

GSAS Workshops
Language Universals

Joshua Martin (Harvard)

Location: Boylston 105

Date: Friday, October 4, 2019

Time: 12:30-2pm

Title: "*Wh-the-hell* phrases, discourse linking, and domain ignorance"

Abstract: So-called "aggressively non-D-linked" interrogative phrases, such as *what the hell*, *what on earth*, etc., have received relatively little attention in the literature on the semantics of *wh*-questions. The most prominent analysis is that of den Dikken & Giannakidou (2002), who argue that these *wh-the-hell* phrases are polarity items and derive their distribution and various properties, including an inability to be discourse linked or remain in-situ, from this. In this talk, I argue against the polarity analysis on empirical grounds and propose a tentative alternative analysis based on the speaker's ignorance of the set from which the possible answers can be drawn. I try to derive their resistance to discourse-linking (and some evident exceptions to this), their unique incompatibility with *which*, their preference for *kind* expressions over other nouns, and their inability to appear in-situ from this ignorance requirement. I will also present some previously undiscussed syntactic data involving *wh*-ellipsis, or *wh*-questions without *wh*-words, involving these *the-hell* phrases.