Applied Linguistics Circle

Tuesday 31st May 2011, 4:15 in Room G74

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Language as a Window into Culture and History

This research aims to uncover insights into how languages evolve, and how language can act as a carrier of cultural traditions and reflect those traditions. Drawing on existing notions and ideas from evolutionary biology (in particular population genetics), and using statistical and computational techniques, as well as large corpora of language data, we can extract patterns and trends which reveal important factors about language change.

During the talk I will focus on two of our current projects, which aim to build models of word evolution. We argue that words, like genes, can come under selective pressures to adapt to fit our needs. The first study I will discuss concerns word competition within one language (in this case, English) by investigating the use of near-synonyms. The second concerns word competition across different languages (New Zealand English and Maori) by looking at loanwords. This work is relevant to the basic question of language evolution, as well as to issues of cultural identity, and may help to identify aspects of language and culture that are borrowed versus those native to particular communities.