(Variationist) sociolinguistics greets the Parallel Architecture
Shana Poplack
University of

Arguing that the data of spontaneous speech production, particularly its property of linguistically-conditioned inherent variability, pose the greatest challenges to any formal model of grammar, in this presentation I draw on a variety of analyses of spoken-language corpora to confront some of the proposals of the Parallel Architecture. While these show that the PA is broadly on the right track, the finer level of granularity offered by in-depth analysis of spontaneous speech reveals a layer of complexity in the *structure* of linguistic variability that has received far less attention than the more salient associations between rates of variant use and broad social categories like class or gender. Among the features considered are the complex web of (conspiring or conflicting) conditions brought into play at every choice point which together predict variant selection with a fair degree of accuracy, the fact that their individual significance cannot be predetermined but depends on the interplay among the specific constellation of factors operating on a given variable, and the startling capacity of community members to replicate even the fine details of such conditions across space and over time. The fact that so much of this structure lies so far below the level of consciousness – of both speakers *and* linguists – suggests that it must form part of our "knowledge of language". This raises the issues of how to represent this knowledge in the grammar and where to best accommodate it.