Cognitive Science Colloquium
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280 Park Hall

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The Linguistics of Spin

Most work on computational analysis of people's attitudes relies on words that express overt opinions, e.g., using the word "awesome" in a movie review as a clue to the fact that it views the movie favorably. However, underlying perspective can also reside in less obvious linguistic choices. The chairman and president of BP America, describing BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill, testified to Congress that "eleven people were lost in an explosion and fire" (May 11, 2010). In contrast, the progressive media outlet Democracy Now! described the "explosion that killed eleven workers" (May 13, 2010). The two statements describe the same event, but they differ in their underlying view of what happened. The difference illustrates how language can be used "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation". Entman calls this framing, and deliberately framing in a way that manipulates or deceives is sometimes called spin.

In the first part of this talk, I introduce the idea of grammatical framing, i.e., framing accomplished via choice of grammatical structure. I demonstrate that grammatical framing is fundamentally connected to underlying properties of events that are well known to lexical semanticists, and show how observable syntactic reflexes of those properties can be used, fully automatically, to accurately label a text with respect to its perspective on a topic, even in the absence of overtly opinionated language. In the second part of the talk, I discuss my group's recent work on lexical framing, which includes computational models to detect underlying divergences of viewpoint and the words and phrases associated with those divergences.

This research includes joint work with Stephan Greene, Jordan Boyd-Graber, Eric Hardisty, and Viet An Nguyen.

RECOMMENDED READING: