(In)definite tense

In this talk I will present some ideas, partly unpublished, of Arnim von Stechow on tense, the pluperfect and dynamic semantics.

While it seems uncontroversial to analyse Past and Future tenses as relational (reference time before/after perspective time), there is a long standing issue in the literature as to the referential status of the reference time. The tradition going back to Prior 1967 treats the reference time as indefinite, while Partee 1973 argues for a definite analysis of tense. We argue that this issue cannot be solved straightforwardly since tenses are ambiguous between an indefinite and a definite interpretation. The claim holds for the simple past and the future in main clauses, and for the pluperfect in Germanic and Romance languages. Occasionally the claim holds even of aspect, e.g. in Russian.

Our focus in this talk will be on the pluperfect which represents a nice illustration of our ambiguity hypothesis: the higher tense is anaphoric/definite and the lower tense is indefinite.

The data invite a dynamic account. Indefinite terms will therefore be analysed as introducing a new discourse marker, while definite terms will be anaphoric to an old discourse marker and are in fact entirely presupposed. We will use a simplified system which incorporates the basic insights of Heim’s dissertation (1982).