A new approach to the morphosyntax of gender

Phi features are crucial for syntax and morphology, and number and person accordingly have been the focus of a significant amount of research. However, gender has received less theoretical attention, with the result that critical questions concerning its syntactic representation and morphological realization remain open (Is there a GenderP? Are gender features interpretable? How are the gender features found in the syntax spelled out?). In this talk, I present the results of an ongoing research project to develop a cross-linguistically viable proposal for the morphosyntax of gender. Assuming that lexical categories are decomposed into a category-defining head and a category-neutral root, I argue that gender is located on the nominalizing head ‘little n’ (cf. Ferrari 2005, Acquaviva 2009). I also argue that gender features can be either interpretable (interpreted as biological sex for many languages) or uninterpretable (e.g., the gender of an inanimate noun in French or Spanish). I initially motivate the analysis with an in-depth case study of Amharic (Ethiosemitic), and I argue both that the gender system of Amharic poses challenges for previous gender analyses, and that it provides clear support for gender on n. I continue by identifying and confirming a wide range of cross-linguistic predictions of the proposal, including the complex interplay of number and gender in Somali and the relationship between nominalizations and gender across languages. I conclude by showing how the proposal generates a typology of possible (and impossible) two-gender systems, and show how each type of predicted language is attested.