

Speaker: **Julie Sedivy**
Brown University

Title: **Pragmatic inferencing within an incremental processing system**

Date: Monday, March 03, 2008

Time: 4:00pm

Place: Rosenfeld Hall (corner Temple & Grove)

Abstract:

Current psycholinguistic work presents very compelling evidence that interpreting linguistic utterances recruits a highly incremental processing system, where meaning is computed in lock-step with the incoming linguistic signal. However, as has been noted by Grice and many others since, meaning includes not just the conventional meanings associated with linguistic expressions, but also a variety of pragmatic inferences that are derived from conventional meanings.

This high degree of incrementality poses a potential challenge for classical Gricean accounts of conversational implicature as applied to the language processing domain, suggesting one of two possibilities. One is that implicatures are not computed incrementally, but rather, lag behind the processing of conventional meaning. The other is that hearers must be able to somehow incrementally compute not only the conventional meaning of the unfolding linguistic signal, but also compute enriched meanings that arise as a result of reasoning about what the speaker might have said but didn't say, all under the pressures of real-time processing. Several theoretical approaches buy the possibility of incremental processing by entirely by-passing a rationalist inferencing mechanism for at least some implicatures. For example, Chierchia and Levinson argue that scalar implicatures related to Grice's Quantity maxim are either partially or fully conventionalized, such that the expressions themselves trigger the implicature.

In this talk, I will summarize some empirical findings showing that at least under some circumstances, what appears to be fully Gricean Quantity-based inferencing can occur during the course of real time spoken language processing with no apparent slowdown to the system. These inferences also appear to be strikingly sensitive to actual patterns of usage exhibited by speakers, suggesting that hearers may well compute meanings based on an assessment of what a speaker might be expected to say under particular circumstances. Furthermore, they reveal expectations of not just the semantic content of an expression, but also its likely linguistic form.

I will conclude the talk by making some remarks about two challenges to a Gricean account of implicature that I believe can be illuminated by cognitively-oriented empirical work: 1) The question of whether implicatures can be globally derived on the basis of a propositional unit while being computable incrementally; and 2) The question of the non-uniformity of implicatures in a variety of discourse and linguistic contexts, and how one might arrive at a predictive account of when they occur.