The Pleasure and Pain of Language
Friday, April 4th 2014 – Lattimore 513

12:00 pm – 1:00 pm
A Psycholinguist’s Musings on Aesthetic and Literary Language
Julie Sedivy

When psycholinguists discuss the properties of language and the cognitive systems for language processing, they typically do so from the perspective of their usefulness for fast or efficient communication. We rarely examine them from the perspective of what makes language pleasurable. In this talk, I will draw on observations and findings from various disciplines in order to explore how those aspects of language that make it useful for communication can support and at times serve as obstacles for our enjoyment of language and its use for aesthetic purposes. Through this lens, I’ll discuss the dynamics of word recognition, how predictions are generated during language processing, and how we view the extraction of meaning from speech or text as a supremely goal-driven behavior with the aim of discerning the speaker’s or writer’s intended meaning.

4:30 pm – 5:30 pm
Patterns in $&#@*!
Solveiga Armoskaite, Nathan Buckley, Miriam Kohn, Brian Leonard, Murray Schellenberg, Jake Socolow

Background The language of profanity has always been considered fascinating (Jay 2000; McEnery 2005, Wajnryb 2005, among others). However, it is only recently that formal linguists have started to explore the hitherto neglected domain of language usage. Use of profanity has an immediate strong impact on any utterance, and as such it sheds light on the speaker perspective on the matter at hand. Therefore it is an indelible part of constructing meaning. Naturally, the focus hitherto has been on either intonation (Culpeper et al. 2003; ref) or semantics/pragmatics (Potts 2007, Timothy & Janschewitz 2008, among others). However, f-expressions are often void of inherent syntactic category or meaning and acquire both only contextually, e.g.:

(1) This fucking fucker won’t fuck.
   Context: WWII movie, a private screaming about a defunct rifle
   reported in Napoli & Hoeksma 2009:623, see also Wajnryb 2005

research question As with any verbal behavior, we expect the use of f-expressions to be patterned, systematic and structurally analyzable (cf. Corver 2008; Corver 2012), adding to intonational and semantic generalizations. What are the correlations between the structures where f-expressions surface and the meanings that these f-expression attain?

focus of the project We explore profanity, specifically, f-expressions,
(i) in the speech of naturally occurring conversations of undergraduate college students; (ii) and compare it to the usage of f-expressions in movies, documentary and fictional. To date, most research on taboo expressions has either tapped exclusively into speaker-author intuitions or relied on data harvested on internet/ in the media.

preliminary findings We find evidence that the syntax of f-expressions interacts with their semantics. We show that it is statistically significant that particular syntactic structures are attested with particular interpretations (e.g., present participle forms), while other syntactic structures are statistically insignificant (past participle forms) or hardly attested (embedded constructions). For example, –ing forms are most flexible in that they can be used negatively, positively and ambiguously, when compared to other verbal or nominal forms. At the same time, –ing forms are the most bleached forms in that they dominate in positive intensifiers usage:
(2) It was so fucking beautiful. It sent fucking chills down my fucking spine.