

**I hold these truths to be self-evident: The semantic and pragmatic contributions of *of course***  
Margaret Kroll & Tom Roberts, UC Santa Cruz

**Introduction.** The English discourse particle *of course* is used to mark a proposition as being ‘uncontroversial’, and often occurs in responses to both questions and assertions.

- (1) A: What did Maude make for the potluck?  
B: She made her famous kumquat strudel, **of course**.

But what is ‘uncontroversiality’? Intuitively, B’s response in (1) conveys that A finds it obvious that Maude made strudel, and moreover, that B ‘should have’ known that. Previous accounts of uncontroversiality for the similar German particle *ja* suggest that *ja* lexically encodes the requirement that *p* be obvious in some respect for all participants in a discourse. (Kaufmann & Kaufmann 2012, Grosz 2010, a.m.o.) But while *ja* is typically treated as marking a proposition as being ‘uncontroversial’ for all participants in a discourse, we argue that a more fine-grained approach is needed for *of course*. Specifically, we propose *of course* marks uncontroversiality of a proposition *for the speaker*, and that the apparent ‘obviousness’ of *p* for the addressee in (1) is derived pragmatically.

**Uncontroversial for whom?** *Of course* cannot be used with a proposition that contradicts the speaker’s expectations; this inference is non-defeasible.

- (2) *Maude is a known vegan who hates to touch meat.*  
A: What did Maude make for the potluck?  
B: A rack of lamb, (surprisingly/**#of course**).

While *of course p* is often used to indicate the addressee should also take *p* for granted, as in (1), this inference need not always hold, such as in a sequence of instructions (Holmes 1988). This indicates addressee uncontroversiality is not a semantic component of *of course*.

- (3) *A teaching B to drive a stick shift:*  
You press the clutch to shift into first gear, and then **of course** you press the clutch again to brake to a stop.

**Comparison to *ja*.** *Of course* is superficially very similar to the German particle *ja*, in that it is generally used to mark information as being obvious given world knowledge, the discourse context, the common ground, etc. However, *ja p* can felicitously be used in cases where the speaker had no particular expectation of *p*’s truth, *of course p* cannot. We propose that this is because *of course p* cannot felicitously be used if the speaker’s only evidence for *p* is in the conversational context:

- (4) *A sees B for the first time in bright sunlight and realizes B’s eye color. A says:*  
a. *Du hast ja grüne Augen!* ‘You have JA green eyes!’ (Grosz 2010: 7)  
b. **#Of course** you have green eyes!/You have green eyes, **of course!**

**Analysis.** We propose that *of course p* marks *p* as uncontroversial for the speaker—that is, significantly more likely than its focus alternatives—in the following way:

- (5) Let *V* be the set of propositions *v* gained by direct evidence of *p*. Then *p* is uncontroversial for a speaker *s* at time *t* given an epistemic probability space  $\langle E_{stw}, Pr_{stw} \rangle$  and a contextually given probability threshold  $\theta$  on  $(0,1]$ , for all  $q \in \llbracket p \rrbracket^f$ , for  $E_{stw} - V$ ,  $Pr(p) - Pr(q) > \theta$ .

The apparent uncontroversiality for the addressee is then derived from the combination of speaker uncontroversiality and the default assumption of the speaker that the addressee has access to the same sort of background knowledge that she does.