The Department of Linguistics
is pleased to present

**Omer Preminger**

University of Maryland
speaking on

**Syntactic terminals: what they are, and how they map onto other things**

**Thursday, February 17, 2022**
**HUM 1 – 202**
**Or remotely via Zoom**
[https://ucsc.zoom.us/j/95986918559?pwd=Vk5TWU1ScTBaRC9uYVZIcGtjVWp4QT09](https://ucsc.zoom.us/j/95986918559?pwd=Vk5TWU1ScTBaRC9uYVZIcGtjVWp4QT09)

**Abstract:**
At a first approximation, syntax is the study of how words are assembled into phrases, clauses, and sentences. This invites a view where individual syntactic terminals are bundles that bring together some syntactic information (e.g. syntactic category, subcategorization and/or selection) with a FORM and a MEANING. This view of natural language, which I will call the semiotic view, faces certain challenges. On the form side, one must contend with suppletive allomorphy, where the alternating forms are not individually predictable (e.g. -i vs. -ka in the Korean nominative marker). On the meaning side, one must contend with things like systematic polysemy (cf. the artifactual and abstract senses of *book* in a sentence like *This book is old and crumbling but will affect your life like no other*).

Despite these challenges, it is often assumed – in practice, if not in theory – that given the right models of allomorphy and polysemy, a semiotic view of natural language can be salvaged. One can see this de facto assumption at work every time someone asks, “What does the word (or morpheme) *w* in this language mean?” or, less commonly, “How is meaning *m* pronounced in this language?” These questions only make sense within a fundamentally semiotic framework. In other words:
a common working assumption (if not a theoretical one) is that natural language does pair forms and meanings after all; it’s just that these forms and meanings have more abstract representations than one might have initially thought; and it is this abstraction that provides the necessary leeway to capture phenomena like allomorphy (up to and including suppletion), as well as polysemy.

In this talk, I present arguments that even this weaker semiotic characterization is incorrect. I argue that syntactic terminals, though they form the basis for the mappings to form and to meaning, are not individually mapped to either. Instead, ordered sequences of terminals are what is mapped to individual morphological exponents; and ordered sequences of terminals are what is mapped to individual listed meanings.

The proposed model, it is worth noting, bears some resemblance to Distributed Morphology (DM), with its “Vocabulary” and “Encyclopedia” (see Marantz 1997, and references therein). But the latter is still a fundamentally semiotic theory: in DM, the unit associated with form, albeit in a context-sensitive way, is still the individual syntactic terminal; and the unit associated with meaning in DM is again the individual syntactic terminal (again, with potential allowances for context-sensitivity, in particular when it comes to idiomaticity; see Harley 2014a,b). I will discuss particular evidence that favors the more radically non-semiotic model proposed here, where mappings to form and to meaning originate not in individual terminals, but in sequences of terminals. I also show why a framework like Nanosyntax (Starke 2009, Caha 2019), which also maps sets of terminals to forms and meanings, falls short of these explanatory goals, due to a failure to properly dissociate syntax-form mappings from syntax-meaning mappings.