



Emory Program
in Linguistics

ABSTRACT BOOKLET

2021 Spring Emory Linguistics
Virtual Conference

Wednesday, May 5, 2021
12:00pm - 1:30pm EDT

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Jane Farrell, Daisy Kim & Marvin Richards

“Ain’t Ain’t a Word”: Stigma Against Southern Speech in the Classroom

Shawna Dempsey

This research explores whether teachers’ prior experience with a student’s dialect influences grading outcomes. Specifically, I am interested in how negative language attitudes about Southern American English affect how teachers grade students who speak this variety as compared to “standard”-sounding students. This question stems from the nature of the education system as a language authority, which plays a crucial role in spreading standard language ideology (Lippi-Green, 2012). As such, studying the implicit biases that these authorities exercise toward students who speak with non-standard dialects when providing feedback is crucial for equity in the education system. In this study, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: Southern accent or standard accent. Participants evaluated two student assignments, a student presentation and an essay. First, participants observed a student presentation with all variables held constant except the student’s accent, which reflected the condition to which participants had been assigned. Participants then provided feedback regarding the presentation. Then, all participants evaluated and graded a student essay (identical between conditions) on an unrelated topic, which was explicitly attributed to the student presenter. The feedback and grades of each assignment were then compared between conditions. Moreover, grader comments were analyzed to further understand the grades administered. While the grades were not statistically different between conditions, Southern condition grades varied more widely than standard condition grades. This result demonstrates the lack of consensus that Southern condition graders had as compared to standard condition graders. These results are discussed in light of educator characteristics and research design. Practical implications are also discussed.

WISeN: Widely Interpretable Semantic Network for Richer Meaning Representation

Lydia Feng

Many semantic annotations currently utilize Abstract Meaning Representation and PropBank frameset files to represent meaning. This scheme relies on arbitrary predicate-argument structures comprising unintuitive numbered arguments, fine-grained sense-disambiguation, and high start-up costs. To address these issues, we present a new annotation scheme, WISeN, that prioritizes semantic roles over numbered arguments and does away with sense-disambiguation. This scheme aims to be more intuitive for annotators and more interpretable by parsers. We evaluate this annotation scheme with a two-part experiment. First, we measure speed and accuracy of manual annotations. Second, we train a parser on both AMR and WISeN annotations and measure model accuracy. The results show that WISeN supports improved parser performance and increased inter-annotator agreement without sacrificing annotation speed compared to AMR. As such, we advocate for the adoption of WISeN as an annotation scheme for semantic representations.

Visualising Merge as a Three-Dimensional Constructed Language

Keara Harris

Language as we know it is bound in time; in both spoken and signed varieties, we experience language in a linear form. However, linguists such as Noam Chomsky suggest that language is not linear at all. Rather, the rules and meanings of language are bound by hierarchical structures. This paper aims to explore the idea of hierarchical structure in language by taking Chomsky’s hypothesis of Merge seriously and using it to create a constructed language in three-dimensional space. The model will be able to represent an unlimited array of hierarchical structures of language. I will additionally explore the implications of such a structure on language acquisition. This paper represents an in-depth, theoretical thought experiment into Chomsky’s Merge and the idea of universal grammar.

The Syntax of Palestinian Arabic Modal Verbs

Rammi Quah

Modal verbs are a class of verbs that communicate various and complicated meanings such as possibility, obligation, ability, and supposition and usually possess special grammatical properties across languages. The nature of their use across the linguistic varieties of Arabic makes it unclear on the surface whether modal constructions form sentences with one clause or with two, and research is especially scarce on this question with regards to Arabic's nonstandard varieties. Through a series of verbal elicitation interviews with a speaker of Palestinian Arabic, we examined the ways in which the specific linguistic variety forms modal constructions and discovered that it is possible to produce both monoclausal and biclausal modal sentences. In Palestinian Arabic, an apparent monoclausal modal sentence is produced when a complementizer is not present, and an apparent biclausal modal sentence is produced when a complementizer is present. These findings provoke further discussion about what defines and constitutes a clause and its structural hierarchy, the properties of modal verbs across languages, and more detailed subtopics concerning nonstandard Arabic varieties.

“In These Unprecedented Times”: A Genre Analysis of American University Reopening Statements during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Eva Rothenberg

Crisis communication helps institutions manage narratives surrounding crises. Previous linguistic studies exploring crisis management genres have focused on crises stemming from internal institutional wrongdoing or negligence. However, this study used genre analysis and corpus-based discourse analysis to better understand crisis management strategies of American universities amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, the crisis occurred outside of the institutions in question, but still directly affected their ability to function. Using Swales' (1990a) Creating a Research Space (CARS) model as a springboard, I developed a Move-Step framework and applied these patterns to a corpus of 50 emails sent out by four-year universities and colleges in the United States. These communications detail their reopening plans for the Fall 2020 semester. Contrary to the ostensible goal of these communications, this study found that these emails were not as focused on conveying logistical information as much as they revolved around asserting solidarity and strengthening the college community.

The Hairsapes of Chinese International Students

Qifan Wang

Under the background of the growing field of Linguistic Landscape studies that started to explore meaning-making systems in public other than languages, this study applies the Triadic Model of Linguistic Landscape analysis to investigate the hairstyles of Chinese international students as a semiotic system. Eleven Chinese international students who were studying at US colleges participated in online interviews with open-ended questions. They talked about stereotypes, expectations, and regulations on hairstyles on various occasions as well as their personal experiences and feelings regarding hairstyles. The researcher identified 11 conceived spaces that strongly influenced the participants' hairstyle choices. The participants' lived reactions to these conceived spaces were varied and even contradictory. The study extends the scope of Linguistic Landscape studies to hairstyles and thus expands the understanding of how meaning-making happens in public spaces. It also demonstrates that the meaning-making of hairstyles of these Chinese international students is based on existing expectations and stereotypes in the setting, and it reveals that the diversity of Chinese international students might be greater than expected.

Motivations of Student Medical Interpreters: Personal, Professional, or Altruistic?

Julie Wechsler

This study presents an interdisciplinary examination of the role, training, and motivation of undergraduate student medical interpreters. Interpretation is an essential part of an accessible healthcare system; when patients do not speak the same language as their doctors, they face poorer medical outcomes, decreased doctor-patient trust, and a diminished desire to seek medical care. When professional interpreters are not available, patients may rely on ad hoc interpreters, but their lack of training can be as detrimental as having no interpreter at all. Student volunteers, however, offer a solution to this problem. While not full-time interpreters, they receive official training, and thus can help fill the need for language services. Despite this particular capacity to help lower language barriers, and though much work has been done in linguistics and medical sociology on the purpose and role of professional interpreters, student volunteer interpreting has not been widely studied. In this work, semi-structured individual interviews with student interpreters were conducted to determine both how and why they volunteer their time to interpret. Using a thematic analysis framework, their motivations were found to fall under three general categories: (1) personal identity, as students often grew up speaking the language they interpret; (2) community engagement, because of the opportunity to make a direct impact on patients; and (3) pre-professional experience, since many of these students aspire to careers in healthcare. A greater understanding of these motivations adds to knowledge about language mediation and validates the utility of students in this role. Beyond the academic implications in linguistics, psychology, and medical sociology, this research also has direct applications for encouraging the development of student interpreter programs. Particularly in communities with high proportions of immigrants, and especially in fields such as healthcare, these students can contribute to making medical care as inclusive and accessible as possible.

Tigrinya: NPIs and their Licensing in Tigrinja

Angela Cao & Maddy Liotta

In this study, we discuss the syntactic constraints on the licensing of negative polarity items in Tigrinya, both locally and across clause boundaries. An example would be /wala Hanti/, which is analogous to English's "any." Through data drawn using distance elicitation sessions with a native speaker of the under-documented Semitic language, we explore the different types of locality conditions in which negative polarity items appear, an NPI's relationship with its most basic licenser, and why these contexts give rise to these items. For example, we observe that even if an NPI appears to be external to a relative clause, it can be licensed by negation within the relative clause. With these observations, we consider various hypotheses for why these licensing contexts justify usage of an NPI (such as how usage of an NPI may increase the utility of an utterance) and how these traits identify Tigrinya as uniquely Semitic. Finally, we conclude by taking a broad view of negative polarity items in Tigrinya by establishing distinguishing traits of categories in which speakers would choose to use a negative polarity utterance over an affirmative polarity utterance (or vice versa) in terms of utility, social constraints, and syntactic regularity.

Tone Correlation between Chinese Words and Sino-Vietnamese Words

Giang Dang

Due to a long history of language contact under Chinese domination, Vietnamese has borrowed many words from Literary Chinese during the Middle Chinese period. The tonal systems of the two languages have been extensively described; however, there has been no previous research that looks into how these two tonal systems interact in Sino-Vietnamese words. In my research, I seek to fill this gap by surveying the most common 100 Sino-Vietnamese words according to Alves (2017) to discover any parallels among the tones of these words and their corresponding modern Chinese words. I hypothesize that tones with similar tonal qualities will tend to correlate to each other. As Standard Modern Chinese has four tones and Vietnamese has six tones, there cannot be a one-to-one parallel. My survey shows that there are certain correlations between the tones of Chinese words and Sino-Vietnamese borrowed words, even if these parallels are not strict. Tones in Modern Standard Chinese words tend to correspond to one or two tones in their Sino-Vietnamese counterparts, but not based on tonal quality alone. To explain why the tone parallels are not strict, I argue that both Vietnamese and

Chinese have undergone language change since the period of extensive contact. As a part of sound change, the tones of both languages have developed, and this process makes them more different in the present than they were.

Hyper For Hypernyms: Word Association and the Hierarchical Network Model

Jane Farrell, Daisy Kim & Marvin Richards

Many studies in word association have been conducted to understand the relationship between lexical storage and meaning (Meyer and Schvaneveldt, 1971). However, less work has been done to understand the effect of the degree of association between lexical items. This study aims to answer two questions that will translate into how lexical items are stored through the lens of the Hierarchical Network Model (HNM): how does the number of intervening categories between a word pair affect performance on a word association task, and does the location of the hypernym also affect this performance? Using a between-subject study design, two groups were presented with a word association task. Each participant responded to 15 pairs of words, 5 with fewer intervening categories between the two words, 5 with more, and 5 control pairs that had no association. Group 1 was presented with the hypernym on top, while Group 2 was presented with the hypernym on the bottom. In Group 1, there was a significantly longer response time when responding to pairs with more intervening categories than when responding to pairs with fewer intervening categories. Group 2 had no significant difference in response time between the two types of pairs. Between groups, the average response time was reaching significance, with Group 1 averaging longer response times. These results support HNM, showing that lexical items and meanings may be stored in a hierarchical manner.