Abstract:
The open-ended ability of humans to construct meaning creatively from the lexical ingredients they store in memory is one of the most striking properties of human cognition. Compositionality has been the empirical focus of the modern semantic tradition that concerns itself with natural language semantics, starting with Montague and Partee (which in turn has its roots in the philosophical truth-making traditions leading from Frege through to Tarski, Church and Lewis). But in this talk I will argue that while this tradition has been very successful descriptively, we are still very far from explanations of the most basic phenomena and generalizations about natural language compositionality and meaning layering. In the first part of the talk, I use evidence from meaning layering in the verb phrase—- from lexical verb, aspectual auxiliary to tense and modality—- to motivate the reality of the ‘explanation gap’. The diagnosis of the problem will be that very foundational questions get begged because of the encapsulation/encarceration of conceptual content away from standard semantic compositional machinery (Alcatraz). In the final part of the talk, I will sketch a solution for how the hyperintensionality of lexical conceptual content can indeed be formally integrated into a truth making version of semantics, without begging the compositionality question (Escape).