Course Outline

The course meets Tuesday 3.30-6.30; Thursday 9-11.50. I will generally be available for consultation on Wednesdays, before class on Tuesdays, after class on Thursdays and by arrangement.

The aim of the course is to present recent ideas that have emerged from the Rethinking Comparative Syntax project group, based in Cambridge (UK) (see recos-dtal.mml.cam.ac.uk). The project aimed to break new ground in syntactic theory by reconceptualising the principles-and-parameters approach to comparative syntax, retaining its strengths and attempting to deal with its perceived weaknesses (see in particular Newmeyer 2004, 2005). The central idea is to organise the parameters of Universal Grammar into hierarchies, which define the ways in which properties of individually variant categories may act in concert; this creates macroparametric effects from the combined action of many microparameters. But there’s much more to it than that ...

The introductory session(s) – this week – will set the general background, looking at P&P theory, its strengths and weaknesses, and outlining and motivating the new approach. After that, we’ll look at word order and linearization (with special emphasis on the Final over Final Constraint), null subjects/arguments, incorporation/polysynthesis/head-movement, and alignment/GF-related parameters.

Assignment: write a short paper on some aspect of the issues discussed in class, or your favourite example(s) of interesting cross-linguistic syntactic variation.

Readings will be “assigned” as we proceed, but here are the essential ones. These are a combination of “classics” of P&P theory new and old (many of which will be familiar), and work by the ReCoS group. I can make unpublished material of various kinds available to you.

Biberauer, Theresa and Ian Roberts. 2014. ‘Contrastive Hierarchies in Phonology and Syntax: The Role of Third Factors (or: Why Phonology is not Different), Ms. University of Cambridge.