

Friday, February 26, 9:00 – 10:30 am

The Boundaries of Grammar: Which Categories We Can and Which Categories We Can't Do Without

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Chair/discussant: Gennaro Chierchia, Haas Foundations Professor of Linguistics, Harvard University

<https://www.harvard-yenching.org/events/trang-phan-boundaries-of-grammar/>

Talk will be held over Zoom

Registration required: https://harvard.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6th9gmGwLudv6S2

The distribution and interpretation of bare nouns varies crosslinguistically. In particular, what kinds of categories can and cannot be attached to a bare noun differ from one language to another. To illustrate the range of cross-linguistic variation, we start out with the well-observed contrasts between English (in which bare nouns can be accompanied by a plural marker or an article, *dogs* or *the/a dog* for instance) and Chinese (in which bare nouns cannot co-occur with a grammaticalized plural marker nor article, but a classifier, *zhǐ gǒu* for instance). This raises the question of whether there are restrictions on how the grammar of Noun Phrases works across languages or not. By further comparing to other languages including Hindi and Nuosu Yi, it is shown that Vietnamese in fact adds an interesting dimension to the empirical landscape in having a rich classifier system while at the same time having a productive genuine plural marker and probably a definite plural article. Prima facie, the co-occurrence of classifiers and plural markers/articles in Vietnamese superficially looks like an anomaly, and thus provides arguments in favor of the view that how people use their nouns is not really subject to any structurally governed constraint. We discuss evidence that goes against this view: the way nouns are structured, while variable, is subject to interesting and complex restrictions, and Noun phrases across different languages rely on a number of cross-linguistically stable building blocks, ultimately rooted in logic.