

Linguistics 502: Semantics I

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Course Description

People use sentences to convey information about themselves and about the world in which we live. This course provides an introduction to the study of how meaning is encoded and expressed in natural language. The study of linguistic meaning comprises two disciplines: *semantics*, the study of the literal meaning carried by words and sentences, and *pragmatics*, the study of how speakers use words and sentences to convey meaning. Despite its title, this course is concerned with both aspects of linguistic meaning.

We will examine some of the basic concepts, findings, and theoretical approaches that underlie research in semantics and pragmatics. Along the way, we will also acquaint ourselves with some of the formal tools that are employed in the study of meaning. Throughout, our focus will be on an empirical understanding of meaning in natural language (i.e., this is not a logic class). In particular, we will investigate various aspects of the semantic structure of English while constructing an explicit theory of linguistic meaning.

Prerequisite

The prerequisite for this course is CAS LX 250, "Introduction to Linguistics". Any student who has not satisfied the prerequisite should contact me immediately.

Textbook & Supplementary Readings

The required textbook for this course (available at the BU Bookstore) is:

Kearns, Kate. 2011. *Semantics*, 2nd edition. Palgrave Macmillan.
(ISBN: 978-0230232303)

Several supplementary readings will also be assigned—these will be made available to you via the course website.

Requirements

Reading: Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all readings are required, and should be completed by the beginning of class.

Attendance & Participation: Regular attendance and participation are expected, and will constitute 5% of your overall grade.

Exams: There will be two in-class midterm exams: the first will be on **Tuesday, February 24**, and the second will be on **Thursday, April 2**. Each midterm exam will constitute 15% of your overall grade. There will also be a cumulative final exam on **Friday, May 8 (3-5pm)**, which will constitute 20% of your overall grade.

Homework: There will be (more or less) weekly homework assignments, which will be made available to you via the course website. Some of the problems will be technical exercises designed to develop familiarity with our formal tools, and will not require prose write-ups. Others will be more substantial problems in semantic analysis and argumentation, and will require clear and well-reasoned exposition. The assignments will both test your understanding of previously covered material and also serve to introduce new topics that will be discussed in subsequent classes. In some cases, you will not yet have the tools to fully solve a particular problem—your goal here will be to develop a novel proposal for how to solve the problem.

Assignments will be due at the beginning of class. Late assignments will not be accepted unless prior arrangements have been made. Your lowest homework score will be dropped; the rest will account for 45% of your overall grade.

Your homework assignments should be presented in coherent prose — groups of complete sentences that lay out your thinking clearly, explicitly, and in an organized fashion. Assignments should be typed, with enough space for our comments. (Logical symbols may be hand-written, though these are also available in word processing programs such as Microsoft Word.) Remember to include your name, the date, and the assignment number on each assignment. Multi-page assignments should be stapled.

Linguistics is a collaborative discipline, and I encourage you to discuss the assignments with each other. However, each student must write up his/her answers independently, without reference to the written work of any other student. Also, give due credit to your collaborators by listing their names at the top of your assignment. Any external sources that you consult must be cited in your assignment. You are expected to abide by Boston University's Academic Conduct Code, which is accessible at <http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/>. Graduate students are additionally expected to abide by the GRS Academic Conduct Code, which is accessible at <http://www.bu.edu/cas/students/graduate/forms-policies-procedures/academic-discipline-procedures/>.

Preliminary Schedule (subject to change as the semester proceeds)

| WEEK | DATE | CLASS TOPIC | READING | ASSIGNMENTS |
|--|---------|---|--|---------------------------|
| 1 | Tu 1/20 | Course Overview; Requirements | | |
| | Th 1/22 | <u>Towards a Theory of Meaning</u> | Kearns Chap. 1 | HW1 out |
| 2 | Tu 1/27 | Truth, truth-conditions, and compositionality; Entailment, implicature, and presupposition | Chierchia & McConnell-Ginet, excerpt from <i>Meaning and Grammar</i> (16-22) | |
| | Th 1/29 | <u>Conversational Implicature</u> Sentence meaning vs. speaker meaning; Grice's maxims; Varieties of implicature; Scalar implicature | Birner §2.1 (40-62) | HW1 due; HW2 out |
| 3 | Tu 2/3 | | Birner §2.2-2.3 (62-73) (skip §2.2.2) | HW2 due; HW3 out |
| | Th 2/5 | | | |
| 4 | Tu 2/10 | <u>Propositional Logic</u> | Kearns §2.1-2.2 (24-32) | |
| | Th 2/12 | Meaning at the sentence level; Sentential connectives; Semantic relations amongst sentences | Löbner §4.2-4.3 (62-73) | HW3 due (F 2/13 @ 5pm) |
| 5 | Tu 2/17 | No Class | | |
| | Th 2/19 | A Case Study: <i>and</i> vs. <i>&</i> | | |
| 6 | Tu 2/24 | In-Class Exam #1 | | |
| | Th 2/26 | <u>Presupposition</u> Triggers and the S-Family test; Given vs. new; Semantic vs. pragmatic presupposition | Birner §5.1-5.2 (146-155) | HW4 out |
| 7 | Tu 3/3 | | Kearns §2.3 (32-39) | HW4 due |
| | Th 3/5 | | | |
| Spring Break (Sa 3/7 – Su 3/15) | | | | |

| WEEK | DATE | CLASS TOPIC | READING | ASSIGNMENTS |
|------|---------|---|-----------------------------|------------------|
| 8 | Tu 3/17 | <u>Predicate Logic (cont.)</u> Meaning below the sentence level; Predicates and arguments | Kearns §2.3 (32-39) | HW5 out |
| | Th 3/19 | <u>Lexical Semantics</u> Semantic relations amongst words; Lexical opposites; Varieties of adjectival modifiers | Löbner Chap. 5 | |
| 9 | Tu 3/24 | | | HW5 due; HW6 out |
| | Th 3/26 | <u>Argument Structure</u> Predicates and thematic roles; Linking theory; Alternations and implicit arguments | Kearns §10.1-10.3 (206-220) | |
| 10 | Tu 3/31 | | | HW6 due |
| | Th 4/2 | In-Class Exam #2 | | |
| 11 | Tu 4/7 | <u>First-Order Predicate Logic</u> The quantifiers \forall and \exists ; | Bach Chap. 1 | |
| | Th 4/9 | The Aristotelian Square of Opposition; Scope ambiguities | Kearns Chap. 3 | HW7 out |
| 12 | Tu 4/14 | | | |
| | Th 4/16 | <u>Generalized Quantifiers</u> Expressive capacity of FOPL; The problem of <i>most</i> ; Restricted quantifiers and compositionality | Kearns §6.1-6.2 (94-99) | HW7 due; HW8 out |
| 13 | Tu 4/21 | | Kearns §6.3-6.7 (99-111) | |
| | Th 4/23 | Negative Polarity Items | Kearns §6.9 (118-121) | HW8 due; HW9 out |
| 14 | Tu 4/28 | <u>Nouns and Verbs</u> Aspectual classes of verbs; Distributive vs. collective predicates; Plurals and universally quantified NPs | Kearns §8.1-8.3 (156-166) | |
| | Th 4/30 | | | HW9 due |
| 15 | F 5/8 | Final Exam (3-5pm) | | |

Reading List

- Bach, Emmon. 1989. *Informal Lectures on Formal Semantics*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Birner, Betty. 2012. *Introduction to Pragmatics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Chierchia, Gennaro and Sally McConnell-Ginet. 1990. *Meaning and Grammar: An Introduction to Semantics*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Kearns, Kate. 2011. *Semantics*, 2nd edition. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Löbner, Sebastian. 2002. *Understanding Semantics*. London: Arnold Publishers.