

LING 53 Semantics 1

Syllabus (as of 06.21.16)

1 Administrative Information

INSTRUCTOR:

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Office hours: M 13.00-14.00

LOGISTICS:

Class: MW 9.00-12.30, Soc Sci 1, 161
Website: Google Classroom, code h1w311
Prerequisites: none.

The course is an introduction to the study of linguistic meaning. When we investigate how language is used in communication, we recognize two interacting systems: (a) the semantic system, which is part of our knowledge of the language we speak, and (b) the pragmatic principles that guide our interpretation of language in actual situations of use. This course is concerned with both the semantic and the pragmatic aspects of language understanding. Our goal is to investigate aspects of the semantic structure of English within the framework of an explicit theory of linguistic meaning. We begin with the pragmatic side, by distinguishing among different layers of meaning an utterance conveys. We then move on to explore the basic meaning of verbs, and the way the meaning of sentences is constructed from the meanings of their parts. We end with issues concerning reference and discourse. In talking about the meaning of sentences, we will use the formal languages of propositional logic and predicate calculus to help us arrive at a compositional account of the truth conditions of English sentences.

No previous work in linguistics is presupposed. The course carries the General Education code IH. Our starting point will be the truth-conditionality hypothesis advocated by the philosopher Donald Davidson:

- **TRUTH-CONDITIONAL HYPOTHESIS:** The meaning of a declarative sentence is its *truth conditions*, what it would take for the sentence to be true.

In this session, we will construct an explicit system of rules using the truth-conditional hypothesis as our guide. You will be exposed to several areas of exploration in semantics:

- the subtle distinctions between **entailment**, **presupposition**, and **implicature**
- problems in **lexical meaning**, especially theta roles
- **quantification** in natural language
- the formal tools of **propositional logic** and the **predicate calculus**

1.1 A Rough Schedule

The course will be divided into 5 subject areas, with the following order of presentation.

1. RELATIONS BETWEEN WORDS AND SENTENCES (3 classes): Discussion of three important semantic relations between sentences: entailment, implicature, and presupposition; the role of context.
2. VERBAL SEMANTICS (2 classes): The semantics of verbs; argument structure; aksionsart
3. NOMINAL SEMANTICS (1 class): The semantics of nouns; number and gender; pronouns; the mass/count distinction; definiteness
4. QUANTIFICATION (2 classes): The semantics of quantifiers
5. TENSE AND MODALITY (1 class): The semantics of tense in natural language

2 Requirements

The course has two formal requirements: lecture and problem sets.

2.1 Lecture

It is imperative that you attend class, especially given that there is **no textbook** for the class. This class will also require diligent and accurate note-taking – please do not rely on class slides/handouts to summarize information for you. Speaking up in class will affect your participation grade.

2.2 Problem Sets

You will have homework due on every day of class, handed out on the previous class day. Homeworks assigned on Monday (due on Wednesday) will be short exercises, designed to be completed in one to two hours of work. Homeworks assigned on Wednesday (due on Monday) will be much longer, requiring several hours of work to complete. There will be four shorter homeworks and four longer homeworks. Homework will be given out and turned in via Google Classroom as a Google Doc.

You fail the course if you miss more than 2 assignments.

While collaborative work is highly encouraged, joint submissions of homework are not permitted. Please indicate on your problem set who you collaborated with. If you collaborated with no one, please mark it. We will deduct points for the following:

- not listing your collaborators **I will deduct 30% for this!**

2.3 Participation

A word about participation. Your participation grade is 20% and is determined across how actively you are involved in the intellectual life of the class (class, office hours). Coming to class (and sitting silent) will not count as a good participation grade – at best, it's a C. I don't take attendance in class, and if you aren't raising your hand and talking, you aren't participating (in my book).

2.4 Grade Computation

We will use the following system to compute your grades:

- Long sets: 48% (each problem set is worth 12% of your grade)
- Short problem sets: 32% (each is worth 8% of your grade)
- Participation: 20%

2.5 Matters of Etiquette

In this class, we treat each other with respect and compassion. That means we do not show annoyance at someone else's confusion, nor laugh at people's questions (unless intended).

We also don't interrupt class discussion by yelling something out of turn; please raise your hands if you want to bring something to the class's attention. Because of the size of this class, you won't always be able to contribute something to a discussion. I'm sorry. If the issue is really pressing, mention it to your TA, come up after class, or come to office hours. I am always happy to relay an interesting remark to the rest of the class.

If you feel like you're being systematically marginalized, please let one of us know. This room is not conducive to larger lectures; I often can't see in the back. Regardless where you are sitting, it is never my intention to keep students from discussion!

Finally, a brief word about email: I try to respond to email as quickly as possible, but I have a life outside this classroom. Here are my promised response latencies: a) during the week, 24 hours; b) during the weekend, by Monday morning. That means, in particular, that I will guiltlessly file away hurried questions to me on Thursday evening or Friday morning. I'm sorry to be so harsh, but I found out the hard way that otherwise I'm besieged with messages while trying to eat breakfast.