Keynote Abstract

How I got into sociolinguistics, and what I'm (still) tryna get out of it

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In this talk, modeled after Labov (1987), I will discuss how I came to graduate with a self-designed undergraduate BA in "Sociolinguistics" in 1971 from UC Santa Cruz, before going on to my MA (1973) and PhD (1979) in Linguistics at Penn.

Researching and "professing" in sociolinguistics for 44 years (1974-80 U of Guyana, 1980-Stanford) has been a fascinating and rewarding career, but as I approach retirement, I find myself with some unresolved questions, including these:

1. Why did teenaged Foxy Boston (the AAVE speaking East Palo Alto superstar I've written about in several papers, e.g. Rickford and McNair Knox 1994) report that some people said she "talks like a White girl")?
2. What did Rachel Jeantel really say (and intend) when Prosecutor Bernie de la Rionda asked her, in an interview prior to the Zimmerman murder trial, if she could "hear" who was saying what, as Trayvon and Zimmerman scuffled, with his phone headset off? Her answer was the source of Defense Attorney Don West's repeated attempts to impeach her during her 6-hour testimony.
3. How well/badly are US schools doing teaching Black (and Brown) children to read, why, and what can sociolinguists do to improve the situation?
4. What do we have to do to persuade schools and courts to pay more attention to dialect prejudice and non-comprehension in their institutions and to the contributions linguists might be able to offer to alleviate these problems?
5. Whatever happened to the study of "Social Class" in Sociolinguistics, and does Sociology have any promising new approaches to offer to revive it?
6. Whatever happened to the concept of "Speech Community," and is "Community of Practice" really better?
7. Whatever happened to "Creole Studies" within "Sociolinguistics," and to "Sociolinguistics" within "Creole Studies"?

Time may not permit me to get to all of these, but they are among the issues, large and small, that leave me "bewitched, bothered, and bewildered." I hope that airing them at this forum might enable me (and/or others) to resolve them.

References:

Labov, William. 1987. How I got into linguistics, and what I got out of it. http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/Papers/HowIgot.html

Rickford, John, and Faye McNair-Knox. 1994. Addressee- and Topic-Influenced Style Shift: A Quantitative Sociolinguistic Study." *Perspectives on Register: Situating Register Variation within Sociolinguistics*, ed. by Douglas Biber and Edward Finegan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 235-76.

Panel Abstracts

Searching the brain for speech representations

Jen Segawa
Stonehill College

Currently, biologically-based models of speech motor control focus on phonemic or gestural representations within a syllable, despite linguistic and psycholinguistic evidence for additional representations. I will present work that uses neuroscience techniques to test two theoretical speech representations: sub-syllabic constituents – e.g. syllabic onset, coda – and syllabic frames.

To study sub-syllabic constituents, we employed a paradigm traditionally used to study non-speech motor sequence learning. Participants practiced producing novel phoneme sequences with phonotactically illegal consonant clusters. After 2 days of practice, participants produced the new illegal sequences as quickly and accurately as the practiced sequences – even in novel vowel contexts – only if they contained no novel consonant clusters, implicating consonant clusters as important speech motor representations. We then compared brain activity using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) during the production of practiced and novel sequences to better understand the neural mechanisms of this learning.

We also tested the slot-filler and frame-content theories which both posit that a syllable's sounds (e.g., /k/, /æ/, /t/) and structure (frames, e.g., consonant-vowel-consonant) are represented in parallel during speech production. We measured patterns of fMRI-repetition suppression across a series of experimental speech conditions. Based on these patterns, we identified a phonological representation in left inferior frontal sulcus, a brain region implicated in phonological working memory. Left presupplementary motor area and right posterior cerebellum responded to syllabic structure; these regions are implicated in auditory-based timing coordination. We believe these areas independently select the phonological and structural elements of a syllable.

Collectively, this work suggests that speech and language research can benefit from conversations across its many disciples by combining linguistics knowledge and neuroscience techniques to pursue a biological understanding of speech.

Evaluating how children might, or might not, interpret phonetic variation phonologically

Daniel Swingley
University of Pennsylvania

Infants learn something about perceptual categorization of their language's phonetic categories very early in life. Infants also learn that there are words and what some words mean. But do infants intuit that phonetic categories signal lexical contrast? In this sense, do they have a phonology, or just a phonetics? In this brief talk I will boldly claim that, contrary to received wisdom, we don't know; and I will support this defiant agnosticism with some interesting experimental data.

Continuous and discrete representations in coarticulation to /ɹ/ in English

Jeff Mielke
North Carolina State University
Authors: Jeff Mielke, Bridget Smith, Lyra Magloughlin, Eric Wilbanks, and Jessica Hatcher

English /ɹ/ appears to trigger several forms of coarticulation and assimilation, including retraction of /s/ in /stɹ/ clusters and affrication and retraction in /tɹ/ and /dɹ/ clusters. These patterns are potentially ambiguous between coarticulatory effects and categorical assimilatory patterns. One one hand, tongue body retraction and lip rounding are both expected coarticulatory effects of English /ɹ/, and on the other hand, the results of extreme /ɹ/ influence are very similar to the typical realization of the phonemes /ʃ tʃ dʒ/.

Analysis of 162 sociolinguistic interviews from Raleigh, North Carolina (Dodsworth and Kohn 2012) shows that retraction of /stɹ/ and affrication and retraction of /tɹ/ and /dɹ/ have been increasing over time in this community (Wilbanks 2016, Magloughlin 2018), while retraction of /s/ and /z/ next to /ɹ/ is stable.

Lingual ultrasound and lip video were collected from 28 additional talkers drawn from the same community. The articulatory study shows that /s/ in /stɹ/ clusters resembles postalveolar consonants, not [ɹ], whereas word-final sibilants before /r/ (/z#ɹ/) only show resemblance to [ɹ], especially in lip posture. /tɹ/'s articulation is consistent with being a phonologically affricated allophone of /t/ that is coarticulated with [ɹ]. These data indicate that /stɹ/, /tɹ/, and /dɹ/ are phonologized in the (mostly young) group of speakers. Retraction of /ɹ/-adjacent /s/ and /z/ involve gestures more similar to /ɹ/ than to postalveolar consonants, evidence that they are directly phonetically conditioned.

Signs, speech, and gesture: integrating continuous and discrete representations into a single proposition

Kathryn Davidson
Harvard University

Human language is infinitely productive because it makes use of discrete symbolic representations that can combine with each other to form new structures with new meanings. This is equally true of spoken languages and sign languages, but the latter have often been considered to include additional levels of continuous/depictive representations, which are typically outside the domain of traditional linguistic analysis. At this panel, I will discuss briefly two experimental studies and one set of corpus data from bimodal bilingual language which show that these are naturally compared to combination of spoken language plus gesture, and then discuss formal semantic models of how continuous and discrete representations compose in several examples of sign+gesture and speech+gesture.