GSAS Language Universals Workshop

Speaker: Kathryn Davidson (Harvard University)
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12-1:30 pm
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The value of abstraction in compositionality
Abstract

Although human language is the paradigmatic case of the use of arbitrary symbols to construct and communicate ideas, meanings for (symbolic) words and (iconic) pictures are often naively mapped onto each other, and language production includes tightly aligned examples of both. But how, if at all, should a compositional semantic theory built for hierarchically structured symbolic language incorporate iconic content in spoken language, sign language, and gesture? I argue that while our psychological representations for objects or events can draw from both, only symbolic abstractions support creation of the propositional alternatives which underlie core notions like negation, questions, exhaustification, etc. In other words, symbolic abstraction is necessary not just for what we can(not) picture, but what we can ask. I show how this difference in semantic/pragmatic potential plays out in some classic cases that combine iconic and symbolic forms in spoken and sign languages