SYLLABUS

Linguistics 401:
Introduction to Linguistics

1 In a Nutshell
This course is an introduction the basic methodology and results of contemporary linguistics. Above all, the goal is to get a sense of how to develop, evaluate, and improve hypotheses about language in a precise and rigorous way. In order to do this, a significant proportion of the course will be devoted to collectively developing an explicit theory of syntax (sentence structure). We will then consider other core subfields of linguistics, including phonetics (how sounds are made and perceived), phonology (how sounds pattern together), and semantics (the structure of meaning).

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3 Course Requirements
The principal requirements for the course are:

• Take-home assignments. These will be done in groups of three people. They will ask you to devise solutions to empirical problems and present them in the form of a brief well-reasoned argument.

• Two take-home exams (a midterm and a final). They will essentially be long assignments.

• An in-class phonetics test.

• Contributing frequently and thoughtfully to class discussions. This is not optional.

Outside of class: You will collaborate on your take-home work with two other people and turn in a joint write-up, but each collaborator must be able to defend the proposed solution. The group you work with will change occasionally (probably twice) over the course of the semester. You may discuss your work with other students not in your group, however. Of course, other people's ideas must be properly cited. If you find any of this confusing, ask.

In class: The course will revolve primarily around in-class discussion, and most of the progress we make will be made that way, so coming to class is genuinely crucial. If you miss classes, you are likely to miss information that will be necessary for understanding the assignments and subsequent discussion. If you anticipate having to miss class frequently, do not take this course.

Disability?: If it will be difficult for you to meet these requirements due to a disability, please let me know during the first two weeks of the course so we can make appropriate arrangements.

Honors option: If you'd like to do an honors option—or you're not in the Honors College, but would like to do the equivalent of one—talk to me at some point during the first half of the semester. We can work out what exactly you would do, but at least part of it would be a short in-class presentation of your work at the end of the semester.

4 Grades
Each assignment and each exam will receive a grade. Your final grade will be the average (mean) of the following:

• your grades on the assignments

• your grades on the exams, weighted double (that is, each exam will count as two assignments)

• your grade on the in-class phonetics test (counts as much as an assignment)

• a grade for what you contributed to class discussions (counts as much as an assignment)

1 Phonetic transcription: [ˈmaɪ.nɪ.məˈzɪki]. This splotch of typographical weirdness will be interpretable to you by the end of the course.
5 Suggested Supplementary Reading

There will be no textbook for the course. But you may want to read this:


This is written in an informal and often entertaining style—it’s a popularization, not a textbook. It presents some of the subject matter of contemporary theoretical linguistics from the perspective of broader issues in cognitive science.

You may be alarmed by the absence of a proper textbook. Don’t be. If you really cannot bear the thought of being without one, you may want to use either of the following as an intellectual security blanket:


Each of these has some disadvantages, and reading them may actually make things harder (because of inconsistencies in terminology and the like). They might be useful if you would like to know more about topics we won’t be talking about in any depth, though. These textbooks will not be helpful as a substitute for missed classes. Some of what we talk about in class can’t be found there, and what can is often approached in a different way.

6 Agenda

The rate at which we proceed, and to a smaller extent the path we take, will depend on what happens in class. For this reason, this is a rough overall agenda, not a fixed schedule.

- linguistics, linguistic knowledge, and linguistic intuitions (today)
- **syntax**: how words come together (about six weeks)
  - prescriptive rules and why they aren’t interesting
  - grammar as a mental machine
  - phrase structure
- recursion
- complementation and subcategorization
- transformations
- syntactic variation
- midterm exam
- **phonetics**: how meat makes sound (about two weeks)
  - mildly embarrassing exploration of one’s own vocal tract
  - English speech sounds
  - transcription
  - phonetic variation across dialects and a taste of sociolinguistics
  - phonetic variation across languages
- phonetics test (in class)
- **phonology**: how sounds interact (about four weeks)
  - phonemes
  - assimilation
  - phonological rules and underlying representations
  - child phonology (phonological acquisition)
  - historical linguistics and reconstructing languages
  - syllable structure
  - borrowing
- **semantics and pragmatics**: how does language manage to mean things? (about two weeks)
  - flavors of meaning
  - truth-conditional semantics
  - compositionality: how meanings are assembled
  - implicatures: conveying without saying
- a taste of psycholinguistics
- language and the mind
- final exam