Language Science Colloquium 2017-18

Monday, April 23rd

Time: 11:00-12:30 pm
Location: 442 Social Sciences Tower
Lunch provided.

Victor Ferreira, University of California, San Diego

Syntactic Entrainment as a Candidate Mechanism for Learning the Meanings of Syntactic Constructions

In natural language, syntactic structures not only determine permissible linguistic patterns and convey who did what to whom; they also can convey aspects of event meaning. For example, in English, one explanation for why "the man sent the address the letter" sounds odd (compared to "the man sent the woman the letter") is that the relevant syntactic structure, the double object, conveys successful transfer of possession (and whereas women can take possession of letters, addresses generally cannot). In this talk, I describe a series of experiments investigating a possible mechanism by which such meanings might be learned and tuned. Experimenters and subjects described sets of twelve scenes to one another. Rounds began with the experimenter describing each scene using particular syntactic structures (e.g., "the man is giving the doctor a prescription" vs "the man is giving the prescription to the doctor"), manipulated across subjects and scenes. Subjects then described the same scenes back. Results showed that when subjects described scenes, they repeated the same structures they heard experimenters use for that scene (up to 21 trials earlier), an effect we term "syntactic entrainment." Follow-up experiments assessed whether syntactic entrainment is person-specific across a range of experimental conditions. Taken together, the experiments show that the nature of syntactic entrainment positions it well as a possible explanation for how syntactic structures get and tune their meanings.

RSVP Patty Jones at: patty.jones@uci.edu