Syllabus

LIN 437: Semantics and Pragmatics

1 The course

This course examines how natural languages encode meaning and how speakers use them to convey it. Our core aim will be to develop a theory of semantic and pragmatic competence that addresses these deep, complicated, and potentially slippery questions with the rigor and precision contemporary linguistics aspires to. In doing so, we will encounter some of the technical tools that provide a framework for answering these questions in a precise way, but the emphasis will be on the empirical phenomena the theory is designed to model and on the proper place of such a theory in the architecture of the grammar.

2 Contact information

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3 Requirements & policies

The principal requirements for the course are:

- Take-home assignments, of which there will be at most six. Most of these will require 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.
- Contributing frequently and thoughtfully to class discussions. This is not optional.

Outside of class You can—in fact, definitely should—discuss your work with other students. You're encouraged to collaborate on a single write-up in groups of up to three, but each group member must be able to defend the proposed solution. Other people's ideas must be properly cited. If you find any of this confusing, ask me for clarification.

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 crucial. If you miss classes, you are likely to miss information that will be necessary to understand the assignments and subsequent discussion. If you anticipate having to miss class frequently, do not take this course.

A warning Semantics uses mathematical tools that many people find difficult to master. More generally, the course is highly technical, more so than you might be used to from other linguistics classes at the same level. If you're not prepared for that, you should drop the course now.

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 exactly what 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.

Disability? Please notify me during the first two weeks of the course to make any special arrangements to accommodate a disability. If you haven't already done so, you should contact MSU's Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities for help with the process.

Academic integrity Don't plagiarize. Don't look for solutions to the problems on your assignments online. In most cases, this isn't possible, but in all cases, it's a form of cheating. For more on the university's academic integrity policies, consult the website of the MSU Ombudsperson's Office.

Social media and copyright issues Don't share course materials (handouts, assignments, etc.) with anyone outside of class. Don't record anything that happens in class. Violating these policies may result in academic disciplinary sanctions.

4 Grades

Each assignment and each exam will receive a grade. Your final grade will be the mean of the following:

- your grades on the assignments
- your grades on the exams, weighted double (that is, each will count as two assignments)
a grade for what you contributed to class discussions (this will count as one assignment)

5 Textbook

There is no required textbook for this course. There is, however, one that may be helpful as a supplemental resource:


This might help you in pursuing some topics in greater depth, getting a firmer grasp of the theoretical machinery, and exploring issues not covered in the course. It is, of course, not a substitute for coming to class—much of what we discuss will have no direct counterpart in the textbook, and where there is overlap, the conclusions will often have been arrived at differently.

6 Rough schedule

This schedule isn’t really a schedule. It’s a tentative overview of some of the topics we’ll address in roughly the order we’re likely to address them. The precise course we will take and its timing will depend primarily on in-class discussion. It’s unlikely that we’ll actually manage to get through all of these topics, but it can’t hurt to be optimistic about our pace.

Jan. 10: Preliminaries
Logistics
Some big questions and some small puzzles

Jan. 12: The meaning machine
Truth conditions
A bit of lexical semantics

Jan. 17: Models and natural language ontology
Compositionality and functions

Jan. 19: Meet the lambda
Functions as meanings

Jan. 24: Nouns, verbs, adjectives
Types and type-driven interpretation

Jan. 26: Types and argument structure

Jan. 31: Multiple arguments and Schönfinkel/Currying
Higher types
(Marcin is out of town; Ai Taniguchi fills in)

Feb. 2: Negation
Passives
(Marcin is out of town; Ai Taniguchi fills in)

Feb. 7: Presupposition
Definite descriptions

Feb. 9: Definite descriptions continued
A theory of presupposition
Context-sensitivity

Feb. 14: Presupposition and lexical semantics

Feb. 16: Steps toward temporal semantics

Feb. 21: Tense

Feb. 23: Modification
Vagueness and structural ambiguity

Feb. 28: Aktionsart/lexical aspect
Lexical semantics of verbs

March 14: Grammatical aspect

March 16: Quantificational adverbs

March 21: Quantificational determiners

March 23: Two problems with quantificational determiners
Midterm handed out1

March 28: Pronouns and variables
Movement and variable-binding

March 30: Generalized quantifiers and scope
Architecture of the semantic module revisited

April 4: Cross-linguistic semantics
Conservativity

April 6: Polarity and polarity-sensitivity

April 11: Temporal sensitivity across the grammar
Two flavors of adjective and two ways to predicate

April 13: Some foundational puzzles
Intensionality

April 18: Intensionality continued: modeling possibilities

April 20: Pragmatics of discourse
Discourse structure and information states

April 25: Scalar implicatures

April 27: Expressive meaning
The morals of the story
Final exam handed out (due on Friday of finals week)

1Again, this is an estimate. It may actually be a little earlier or later.