information drawn on by a modular system that encodes and decodes richly structured, but partial and defeasible evidence of speakers' intentions.
- Two speakers share a language insofar as the prior theories describing them overlap.

THANKS