

Harvard Linguistics Colloquium Talk Series

Title: The A-/ \bar{A} -distinction is categorial: the view from A-resumption in Arabic

Speaker: Matthew Hewett, UPenn

Time: Friday Nov 22nd @ 12pm

Location: The Fong Auditorium, Boylston Hall (1st floor)

Abstract: The A-/ \bar{A} -distinction—a distinction between dependency types like raising-to-subject and *wh*-movement—has been a mainstay of modern syntactic theorizing since Chomsky (1981). Yet, despite widespread acceptance of the empirical correlates of this distinction, its theoretical underpinning remains a matter of debate. In this talk, I offer a novel perspective on understanding the A-/ \bar{A} -distinction by examining resumptive A-dependencies in Arabic (on which see Doron and Heycock 1999, 2010 and Sellami 2024). A-resumption challenges traditional positional approaches to the A-/ \bar{A} -distinction that predict a strict bipartition among position types (i.e. A-positions vs. \bar{A} -positions, see Chomsky 1981, Mahajan 1990) because, as I show for the first time, A-resumption simultaneously displays a mixture of A- and \bar{A} -properties. For instance, A-resumption feeds agreement with T (= A-property) and skips over intervening DPs and finite clause boundaries (= \bar{A} -properties). Moreover, A-resumption challenges recent approaches which derive A- and \bar{A} -properties from the mechanics of movement (e.g. van Urk 2015, Safir 2019) because A-resumption involves binding without movement.

Instead, I develop an analysis of A-resumption and the A-/ \bar{A} -distinction based on the following two claims about structure-building features:

- (1) There is a distinction between A- and \bar{A} -features (see also van Urk 2015) which reduces to the *category* of the constituent targeted by that feature: A-features target (features of) DPs, \bar{A} -features target (features of) QPs (in the sense of Cable 2010).
- (2) There is a distinction between the featural triggers for external Merge and internal Merge (Hewett 2023; Elbourne 2024).

A-resumption is derived by externally merging a DP (and not a QP) in a non-thematic position and binding a pronominal variable in its scope. I demonstrate that the properties of A-movement, A-resumption, and \bar{A} -movement are correctly predicted by this account—a success arguably not shared by its alternatives. From a broader perspective, my analysis supports the conclusion that Merge is *feature-driven* (i.e. driven by features of lexical items, see Adger 2003; Müller 2010; Zyman 2018) rather than *free* (see Chomsky 2015; Collins 2017; Safir 2019), shedding light on the nature of syntactic structure building.