

CAS LX 331 / GRS LX 631

Semantics & Pragmatics: Introduction to Linguistic Meaning

Boston University · Spring 2020

Instructor:	Elizabeth Coppock, Assistant Professor of Linguistics
Time and place:	Tues. and Thurs. 12:30pm–1:45pm in CAS B20
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Office:	621 Commonwealth Ave., Room 110
Office hours:	Tues. 11am–12:15pm and Thurs. 2pm–3:45pm
Online office hours:	Mon. 3pm–5pm on Slack (message @Prof. Coppock directly)

Course Description & Learning Objectives

This course provides an introduction to the study of meaning in natural language. The study of linguistic meaning comprises two overlapping sub-disciplines:

- **semantics**, the study of what *words and sentences* mean
- **pragmatics**, the study of what *speakers* mean

We will examine some of the basic phenomena, concepts, and theoretical tools that underlie research in these areas. Students who complete this course will:

1. learn to distinguish between the conventional ('literal') aspects of a sentence's meaning, and those aspects of meaning that depend upon speakers and contexts;
2. develop some mastery of the formal tools that linguists use to represent and reason about linguistic meaning;
3. develop the ability to identify and evaluate the predictions made by a precise theory of meaning, and to assess the relative merits of competing analyses of a particular phenomenon;
4. become acquainted with a broad range of semantic/pragmatic phenomena;
5. carry out a small fieldwork project comparing at least two languages in a team.

Furthermore, this course leads to learning outcomes in the following Hub areas: THE INDIVIDUAL IN COMMUNITY, GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AND INTERCULTURAL LITERACY, and CRITICAL THINKING.

- THE INDIVIDUAL IN COMMUNITY.
 - Students will analyze how the direct and indirect channels through which language is conveyed convey meaning and influence beliefs, both in English and in other languages, across a broad spectrum of communicative arenas.
This will be achieved through exercises in which students learn to distinguish entailments from other kinds of implications, including an exercise studying how phenomena such as presupposition and implicature impact the ratings that fact-checkers assign to claims made by politicians in the media.
 - Students will work with a member of a language community other than English to tell stories that reflect the associated culture.
This will be achieved through the final project, which involves creating or adapting culturally appropriate elicitation materials for a language other than English.
- GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AND INTERCULTURAL LITERACY.
 - Students will demonstrate, through comparative analysis, an understanding of global diversity as expressed in at least two different languages.
This will be achieved through the final project, which involves not only adapting elicitation materials for culturally diverse settings, but also working in a group to compare the application of the same story template across multiple languages and associated cultural settings.
- CRITICAL THINKING.
 - Students will be able to identify key elements of critical thinking including distinguishing deductive from inductive modes of inference, recognizing common logical fallacies, and translating ordinary language into formal argument.
As a whole, the course is structured around different kinds of implication relations. Students will study the characteristics of deductive arguments such as validity and soundness, names for common fallacies such as Denying the Antecedent and Asserting the Consequent as well as valid modes of argumentation such as Modus Tollens and Modus Ponens, gain formal tools for capturing logical entailments (Propositional Logic, Predicate Calculus), learn to distinguish logical entailments from other kinds of implications such as presuppositions and implicatures, and study a variety of examples of these kinds of implications as they apply to specific linguistic phenomena.
 - Drawing on skills developed in class, students will be able to evaluate the validity of arguments, including their own.
Grappling with the linguistic phenomena that students are asked to analyze on their own will force them to engage in logical reasoning of a scientific nature. We even discuss in class how the scientific method uses an application of Modus Tollens: A certain hypothesis makes a prediction; that prediction is falsified; hence the hypothesis must not be correct.

Prerequisite

The prerequisite for this course is CAS LX 250 Introduction to Linguistics.

Literature

There is no required textbook for this course. All readings will be made available via Blackboard.

Course Requirements & Policies

Reading: In the syllabus below, the readings associated with the lectures are indicated in the same row. As problem sets are normally due on Tuesdays, you may do the readings due on Tuesdays either before class on Tuesday or before the following class on Thursday. However, all of the week’s readings should be done by Thursday.

In-class quizzes. On selected Thursdays, there will be brief quizzes reviewing the material from the previous lecture and the associated reading, using clickers. They are worth a total of 5% of your grade, so please don’t let them stress you out.

Final project. The final project will involve developing and applying elicitation materials for semantic fieldwork. To do fieldwork in semantics/pragmatics, it is useful to have non-linguistic visual materials that can be used to probe the structures of interest. The materials should ideally be culturally appropriate, using concepts, activities, and ideologies that are familiar to the members of the language community.

One technique for elicitation in semantic fieldwork that is growing in popularity is the “storyboard”.¹ A storyboard is a sequence of pictures telling a story, designed to elicit some particular kind of linguistic structure or semantic distinction. The fieldworker tells the story in the common language, and then the consultant tells the story in his or her own language.

For this project, you will work in a group of two or more people, each focussing on a different language. Everyone in the group will work with the same basic elicitation materials. These may be based on an existing storyboard, or you may develop a questionnaire of your own, for example based on the paper by Tonhauser et al. Use of visual materials is encouraged but not required. Each member of the group will apply the same basic elicitation materials to a different language, making adaptations where necessary. Each member of the group must:

1. by **April 9th**, find at least one native speaker of a language other than English who is willing to help (it’s perfectly acceptable to use your own native language if it is not English, but the native speaker must be someone other than yourself);
2. by **April 16th**, decide who you will be working with and what phenomenon you would like to study
3. by **April 23rd**, develop an elicitation plan

¹You can find examples of storyboards at <http://totemfieldstoryboards.org>.

4. by **April 30th**, try out the elicitation method with the native speaker;
5. in time for the final write-up to be completed by **May 7th**, write up a report on the results, including what aspects of the elicitation materials require adaptation for the particular cultural setting.

The final write-up should discuss in detail the similarities and differences that turned up between the languages investigated. The submitted report should contain one section for each language, which will be singly-authored by one student, as well as a section synthesizing the results, which is jointly authored by the group members. The assigned grade will depend both on the individual component and the group component.

Problem sets. You will complete nine (9) problem sets during the semester. The problem sets 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 may 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.

Remember to include your name, the date, and the assignment number on each submission. Solutions will be due at the beginning of class. We will often discuss some portion of the problem set on the day that it is due. For this reason, late submissions will not be accepted unless prior arrangements have been made.

The lowest problem set grade will be dropped.

Graduate-level requirements. Students enrolled in LX 631 will engage more deeply with the final project. The write-up for the final project must include an introduction of the theoretical issues at stake, a brief review of key previous literature on these issues, and a discussion of the theoretical consequences of the empirical results found. Bibliographical references should be included, and the prose should be precise and accurate, organized into paragraphs that make a single, clear point, and the write-up should follow stylistic conventions that are standard in academic writing in linguistics.² Graduate students are encouraged to schedule a meeting with Prof. Coppock to discuss their projects at least once during the semester.

Collaboration. The purpose of the assignments is to help you learn; they also help us assess whether or not you are learning. When you put your name at the top of your assignment, you are alleging that *you are the author* of the assignment. *You may not under any circumstances provide an answer to another student, whether in writing or aloud, nor may you submit an answer that you obtained from another student in any manner.*

You may discuss what you think the question is asking; you may go over your notes from class; you may point to relevant sections of the reading; you may give an

²See <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/unified-style-sheet>.

illuminating example; and you may give hints, but you may not give an answer. If you do discuss a homework assignment with any other student, please list their name at the top of your submission.

All of the following constitute unacceptable forms of collaboration: (i) having one or more group members produce a “group draft”, which other group members then customize; (ii) individual group members writing up their solutions separately while conferring in real time (whether in person or remotely); and (iii) using another student’s completed solutions as a guide to producing your own. Any suggestion that one of these things has occurred, or any other indication that you are presenting another student’s work as your own, will be pursued as a case of academic misconduct.

Academic Conduct. You are expected to abide by Boston University’s Academic Conduct Code, which is accessible at <https://www.bu.edu/cas/current-students/undergraduate/academic-conduct-code-2/>. Graduate students are additionally expected to abide by the GRS Academic Conduct Code, <https://www.bu.edu/cas/files/2017/02/GRS-Academic-Conduct-Code-Final.pdf>. Plagiarism in any form (including from online sources) and other academic misconduct will not be tolerated. If you are unsure of any aspect of these policies, please ask!

Attendance. Regular attendance is required to pass the class. If you are unable to attend class because of religious observance, you should submit email notification to Prof. Coppock at least a week in advance. Please look over the syllabus. If you anticipate a conflict, please bring this to her attention via email ASAP. If a religious conflict prevents you from submitting an assignment on the due date, you are invited to submit the relevant assignment in advance. In case of illness or other serious issues that may prevent your attending a class, please contact Prof. Coppock by email in advance (or as promptly after the class as possible, depending on circumstances). In case of extended illness or other extraordinary long-term circumstance, contact Prof. Coppock ASAP to make appropriate arrangements.

Late Policy. Late assignments will not be accepted without prior permission. The lowest problem set grade will be dropped.

Final Course Grade: Your overall course grade will be determined as follows:

5%	Attendance/Participation
5%	In-class quizzes
20%	Final Project
70%	Problem Sets (best 8 of 9)

Schedule (subject to change)

DATE	TOPIC	READING	ASSIGNMENTS
T 1/21	Implicature vs. entailment	C&MG ch 1: 1-28	
R 1/23	vs. presupposition	C&MG ch 1: 28-33	
T 1/28	Lexical relations	Wechsler (2015) ch 2: 6-29	PS1 out
R 1/30	Mass vs. count	Wechsler (2015) ch 2: 20-21	
T 2/4	Thematic roles	Wechsler (2015) ch 4: 134-150	PS1 due; PS2 out
R 2/6	Aspect	Wechsler (2015) ch 4: 150-165	
T 2/11	Deixis	Fillmore (1997): 59-75	PS2 due; PS3 out
R 2/13	Tense	Reichenbach (1947): 72-78	
T 2/18	No class; Mon. sched.		
R 2/20	Storyboards & modality	B&M: 135-156	PS3 due
T 2/25	Boolean connectives	Kearns (2000) ch 2: 25-30	PS4 due; PS5 out
R 2/27	Conditionals	Kearns (2000) ch 2: 30-35	
T 3/3	Quantifiers	H&K: 131-138	PS5 due; PS6 out
R 3/5	Quantifiers	LPL Ch 9: 229-247	
T 3/10	Spring break		
R 3/12	Spring break		
T 3/17	Predicates	Bach (1981): 1-14	
R 3/19	Quantification	Bach (1981): 14-16	
T 3/25	Implicature	Grice (1975): 22-40	PS6 due; PS7 out
R 3/27	Scalar implicature	Geurts (2011) ch 2: 27-48	
T 3/31	Presupposition	Beaver & Geurts (2013): 1-9	PS7 due; PS8 out
R 4/2	Presupposition	Beaver & Geurts (2013): 9-30	
T 4/7	Usage conditions	Kaplan (1999): 1-18	PS8 due
R 4/9	Usage conditions	Potts (2007): 1-19	Find speaker
T 4/14	Projective content	Tonhauser et al. (2013): 66-81	PS9 out
R 4/16	Projective content	Tonhauser et al. (2013): 82-105	Project idea due
T 4/21	Final project workshop		PS9 due
R 4/23	Final project workshop		Elicitation plan due
T 4/28	Final project previews		
R 4/30	Final project previews		Try elicitation method

Final project due Thursday, May 7th.

Video lectures on logic (optional but recommended starting mid-February):

On Boolean Connectives: Valid and Sound Arguments (11:41), Negation (18:19), Conjunction (18:37), Disjunction (16:03)

On Conditionals: Conditionals (15:19), The Many Uses of Implication (11:17), Bi-conditionals (10:18)

On Predicate Logic: Atomic Sentences (20:10), Introduction to the Quantifiers (6:43), Variables, Wffs and Sentences (24:02), Quantifier Semantics (9:01)

References

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- Kaplan, David. 1999. The meaning of *ouch* and *oops*. Lecture presented at the University of California at Berkeley.
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