This talk aims to show that the atoms of linguistic composition are not Saussurean signs (viz. arbitrary pairings of form & meaning; Saussure 1916, Hjelmslev 1943).

Setting aside ideophones and cases of onomatopoeia, most modern approaches to linguistic theory take it as a given that the atoms of morphosyntactic composition – be they ‘words’ or morphemes – are form-meaning pairings (which can be associated with additional, sui generis syntactic features). I will argue that this is incorrect: architecturally speaking, natural-language expressions are entirely devoid of Saussurean signs (with the possible exception of monomorphemic utterances like “wow!”, “ugh”, and the like).

I will argue in favor of a grammatical architecture where atoms of linguistic composition are entirely abstract, and are not directly associated with form or with meaning. Instead, these atoms, once syntactically arranged, constitute the input to a set of mapping rules to form, and to a separate set of mapping rules to meaning. These mapping rules are many-to-one rules and, importantly, nothing forces the set of atoms that map onto a particular element of form to also map, as a set, onto a particular element (or elements) of meaning.

Friday, October 30th, 2020 at 12pm
Zoom Link will be sent out on October 28th, 2020