Building beliefs and desires in Navajo

Elizabeth Bogal-Allbritten

SFU

Thursday, January 28th
12:30 - 1:30 p.m.
RCB 6152

It is crosslinguistically extremely common for languages to use different verbs in different attitude reports: in English, for example, attitude reports of belief contain attitude verbs like think or believe while attitude reports of desire contain verbs like want or wish. This talk presents fieldwork-based evidence from Navajo (Diné Bizaad; Southern Athabaskan/Dene) to show that while all languages may have the ability to express attitudes of belief and desire, languages may differ significantly in the grammatical strategies they employ to encode such familiar meanings.

I demonstrate that in Navajo, the same attitude verb (nisin) occurs both in attitude reports of belief and in attitude reports of desire. Navajo shows us an alternative to the verb-driven strategy for expressing attitudes familiar from English. In Navajo, the attitude reported (belief vs. desire) cannot be determined by the attitude verb. Instead, I argue that morphology found inside of clauses embedded by nisin is solely responsible for determining what attitude is expressed by the sentence as a whole.

I close by considering how the investigation of typologically less-familiar languages like Navajo can enhance our understanding of data from more familiar languages. I consider how Navajo fits into the typological and theoretical landscape of attitude reports that Kratzer (2006, 2013) and Moulton (2009, 2015) explore in recent work on English and German. 

http://www.sfu.ca/linguistics/events/colloquia.html