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Title: **Why nouns and verbs build different kinds of phrases**

Date: Monday, October 23, 2006
Time: 4:00pm
Place: Rosenfeld Hall (corner Temple and Grove)

Abstract:

As is well-known, the syntactic category to which a word belongs determines not only the word's own internal composition (its features) but also facts about its dependents – the kinds of words and phrases with which it may syntactically combine (its external syntax). For example, the direct object of a verb may be a Noun Phrase or any of a wide variety of clauses; but the direct object of a noun must be a Prepositional Phrase or a clause chosen from a more restricted set. To some extent, such correlations between the features and the external syntax of the various parts of speech appears to have cross-linguistic stability. Consequently, a project of obvious importance and interest is a theory of syntax that predicts the external syntax of a given word-type from its feature composition. This talk offers a partial contribution to such a project, reporting joint work with Esther Torrego (UMass/Boston).

The key idea is our proposal that a syntactic head may be merged with a complement or modifier only if an agreement-like relation holds between lexically unvalued features of the head and corresponding features of the complement or modifier. Syntactic categories like Noun and Verb clearly differ in the set of features whose values are pre-specified in lexicon, contrasted with those whose values are determined by syntactic processes of agreement. Morphological evidence, for example, suggests that nouns come from the lexicon already knowing their value for person, grammatical gender (where relevant) and, arguably, number. On the other hand, nouns come from the lexicon not knowing their value for certain other features (e.g. those relevant to case). Verbs have essentially the opposite distribution of valued and unvalued features. These independently establishable facts, when combined with our particular proposal about agreement, offer an explanation for many aspects of the external syntax of verbs and nouns.

Our ultimate goal is to explain facts usually taken as purely syntax-internal observations, like "nouns never take NP complements" (*the destruction the city vs. the destruction of the city), as consequences of much more basic observations -- like the elementary-school fact that nouns stand for "persons, places, things and abstract ideas". Needless to say, the talk will present at most some preliminary steps towards achieving this goal.