Friday, Jan. 25, 2019
5057 Woodward, Rm. 10302, Wayne State University
2:00
Eric Acton
Generalized sociopragmatic enrichment
-or-
Why Americans don’t say, ‘the Americans’

Abstract: Pragmatics and sociolinguistics have long recognized that utterances’ meaning depends on context and that it stretches far beyond entailments, but the two traditions have generally proceeded in silos. In this talk, I present a sociopragmatic framework for non-literal meaning that retains these traditions’ insights, while expanding their empirical reach.

Pragmatics, analyzing language use as rational action (Grice 1975), has shown that an utterance $u$’s full significance depends upon considering $u$’s costs and benefits vis-à-vis those of relevant alternative utterances. Still, the bulk of pragmatics research focuses on enrichments to descriptive content, with costs and benefits as formal complexity and semantic informativity. Meanwhile, sociolinguistics has shown that a great deal of meaning isn’t tied to descriptive, semantic content at all, and comes from varied sources—even the phonetic realization of a phoneme. Sociolinguistics also foregrounds indexicality and a wide range of considerations that condition language use and interpretation that extend well beyond form and semantics.

Marrying insights from both traditions, I develop a framework that accounts for not only classic cases of non-entailed meaning, but a wide and diverse range of phenomena besides—including the effect whereby using a the-plural (e.g. the Americans) to talk about a group of individuals tends to depict that group as a monolith distant from the speaker (cf. Americans). The framework leads us to expect to find varied interactions across and within multiple dimensions of meaning, and makes clear the deep connections between semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics. In the spirit of Grice, I further suggest that the principles presented here apply not just to language but to the interpretation of actions more generally.

Bio: Eric Acton is an assistant professor of linguistics at Eastern Michigan University. He earned a BS in mathematics and linguistics at Haverford College, and a PhD in linguistics at Stanford University. Dr. Acton works in the areas of pragmatics, semantics, and sociolinguistics, focusing on the nature of meaning and interpretation broadly construed. His current research centers on uncovering the core principles by which we select and interpret utterances, and what those principles reveal about human nature more generally.