Towards a lexicon-free grammar

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In this talk, I will explore an alternative view of language, a view which which flows naturally from the results of the last 30 years of research in formal syntax.

The traditional picture goes like this: you start from elements such as words or morphemes (lexemes), and grammar combines those elements together (syntax/semantics) and readjusts them (morpho-phonology). The starting elements are themselves complex: they are a bundle of features (morphemes) or even a structured entity (a complex word). This picture is simple, attractive and shared by virtually every school of thought in linguistics. I will however argue that it is the wrong way of looking at language.

Recent research suggests a radical alternative: morphemes (or words) are not the starting point of the grammatical operations, they are rather themselves created by grammar. Grammar starts with individual features – terminals of the syntactic trees are single features. These individual features are merged together by syntax, up to the point where a syntactic tree corresponds to a single morpheme. The same syntax continues its merge work to create trees that correspond to words, and then to phrases. A single computational system thus seamlessly covers phrasal syntax, word-internal syntax and morpheme-internal syntax.

One important consequence of this model is that lexical access is entirely post-syntactic (since lexemes are literally created by syntax), and operates on trees – not on bundles of features in a terminal. This means on the one hand that grammar/syntax is entirely lexicon-free (and its principles thus needs to be largely rethought), and on the other hand that the mechanisms of spellout operate very differently from what was tought.

During the presentation, I will show both reasons to think that this model is superior to the standard model, and some of the exciting mechanisms of grammar that stem from this new architecture of language.