

Linguistic Theory in the 21st Century: Integrational Perspectives

A colloquium organized by the International Association for the Integrational Study of Language and Communication (IAISLC) and the School of English, Faculty of Arts, The University of Hong Kong (HKU).

Dates

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Organizing Committee

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Summary

The colloquium aims to address fundamental questions in the academic study of language. It marks a point in transition in the discipline of linguistics as it has developed in the West, and examines the positioning of linguistics both historically and in its future development as part of the increasingly complex interactions between China and the West. It will bring together international scholars working in integrational linguistics (integrationism), linguists in other paradigms, and those familiar with the Chinese tradition of language scholarship. It will also feature a small number of presentations by a selected group of highly promising postgraduate students along side those of established international scholars. The target number of participants from outside Hong Kong is sixteen.

Background & Rationale

This colloquium marks an important crossroads in the academic study of language. The nature of the discipline of linguistics, its role and positioning within the sciences, social sciences and humanities, and its goals, methods and theoretical foundations are beset by uncertainty. This meeting seeks to address fundamental questions concerning the nature of the academic study of language, its future direction, and the themes, methods and issues by which it should be shaped. Integrational linguistics is a lay-oriented inquiry or mode of investigation – it regards all language users as in some sense linguists. Rather than presenting itself as a science with a “God’s truth” insight into language, integrationism takes seriously the diversity of beliefs about language found at the individual, contextual and cultural level. Following on from this, the conference aims to draw on Hong Kong’s positioning to explore ideas about language in a cross-cultural context, with a special session applying the “China-West” framework to the study of language.

The publication of Franz Bopp’s *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache* (1816) and of Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916) in retrospect both marked fundamental moments in the academic study of language in the West. In the 19th century the discipline of comparative-historical linguistics (“comparative philology”) emerged, staking a claim to scholarly, even scientific rigor, with Indo-European studies at its centre. The 20th century saw the rise of an autonomous academic discipline, “linguistics”, with its central idea of a synchronic linguistic system. The post-1945 world-wide expansion of linguistics coincided

with decolonization, and this brought the politics of language and language planning to centre stage. The advent of Chomskyan theory, however, seemed to offer linguistics an alliance with, or even a dominant role within, psychology and biology. Within this framework language as a social institution was marginalized in favour of what was perceived as the core “language faculty” and the requirement of an autonomous and systematic object of study. Modern sociolinguistics as it developed was divided between this commitment to a “hard” scientific (quantitative) framework and an anthropological exploration of community, identity and social roles. The conference seeks to mark a new century of linguistic theorizing by posing fundamental questions about the future of the discipline.

The integrational critique of linguistics has focused on a set of interlocking presuppositions, including the autonomy of linguistics, its identification of the linguistic system as an object of study, and related notions of linguistic form and meaning. While this critique - and its corollary in the advocacy of a lay-oriented linguistics – has been to a degree in tune with discussions of meaning and interpretation in literary theory, reflexive sociology and anthropology, as well as in important strands in philosophy and the philosophy of science, mainstream linguists have responded, if at all, by pointing to the lack of a reproducible method with which to analyze ‘data’.

Intergrational linguistics takes seriously the embedding of ideas about language in cultural traditions, socio-political contexts, and their role in cross-cultural interactions and intellectual development. It challenges the idea of linguistics as a neutral science, and asserts the fundamental importance of context in all the various meaning of that term for the understanding of language.

General topics and themes

- The disciplinary autonomy of linguistics
- Sociolinguistic theory
- Linguistics and semiotics: theories of the sign
- Indeterminacy and theories of meaning
- Lay-oriented linguistics;
- Culturally-embedded and “pre-modern” understandings of language
- Integrational linguistic method (of enquiry, analysis, argumentation); the nature of linguistic ‘data’
- Integrational linguistics in the university curriculum

Special session/theme: China-West

The Faculty of Arts at the University of Hong Kong has as its Strategic Research Theme “China-West Studies”, including language and culture studies (see http://arts.hku.hk/research/china_west.html). It is proposed to organize a special session devoted to “China-West” language studies, with special reference to cross-cultural issues in the understanding and representation of language, interactions between linguistic traditions, the nature of writing systems, the status of the term “dialect”, etc.

Deadline and Abstracts

The conference is primarily by invitation and there is no general call for papers, as we only have limited places available. The deadline for receipt of abstracts is December 1, 2009. We have so

far received a substantial number of expressions of interest and we are not sure if there will be any further places available. However please send a brief abstract by December 1, 2009 if you wish to participate.