

Tel Aviv University
School of Philosophy, Linguistics and Science Studies,
Department of Linguistics

THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 14/05/2026

16:15-17:45

Webb 103

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Opacity and Phonological Theory: A Case for Rule-Based Serialism over Optimality Theory

Optimality Theory (OT) has been the dominant theory in phonology since the early 1990s, when it replaced the serial rule-based theory of early generative phonology. The immediate success of OT was due to both empirical and conceptual advantages it was argued to offer over rule-based phonology. However, the theory was soon discovered to fail in explaining opacity, a phenomenon in which phonological processes are not visible on the surface. As a remedy, a variety of extensions to OT have been proposed in the past thirty years, but the field has not yet reached a general conclusion about their success. To do this, we need a better understanding of opacity, as well as a systematic evaluation of the proposed solutions. In this talk, I propose a new, theoretically informed taxonomy of opacity and process interaction, and discuss its implications for theoretical phonology. I will show that after numerous patches added to OT, there is still no working version of the theory, and given those patches, the original argument for OT no longer holds. The conclusion is that phonology is serial, non-optimizing, and rule-based.

Click [here](#) to see the colloquium program.