The Department of Linguistics
is pleased to present

Mary Paster

Pomona College

speaking on

Counting and learning bias in phonology

Wednesday, February 24, 2021
1:30 PM (PST) via Zoom

Zoom Information: Will be emailed on Tuesday, February 23, 2021

Abstract:
It has been claimed that phonology does not 'count' past two (see, e.g., Goldsmith 1976, McCarthy & Prince 1986, Seidl 2001, Heinz 2009, Kiparsky 2021). However, there exist some phenomena that are problematic for this claim (and any mechanism devised to exclude counting from grammar), especially in Bantu tone systems. In this talk I give an overview of some phonological systems that seem to involve counting, focusing on particularly challenging cases from Manyika (Johnson & Paster 2012) and Kikuria (Marlo, Mwita & Paster 2014, 2015). If we acknowledge that an adequate theory of phonology must allow counting, questions then arise as to why counting is so rare, and why it seems to occur only in the domain of stress/tone and not in segmental phonology. A theory that freely allows all types of counting overgenerates with respect to the attested patterns, absent some theoretical or functional explanation for the rarity and the apparent gap. I hypothesize that counting is not ruled out in any domain by a universal restriction on phonological grammars; rather, counting is permitted but (1) tends not to emerge historically, especially in the segmental domain, due to the local phonetic origins of most phonological rules/constraints and (2) may tend to be lost over time due to a learning bias towards metrical generalizations. I present preliminary results of an artificial language learning study suggesting that subjects can learn a segmental counting pattern, but that they may tend to learn it 'incorrectly' due to the learning bias.