



Hispanic Linguistics Panel and Talk

A p r i l 1 4 , 2 0 2 3

LOCATION:

ML 302

TIME:

3:00 pm - 5:00 pm

PANEL:

1:00 pm - 3:00 pm

Implications of marginal contrasts for phonology

What is the nature of mental representations that support speech production and comprehension? Spoken human language is communicated as a continuous signal, yet listeners parse that signal into individual words, and individual sounds, which correspond to categories within a system of phonological contrasts. Realizing and perceiving contrasts requires linguistic abstraction, away from physical detail toward some kind of mental representation. This talk asks whether linguistic abstraction functions equally for all pairs of sounds.

A classical phonemic framework predicts that lexical contrast is necessary and sufficient to cement a sharp phonological distinction between two phonemes, but an alternative is that phonemes can be phonetic subcategories whose representations are intertwined. Meanwhile, the vowel systems of Romanian, Italian, and Catalan have marginal contrasts, which are pairs of sounds characterized by few lexical distinctions, phonetic similarity, and (some) contextual predictability. A series of case studies, pursued within the fields of laboratory phonology and sociophonetics, provide evidence that these vowel pairs have phonetic subcategory relationships, captured in the simultaneous presence of strong native speaker intuitions and variability in the vowels' use, perception, or phonolexical mapping. Distinctions between marginally contrastive sounds are thus less robust than others. These sounds' evidently porous relationships, detectable in speakers' intuitions and behavior, suggests variation in the mental representations supporting spoken language.



Margaret E. L. Renwick

Department of Linguistics, University of Georgia

Margaret E. L. Renwick is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Georgia, having received her PhD at Cornell University in 2012. She studies vowels and consonants, in the Romance languages and English, to understand how phonological contrasts are implemented phonetically and how they vary across locations, time, and social groups. Her research projects are rooted in the tradition of laboratory phonology, an approach which integrates experimental methods with more abstract linguistic representations of sound structure, as well as the growing field of sociophonetics.