Language Science Colloquium 2016

Job Candidate Talk
Time: 2:30-4:00 pm
Location: 1321 Social and Behavioral Sciences Gateway Building
Refreshments will be served.

Dustin Chacón

MON, Feb 22nd

Title: Filling in the gaps in comparative psychosyntax

Abstract: In comparative syntax and typology, linguists have discovered that languages can vary along a number of ways, which sometimes can be subtle or surprising. However, psycholinguistic work has largely focused on a small set of closely related languages, and careful cross-language psycholinguistic and language acquisition work is still in its infancy. In this talk, I will present findings from cross-language studies on the processing and acquisition of filler-gap dependencies. Filler-gap dependencies are the relation between a word or phrase that appears in one position in the sentence, but is interpreted in another position, e.g., who in who did Dale say that Sarah saw __ behind the bed?. Filler-gap dependencies are a particularly useful case study, because their properties are well-described in syntax and psycholinguistics. The first set of studies examine filler-gap dependency processing in Bangla, which shows that comprehenders do not actively construct filler-gap dependencies into embedded contexts, unlike Japanese speakers (Aoshima et al 2004; Omaki et al 2014). The second set of studies examine resumptive pronoun dependency processing in English. I argue that resumptive dependencies are formed "passively", likely due to their ungrammaticality status. This contrasts with recent findings in Hebrew, which suggest active resumptive dependency formation processes (Kishev & Asscher-Meltzer 2015). Finally, the last set of studies investigate the learnability of constraints on filler-gap dependencies, specifically the that-trace constraint. I argue that there is not sufficient evidence for English and Spanish learners to infer whether their grammar has the constraint or lacks it, respectively (Torrego 1984; Pearl & Sprouse 2012; Phillips 2013). I argue that the learner must instead rely on related properties to learn this constraint, as in "parametric" theories of language learning (Rizzi 1982; Torrego 1984; Pearl & Lidz 2013; pace Newmeyer 2004).