

Language Science Colloquium 2016

Upcoming Job Candidate Talks

Time: 2:30-4:00 pm

Location: 1321 Social and Behavioral Sciences Gateway Building

Refreshments will be served.

Eva Wittenberg, UC San Diego
WED, February 3rd

Title: Linguistic structure and mental models

Abstract: The most fundamental function of language is to enable people to share mental models of their worlds. For a comprehender, the given mental model she is building will be shaped by the lexical items, and also by the syntactic structures, that a speaker is using. My research uses the mental models that comprehenders form, based on the syntactic structure they encounter, as mutually informative for both linguistic theory and event and object cognition. Here I present three case studies illustrating how linguistic structure shapes core aspects of mental models: the conceptualization of event participants, temporal structure in events, and the relative position of objects on mental scales.

First, we will see how the alternation between a light verb construction (*Douglas gave Mary a kiss*) and a transitive sentence (*Douglas kissed Mary*) influences the semantic roles associated with the described event; specifically, it is unclear whether *a kiss* carries a semantic role. Results from a categorization task and an eye-tracking study suggest that in light verb constructions, there is a tug-of-war between the argument structures of the light verb (*give*) and the light noun (*kiss*), which in turn is reflected in the nuances of mental event construals.

Second, I will show how verbal aspect and nominal syntax in light verb constructions reliably influence the way comprehenders construct the temporal structure of events. I show that describing an event with mass/count syntax affects event construal in a way that is systematically predictable from the interaction of mass/count syntax and semantics: for example, *giving a kiss/giving advice are* imagined as taking less time than *kissing/advising*, but this is not true for *giving a talk* and *talking*.

Third, I will demonstrate how definiteness in noun phrases and adjective order lead to the adjustment of scalar thresholds between interlocutors. I show how definite noun phrases (the [tall red] building) lead to presuppositions about a speaker's thresholds; I show how comprehenders adjust to speakers' thresholds, modulated by the speaker's choice of adjective order (red tall building or tall red building).

The results of these case studies shed light on the mapping from linguistic structure to mental models, and as a result, allow a renewed discussion about linguistic architecture and how it maps onto broader cognition.