On saying less with more

Stephanie Solt
Leibniz-Centre General Linguistics (ZAS)

Attenuators are scalar modifiers that produce weaker statements than salient alternatives, including often the corresponding unmodified form (Israel 2011). Examples of English attenuators are given in (1)-(4):

(1) The house is **pretty** large.
(2) Mabel read **about** 20 books.
(3) Mabel didn't drink **much** coffee.
(4) The coffee isn't **exactly** hot.

In this talk, I give an overview of three effects that arise from using a more complex form to make a less informative assertion, including: i) polarity sensitivity – attenuators tend to be PPIs (as in (1),(2)) or NPIs (as in (3),(4)), though not necessarily on all of their uses; ii) scalar implicature – (3), for example, implicates that Mabel drank some amount of coffee; and iii) understatement – e.g. (4) can be read as a hedged statement that the coffee isn't hot in the strictest sense, but most naturally receives a strengthened interpretation as an ironic assertion that the coffee is quite cold indeed.

How should the class of attenuators be characterized (if there in fact is such a class)? What separates their polarity-sensitive uses from those on which they are not polarity sensitive? And why do some pattern as PPIs while others are NPIs? Finally, is it possible to account for all three of the above phenomena observed with attenuators -- polarity sensitivity, scalar implicatures and understatement – within a unified formal framework?

I will argue for an account according to which the behavior of attenuators derives from the logic of reasoning about alternatives (Krifka 1995, Katzir 2007, Chierchia 2013, Spector 2014 and many others) with crucial roles played by the vagueness of attenuator-modified forms, the nature of alternative sets and the structure of the underlying measurement scales.