

# Center for Cognitive Science

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

**Wednesday, September 14, 2005**

280 Park Hall  
North Campus  
2:00 pm –4:00 pm

Mary Swift, Ph.D.

Computer Science Department

University of Rochester

*(Sponsored by the Department of Linguistics, UB)*

## **"Default aspect and the development of time reference in Inuktitut child language"**

Children acquiring the temporal system of Inuktitut, a polysynthetic language spoken by the Inuit of Arctic Quebec, exhibit developmental phenomena that appear puzzling in comparison to previous crosslinguistic findings. Inuit children very early on use a single unmarked verb form for two kinds of time reference: perfective with telic event descriptions, and imperfective with atelic event descriptions. In contrast, previous research shows that across languages children in their early speech use different tense-aspect marking with telic event descriptions than they use with atelic event descriptions. The first puzzle is how children acquiring Inuktitut come to terms with the variable time reference of the unmarked verb form, without local cues to facilitate differentiation of interpretation. Second, Inuit children's early instances of past and perfective marking occur with atelic event descriptions, in contrast to previous findings showing that initial instances of past and/or perfective marking crosslinguistically occur with telic event descriptions, a pattern predicted by e.g., Basic Child Grammar (Slobin 1985) and The Aspect Hypothesis (Shirai and Anderson 1995). Most strikingly, Inuit children develop facility with overt future marking before overt past marking, a pattern that has not been reported for any other language. These three puzzles of Inuktitut temporal language development find a uniform account under the analysis of Bohnemeyer and Swift (2004), which is based on the notion of event realization (ER). Informally, ER is the factual occurrence of an event at a certain time. ER plays a double role in the analysis of Inuktitut child language: in Inuktitut, the temporally unmarked verb form receives its aspectual interpretation under ER; I also show that aspectual reference in early Inuktitut is constrained by ER, and that this constraint applies to early child language crosslinguistically.

Refreshments will be available; Open to the public!

Center for Cognitive Science, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, 201 Bell Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260, Phone: (716) 645-2177 ext. 795, Fax: (716) 645-3825, Email: [ccs-cogsci-contact@buffalo.edu](mailto:ccs-cogsci-contact@buffalo.edu)