

DRC/CLaS SEMINAR

- Date:** Friday, 9 November
- Time:** 12-1.15 pm
- Location:** W5C 221
- Speaker:** Professor Johann Elsness, University of Oslo
- Topic:** *Tense and aspect at the crossroads: the present perfect/preterite distinction in Australian and other varieties of English*

Abstract: Like a great many other languages, English has two main verb forms used in references to past time: the periphrastic present perfect (*have seen*) and the synthetic preterite (*saw*). The choice between these two verb forms displays a great deal of variation, both between languages and within individual languages. In many languages, including German and French, the present perfect is gaining ground at the expense of the preterite, to the extent that it is now fully possible to say things like *Ich habe ihn gestern gesehen* and *Je l'ai vu hier*, combining the present perfect with very definite specification of past time. The situation in English is more complex. Even here the present perfect increased in frequency from its early beginnings in Old English at least until the Early Modern English period. Now there is reason to believe that the English preterite is striking back, and combinations like the one in *I've seen him yesterday* are not supposed to be possible. Also, the distribution between these verb forms is one of the relatively few points of English morpho-syntax where there is a well documented difference between the various national varieties, especially American and British English: it has often been pointed out that the preterite is common in AmE in many cases where the BrE norm prescribes the present perfect. In this talk the focus will be on Australian and to some extent New Zealand English: where do those varieties place themselves within the broad picture of World English when it comes to the choice between the present perfect and the preterite? Evidence will be provided from corpus investigations and from the Feedback column of *Australian Style*.

All staff and students welcome.