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

THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 29.10.2020
16:15-17:45

Omer Preminger
University of Maryland

"Waving goodbye to Ferdinand: natural language is not composed of Saussurean signs"

This talk aims to show that the atoms of linguistic composition are not Saussurean signs (*viz.* arbitrary pairings of form & meaning; Saussure 1916, Hjelmslev 1943).

Setting aside ideophones and cases of onomatopoeia, most modern approaches to linguistic theory take it as a given that the atoms of morphosyntactic composition – be they 'words' or morphemes – are form-meaning pairings (which can and often are associated with additional, sui generis syntactic features). I will argue that this is in fact an error: architecturally speaking, structured natural-language expressions are entirely devoid of Saussurean signs (with the possible exception of monomorphemic utterances like "wow!", "ugh", and the like).

I will argue in favor of a grammatical architecture where atoms of linguistic composition are entirely abstract, and are not directly associated with form *or* with meaning. Instead, these atoms, once syntactically arranged, constitute the input to a set of mapping rules to form, and to a separate set of mapping rules to meaning. These mapping rules are many-to-one rules and, importantly, nothing forces the set of atoms that map onto a particular element of form to also map, as a set, onto a particular element (or elements) of meaning.

In fact, the input sets to form and to meaning can stand in all manner of misalignment, including what I term *proper partial overlap*, an illustration of which is given in (1), and an example of which is given in (2):

(1) abstract demonstration of *proper partial overlap*:

   a. SYNTAX: $[x, [y, z]]$

   b. SEMANTICS:

     (i) $\{x\} \rightarrow$ A

     (ii) $\{y, z\} \rightarrow$ B   (descriptively, we are used to calling B an "idiom")

c. MORPHO-PHONOLOGY:

    (i) $\{x, y\} \rightarrow$ R   (descriptively, we are used to calling R a "suppletive fusional exponent")

    (ii) $\{z\} \rightarrow$ S

(2) concrete example of *proper partial overlap*:

  a. SYNTAX: [PAST, [GO, OFF]]

  b. SEMANTICS:

    (i) {PAST} $\rightarrow$ "before now"

    (ii) {GO, OFF} $\rightarrow$ "explode"

  c. MORPHO-PHONOLOGY:

    (i) {PAST, GO} $\rightarrow$ /wɛnt/

    (ii) {OFF} $\rightarrow$ /ɑf/

The expression in (2) is composed of smaller parts, both in terms of its semantics ("before now", "explode"), and in terms of its morpho-phonology (/wɛnt/, /ɑf/). It would therefore be incorrect to claim that (2), as a whole, constitutes an 'arbitrary' pairing of form & meaning. At the same time, there is nothing else in (2) that constitutes a pairing of form & meaning, either – only pairings of abstract syntactic nodes with meaning (2.b.i-ii), and separate, incommensurate pairings of abstract syntactic nodes with form (2.c.i-ii). Thus, (2) involves no Saussurean signs whatsoever. I will show that empirically, cases of *proper partial overlap* abound, as do other types of cases predicted by the proposed architecture. Lastly, I will argue that even those contemporary linguistic frameworks that distance themselves from outright Saussureanism, such as *Distributed Morphology* (Halle & Marantz 1993, 1994) and *Nanosyntax* (Starke 2009, Caha 2009, 2019), retain certain Saussurean vestiges that render them less explanatory than the current proposal.

YOU ARE ALL INVITED
Click [here](#) to see the colloquium program for the fall semester