

**Universals Workshop – Harvard Department of Linguistics**

**Speaker: Laura McPherson (Dartmouth)**

**April 29, 4-6pm | Boylston 237**

## **The talking xylophone of the Sembla: Seenku phonology in a speech surrogate system**

This talk presents the linguistic and documentary implications of a xylophone surrogate language in the study of Seenku, an under-described Northwestern Mande language spoken in Burkina Faso by 17,000 ethnically Sembla people. The surrogate language is an “abridging system”, encoding certain phonological aspects (tone, vowel length, and sesquisyllabicity) to the exclusion of others (segmental information). Even amongst the encoded aspects, we find a division between lexical/morphological and postlexical processes, with the latter only variably encoded in the surrogate language, suggesting that a separation between grammatical components is accessible to musicians in transposing speech to musical form. From a documentary standpoint, the surrogate language offers a novel means of studying Seenku’s complex phonology.

This presentation has two aims. The first is to present a preliminary formalization of the xylophone surrogate language, drawing on primary data gathered in Burkina Faso and with Sembla musicians living abroad. The second aim is to demonstrate how inclusion of ostensibly non-linguistic topics in a documentary project not only provides a richer documentation (including cultural as well as linguistic arenas) but also offers a novel way of approaching linguistic data that can lead to insights difficult to glean from speech alone. The two endeavors are symbiotic: linguistic documentation allows for analysis of surrogate languages, and this analysis in turn presents an unexpected source of linguistic data.