Linguistics seminar series

March 24 Honours showcase

Samantha Beer, Kenneth Saw, and Helen Vermont (Monash University)

Deficit, data and diversity: Discourse analysis of reporting on the field of indigenous education

Samantha Beer

The field of ‘indigenous education’ in the remote Northern Territory is often discussed in the media due to purportedly low student achievement in NAPLAN testing and controversial policy changes designed to redress a perceived ‘educational crisis’. Further investigation shows that particular discursive framings predominate in reporting of these and related issues. This presentation draws from a research project conducted throughout 2014 with data originating from the period 2005-2014. The corpora analysed represent influential public sources in this domain of reporting: traditional newspaper (The Australian), online Independent Media (Crikey, New Matilda, The Conversation), and think-tank reports (Hughes Reports issued by the Centre for Independent Studies). A corpus of web comments was also included for comparison. Prominent lexical and phrasal features were identified through use of corpus linguistics tools and annotative close reading as associated with traditional discourse analysis. The prominence and arrangement of particular features was analysed with reference to critical race theory, theories of deficit and data-driven discourse, and proposed positive alternative reporting practices as theorised by Waller (2010, 2013). While complicating results were found, features of deficit and data-driven discourse were found to be more prevalent in traditional newspaper and think-tank reporting, while these framings were more often questioned in Independent Media and Web Comments. Further, evidence of adherence to positive alternative reporting practices were also more evident in the latter corpora.

The distribution of evaluation in children’s narratives

Helen Vermont

Narratives provide the basis for the organization of experiences and memories of life events. They afford a unique opportunity to give order to a viewpoint that would otherwise seem a disjointed set of events (Berman & Slobin 1994; Bruner 1986; Capps, Losh & Thurber 2000; Labov & Waletzky 1967). Stories reflect the values, interpretations, and opinions of the narrator through the use of evaluation and as such evaluative devices are an essential element within a narrative. They reveal the narrator’s attitudes towards an event, without which the story lacks significance and has no point (Labov & Waletzky 1967:33).

Children and adults alike rely on narratives as a primary method of communication (Engel 1995) but narratives are rarely more prevalent than in a child’s world. The use of evaluation in children’s narratives has been widely investigated, however research regarding the distribution of evaluation has so far been quite limited. Thus, my thesis examined where evaluation occurs in children’s narratives, as well as the patterns of distribution in terms of frequency and types of evaluative devices. More specifically I investigated the use of evaluation in two different age groups on the basis of frog story data and explored (a) whether there were any differences in the amount of
evaluation across different parts of the narrative and (b) whether there were any differences in the amount and type of evaluative devices used across the narrative; and whether this differed between age groups, i.e. whether there was a developmental shift in the use of evaluative devices.

The study investigates narratives from two different age groups, seven-year-olds and eleven-year-olds, using data elicited through the wordless picture book, *Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer 1974) available in the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES).

**To ‘Lah’ or not to ‘Lah’?**

*Kenneth Saw*

This presentation will give an overview of a study of stylistic variation in Malaysian English speakers in an Australian context. It investigates how grammatical, phonological and lexical features of Malaysian English, such as the ‘lah’ particle, are used as “ethnolinguistic resources” (Benor 2010) in speech. Through discourse analysis of one participant’s speech in a dinner conversation, this presentation demonstrates how ethnolinguistic resources are used in combination with Standard English variants to index a range of interpersonal and epistemic stances. The main finding is that speakers use these stances to index multiple personas and roles that shift across different speech activities.

**References**