

XV Whatmough Lecture
April 25, 2022
3:00 pm – 5:00 pm

Speaker: Caroline Heycock

via Zoom

Title: The unbearable lightness of *be*: Some of the strange and illuminating things that happen when we use nouns as predicates

The typical configuration that we expect for a clause is that it consists of a subject and a predicate, and the typical predicate is built around a verb. There is a whole range of “copular” clauses, however, where the predicate is built around a noun. These cases raise many challenging questions for linguists: some obvious, others less so. In this talk I’ll discuss some of the questions that these nominal copular clauses pose in particular for our understanding of syntax: how larger meaningful units are built out of words, and what constraints are placed on the processes of combination. These questions include whether there is a structural difference between noun phrases that can function as predicates and those that cannot; whether expressions of identity/equation in natural language are in fact symmetrical; and how far we have to go in deconstructing the concept of “subject” if we are to make sense of anything like the full range of syntactic and morphological properties that we find in copular clauses in even closely related languages.