



Plenary, Keynote, and Workshop Abstracts

Plenary/Keynote Abstracts

Dr. Vincent Hughes - Using phonetics to explore automatic speaker recognition performance

Forensic voice comparison involves the analysis of the voices in recordings of an unknown criminal (e.g. threatening phone call) and of a known suspect (in the UK, often this is a police interview recording). The aim is to aid a trier-of-fact (i.e. judge or jury) to determine whether the recordings contain the voice of the same speaker or not. Increasingly, such work is being conducted using AI-based automatic speaker recognition (ASR) systems; a piece of software that can process audio recordings, extract acoustic information, and statistically process that information to generate a conclusion which captures the strength of the voice evidence. In this talk, I will discuss findings from the ESRC-funded project Person-specific automatic speaker recognition. The project uses linguistics and phonetics to understand and explain the performance of ASR systems, thus increasing their explainability and transparency which are crucial to the presentation of expert evidence in court. Specifically, I will describe a set of controlled data used to explore how ASR systems handle vocal variability, and a set of experiments to understand individual speaker performance in a large, forensically realistic database.

Dr. Monika Schmid - The impossibility of monolingualism in the mind of the bilingual

Bilinguals are different from monolinguals in that they can never elect to speak, process and comprehend only one language at a time. Even when there are no obvious intrusions from another language, such as a foreign accent, code-switched words or grammatical structures, language use is always to some degree underpinned by all of the languages represented in the mind of the speaker.

While this means that second language acquisition can never be entirely 'targetlike' – assuming that the hypothetical target is set to the ideal and idealized monolingual – it also means that speakers with more than one language will be similarly 'non-targetlike' in their native language: there is increasing evidence to show that both beginning classroom L2 learners and experienced and proficient immersed L2 users use and process their native language in ways that are distinct from how 'true' monolinguals do it. These differences are cumulatively referred to as 'language attrition'.

My talk will present some recent evidence on how native language processing can differ between monolinguals and multilinguals, and show both the scope and the limits of such crosslinguistic effects of language co-activation.

Learning objectives:

- Understand the characteristics, scope and limitations of the phenomenon of language attrition

- Become familiar with some of the recent developments in the field
- Become familiar with some of the theoretical models used to account for language attrition

Dr. Monika Schmid - What happens to foreign language skills post-instruction?

40 years ago, Richard Lambert and Barbara Freed observed that "vast amounts of time, energy, and funding have been invested to further the development of curriculum materials and methodology to increase second language learning", but that "the maintenance of these skills once attained" had largely been disregarded (Lambert & Freed, 1982:v) although laypeople and experts alike tend to believe that the functional command of such skills will see rapid decline once instruction ceases.

This observation has largely remained true: language learners drop off the horizon of research, policy and pedagogy the moment they have attained their degree or diploma. It is no exaggeration to say that, at the present point in time, we have no understanding whatsoever of how – or even if – foreign language skills can attrite; which grammatical or lexical features are more or less vulnerable, and why; what other factors (length of time, amount of contact, attitudes) will facilitate or impede attrition; nor how former learners can be supported in maintaining or regaining proficiency and whether pedagogical approaches geared towards learning a language the first time round are fit for purpose in re-learning. There is even less understanding of how pedagogical approaches and characteristics of learner experience feature into the attritional process; or what the implications of language forgetting are for language testing. In particular, the 'lifespan' of commonly recognised test results, such as the TOEFL and the IELTS, seems to be set completely arbitrarily, with no empirical substantiation.

There are few but notable exceptions to the widespread blinkeredness of the field of second language acquisition, learning, and teaching to the problem of Foreign Language Attrition (FLA). Investigations of L2 attrition have been very few and far between (see Schmid, 2022 for a recent overview). The field thus continues to suffer from a lack of empirical evidence, theoretical frameworks, and methodological coherence – compounded by problems such as the difficulty of establishing a baseline and the diversity of contexts (e.g. study abroad, returnees, indigenous or minority languages, etc.).

The present talk will give an overview of what is and what isn't known about L2 attrition at the present time. It will then present a recent study on the maintenance of English and French as foreign languages in a range of different countries. Based on these findings, we will sketch a research agenda for L2 attrition and show how this may influence language learning research, policy and pedagogy in years to come.

References

- Bahrick, H. P. (1984a). Fifty years of second language attrition: Implications for programmatic research. *The Modern Language Journal*, 68(2), 105–118.
- Lambert, R. D. & Freed, B. F. (1982). Language loss: current thoughts and future directions. In R. D. Lambert & B. F. Freed (Eds.), *The Loss of Language Skills*. (pp. 1-5). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Schmid, M. S. (2023). The final frontier? Why we have been ignoring second language

attrition, and why it is time we stopped. *Language Teaching*, 56(1), 73-93.

Dr. Silke Brandt - Language and Theory of Mind Development: Investigating difference within and across languages and cultures

I will present a series of studies investigating the relationship between language and Theory of Mind within and across different linguistic and cultural contexts. For English- and Chinese-speaking children, we have looked at relationships between children's understanding of complement clauses (e.g. He said that the sticker was in the red box), mental verbs (e.g. think) and false belief, when controlling for other cognitive and linguistic skills, such as working memory and vocabulary knowledge (Boeg Thomsen et al., 2021; Brandt et al., 2016; Brandt et al., 2023). We have also investigated correlations between English- and Turkish-speaking children's knowledge of evidentiality, source-monitoring, and false belief (Kandemirci et al., 2023). Together, these studies suggest that there are different linguistic tools that enable children to represent and acquire false belief, and that the availability and choice of these linguistic tools differ across languages and cultures.

In an ongoing study, I am looking at the use of mental-state language in four different pre-schools in Lancashire to investigate whether specific activities and contexts elicit more mental-state language from staff, which could have a positive effect on children's Theory of Mind abilities and general social and academic development.

Dr. Norman Yeo - A brief history of generative grammar

This talk embarks on a brief tour through 70 years of generative grammar. Due to time constraints, most university syntax courses are taught without a historical context of why syntax is taught the way it is. This talk aims to situate, in a non-technical and descriptive way, what we learn and teach in syntax within a background of the historical development of generative grammar. We trace the development of generative grammar from its origins in the 1950s to the present day. Beginning with Chomsky's break from structuralism, we follow the path from construction-specific phrase structure rules and transformations, through the modular architecture of Government and Binding, the Principles and Parameters revolution, and finally into the Minimalist Programme. A central thread is the tension between descriptive and explanatory adequacy, and how successive frameworks have attempted to resolve it through progressive simplification. We conclude with recent developments in phase theory, feature inheritance, and the labelling algorithm, situating these within the broader biolinguistic programme and the Strong Minimalist Thesis.

Workshop

Mr. Daniel Clayton - Field Methods in Action: Discovering the Structure of an Unknown Language – an introduction to language elicitation

This three-day workshop introduces participants to the core methods of linguistic elicitation used in fieldwork on lesser-studied and undocumented languages. First, participants will learn how to elicit data targeting key areas of morphosyntax, phonology, and basic lexicon.

Participants will then work in small groups with native speakers of lesser-studied languages to collect original linguistic data. Through guided elicitation sessions, groups will develop hypotheses about the structure of the language they are investigating, based on the data they gather.

The workshop culminates in group presentations, where participants share their findings and reflect on the challenges and insights of real-time language documentation. The course is designed to provide practical, hands-on experience with the processes that underpin primary linguistic research.