Exploring the limits of syntactic structures

Syntax has played a central role in investigations of the nature of human languages. But, there are at least two distinct ways of conceiving of syntax: the set of rules that enable speakers and listeners to combine the meaning of expressions (compositional syntax), or the set of formal constraints on the combinations of expressions (formal syntax). The question that occupies us in this talk is whether all languages include a significant formal syntax component or whether there are languages in which most syntactic rules are exclusively compositional. Our claims are (1) that Oneida (Northern Iroquoian) has almost no formal syntax component and is very close to a language that includes only a compositional syntax component and (2) that the little formal syntax Oneida has does not require making reference to syntactic features. Our analysis of Oneida suggests that what is often taken as characteristic of human languages (e.g., syntactic selection/argument structure, syntactic binding, syntactic unbounded dependencies, syntactic parts of speech) is merely overwhelmingly frequent in the world’s languages. Our research also suggests that a critical function of compositional syntax is to manage the binding of semantic variables, a function anticipated by Quine’s work on the nature of (semantic) variables.