

Universals Workshop Speaker Marie Coppola, University of Connecticut

Website: languagecreationlab.uconn.edu

Location: Boylston 105

Time: Friday, February 10 at 3:30pm

Title:

Words, language, communication, and interaction: Insights from child and adult homesign systems

Abstract:

Many trajectories of emerging language systems assume the development of a conventional lexicon as a starting point, subsequent development of morphological and syntactic structure, and the possibility of never developing relatively more arbitrary structure such as phonology. I will discuss three types of recent evidence from child and adult homesign systems, comparing them with early cohorts of signers of an emerging language, which do benefit from a linguistic model and a linguistic community. 1) The emergence of morphophonological contrasts (in terms of the distribution of complexity of finger configurations) precedes morphosyntactic oppositions (in terms of the mapping of handshape type to the presence/absence of an agent) in both child and adult homesign systems. 2) At the lexical level, a fully connected social network, vs. one in which all individuals do not interact with each other, hastens the conventionalization of lexical items. 3) Hearing mothers of adult homesigners (who have lived with them for over 20 years) perform more poorly in comprehending homesign sentences than do Deaf signers of American Sign Language (who do not know the homesigners). These findings suggest that social interactions, while crucial for linguistic structure to emerge in the absence of linguistic input, do not drive the actual form of linguistic structure in homesign. Taken together, these results suggest that the progression of linguistic organization at various levels interacts with the presence of a language model, interaction within the context of a linguistic community, as well as the structure of interactions between and among users.