

The Department of Linguistics

is pleased to present

Andrea Beltrama

University of Pennsylvania

speaking on

The interface between pragmatic reasoning and social perception: Towards an integrative view of inferences in communication

Thursday, February 8, 2024

11:40 AM

Location: HUM 1 - Room 210

Abstract:

Comprehenders systematically draw two varieties of inferences in linguistic communication: *pragmatic* inferences, concerning the message conveyed by an utterance; and *sociolinguistic* inferences, concerning the speaker's identity – e.g., their demographic profile and personality traits. Both types of inference have been widely investigated in linguistics and beyond. Yet, much remains to be seen on how they interact with one another -- and in particular, on whether, and how, comprehenders jointly rely on them when extracting information from linguistic utterances. In this talk, I consider two case studies, each of which presents a novel perspective on this issue. In the first case study, I present evidence from two social perception experiments suggesting that comprehenders track a speaker's adherence to, or violation of, the maxims of Relevance and Informativeness -- together with the contextual reasons underlying these violations -- to form an impression of the speaker. In the second case study, I present findings from two picture selection tasks suggesting that comprehenders reason about the speaker's social identity to determine the precision with which they interpret numerical expressions. Taken together, these findings unveil a bi-directional relationship between pragmatic reasoning and social perception, calling for a view of the semantics/pragmatics interface which encompasses social distinctions between speakers; and highlighting the role of sociolinguistic knowledge in pragmatic reasoning. They also underline the value of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of inferences in linguistic communication -- one that combines experimental approaches to semantics and pragmatics with insights and methods from sociolinguistics and social psychology.