Abstract:

Ordinary language use is far from the ideal characterized in standard theories of grammar, pragmatics, and communication. People in conversation decide what to say not alone, but in collaboration with their interlocutors. They are constantly changing course as they speak, often mid-sentence. When they misestimate (well, George W. Bush misunderestimates) what their interlocutors know, they have techniques for dealing with the consequences. And in speaking, they hesitate, add uh and um, repeat words, redo phrases, and abandon phrases, all in great numbers. According to traditional theories, all of these behaviors are irrational aberrations from the ideal. But are they? In the traditional theories, people using language are assumed to have omniscient rationality. What if they were assumed to have bounded rationality based on limited knowledge and limited processing capacity? I will lay out a model of language use based on bounded rationality and show that it accounts for many of these “aberrant” behaviors as fully rational.