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Research Seminar: “The Pacific Northwest and the Limits of Linguistic  
Variation”

Wednesday, March 25, 4:00-5:30pm  
CL 208A

Recent work both from within and from outside the *Principles and Parameters* framework (the cover term for the Chomskyan paradigm in its various incarnations from GB Theory to Minimalism) has brought into question the status of the notion of a *parameter*. In their original formulation, parameters constituted a small set of binary choices made available by Universal Grammar to the learner during the course of language acquisition. The idea (caricatured by Janet Fodor as the '20 questions' approach to language acquisition) was that the interaction of a limited number of parameters could simultaneously account for rapid (and largely error-free) language acquisition and linguistic diversity. While the last twenty five years have afforded precious little support for this original conception, either from studies of child language or from linguistic typology, the need for a coherent theory of grammatical variation is more pressing than ever. In this seminar, I'll look at this question through the lens of the Pacific Northwest – long a source of putative counter-examples to universal generalizations – and suggest that we may have been looking in the wrong places for the roots of linguistic diversity: rather than core syntax or semantics, it is the pragmatic interface which drives variation.

Suggested background reading:

Newmeyer, Frederick J. 2005. *Possible and Probable Languages*. Oxford University Press.