

Why are you telling me this? Relevance and informativity in language processing

Hannah Rohde (The University of Edinburgh)

Thursday, 4:45-5:45, Theater

Models of discourse assume that communication is guided by estimates of message relevance and informativity. This talk considers the cues listeners use to establish relevance relations and the role of discourse context in determining what counts as informative. The recovery and anticipation of relevance relations can be shown to be sensitive to explicit cues (like discourse connectives) and more subtle cues (related to the intonation associated with focus alternatives). Listeners' are found to use these cues in processing a range of pragmatic phenomena including pronoun interpretation, scalar implicature, and presupposition projection. On the production side, speakers must determine what information is useful to include in their message, and their decisions can be shown to vary with the complexity of the context in which their message will be interpreted. Finally, a set of studies test possible repercussions of the inclusion of information that is wholly or partly predictable from the discourse context. The results highlight the way in which language is used not simply to reproduce the facts of the world around us but to make contributions whose novelty is what is expected.