Title: Interactions of Landscape and Language: Spatial Language in Three Communities of Zapotec Speakers

Keywords: Linguistics; Language and Cognition; Landscape and Spatial Studies

Abstract:

What effect, if any, does local landscape have on the language and cognition of speakers around the world? This presentation explores the use of landscape terms in the lexical inventory and spatial descriptions of Zapotec speakers in different communities within the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, Mexico. Each of three communities has notably different landscape features with which speakers habitually interact: strong North-South winds in the north, a cityscape in the central city, and the Laguna Superior in the south. A series of studies conducted in each community yields (i) lists of landscape terms showing salience of such geographic features, (ii) route descriptions showing salience of landmarks in direction giving, and (iii) descriptions of small-scale space showing landscape entities that are used to anchor such spatial descriptions. These descriptions also provide data on speakers’ use of spatial reference frames, which are strategies for locating or orienting objects based on the axes of speakers’ bodies, environmental features, or the objects themselves. This presentation focuses on the use of these exploratory methods to investigate the relationship between landscape and speakers’ spatial language and to determine what effect, if any, the existence of salient landforms in a community has on spatial language and cognition within that community. In this way, this presentation speaks to the neo-Whorfian debate about the role of language vs. environment on cognition.