

GSAS Workshop Linguistics Circle Series

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Friday, March 1, 2019

3:30 – 5:00 pm

Boylston Hall Room 105

Gradual evolution of some key postulates of syntax: making sense of small clauses, middles, islands, exocentrics, and other syntactic shortcomings

Challenging the view that syntax is one (optimal) undecomposable block, in this talk I will present a theoretically grounded syntactic reconstruction that decomposes syntax into (evolutionary) primitives, which can be combined and recombined to yield cross-linguistic variation. This is where formal, typological, and evolutionary considerations come together. This syntactic reconstruction also sheds direct light on some deep properties of the syntax design itself. Defending the notion of “syntactic fossils,” I will present arguments that present-day approximations of this reconstructed proto-grammar include various “defective/deficient” phenomena (e.g. small clauses, middles, islands, exocentrics), which just seem to fall short of the modern syntactic theoretical desiderata. Dealing with tangible and specific linguistic postulates, and tying them directly to the possibility of natural selection, this approach lends itself to empirical testing and cross-fertilization, including with the fields of neuroscience and genetics, as supported by the results of fMRI experiments which tested some predictions of this proposal. There are various ways in which evolutionary proposals can be tested, but they will ultimately need to shed specific light on how biological evolution shapes the genetic make-up that supports human language. A specific natural/sexual selection scenario will be considered.