

CLPS 0030
Introduction to Linguistic Theory

Semester I, 2012

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Office Hours: TBA

Teaching Assistants: TBA

Required Text: William O'Grady, John Archibald, Mark Aronoff, and Janie Rees-Miller, *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*. Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997. Available at Brown bookstore.

Occasional additional readings might be made available on the course website as the course proceeds.

Course Expectations:

(1) You are EXPECTED to come to class regularly. The textbook is somewhat minimal (as are all of the most of the available introductory textbooks) and so *the only way to learn what is going on is to come to class*. Although some handouts with some of the lecture material will also be posted on the course website, *this will not be enough and will not substitute for the lectures*. While I do not take attendance, irregular attendance will result in a lack of understanding of the material, and obvious amounts of non-attendance will be factored in to the final grade.

I really do understand the temptation to skip classes (believe me - I've been there!!!) - especially at 9 am. But you shouldn't take this class if you think that that temptation is going to be overwhelming. Lots of non-attendance in the class is pretty much of a guarantee that you won't be able to pass the course, unless you are telepathic.

(2) Regular homework problems. Much of the "guts" of this course requires hands-on experience with solving linguistic problems. To this end, there will be regular homework problems - approximately weekly. Solving these is the most important learning tool in the course, and probably the bulk of the time that you devote to the course will be by engaging with the homework problems. These will generally be handed out on a Thursday, due the following Tuesday, although there might be occasional departures from this depending on how the schedule works out.

All homeworks are due at the beginning of class on the assigned due date. Late homeworks are not accepted without a written Dean's or medical excuse. There are no exceptions to this policy. Really!

Because the homeworks are graded, collaboration on homeworks is not allowed. Also, you should not consult any students' homeworks from previous years. **Please don't be tempted to try to collaborate. It is almost always transparent, and the consequences are far worse than the consequences of having a bad homework assignment.**

The lowest grade on the homeworks will be dropped, so if you don't get one done on time don't panic.

- (3) An in-class midterm - tentatively scheduled for Thursday, Oct. 18. (This might change.)
- (4) A final exam, scheduled for December 18, 2 pm.
- (5) There will be *optional* discussion sections each week run by the teaching assistants. These will be used to go over the past homework, and to make sure that all of the material from the class is understood. Sometimes these will be used for sample cases relevant to the new homework. We will try our hardest to schedule these in such a way that everyone can attend one section each week, but we might not be able to. There will be ample office hours available for everyone. The sections are optional, but are very highly recommended.

Grading:

- Homeworks: 50%
The lowest homework grade will be dropped
- Midterm: 20%
- Final: 30%

What this course is about:

While it is not obvious at first glance, the ability of human beings to use a language to communicate involves unconscious mastery of a complex and intricate system of "rules" and generalizations. This is true for all languages: every language is a complex but highly organized body of principles - which human beings *unconsciously* master as they learn their native language(s) as children. The linguistic system that enables someone to speak and understand a language is so far from our conscious knowledge that we are generally completely unaware of the subtle and systematic nature of our native language(s). Just as we are not consciously aware of the mental activities involved in seeing and recognizing things, or the mental activities involved in walking or other kinds of movements, we are generally not aware of the mental states involved in "knowing" and using a language. And yet, this "knowledge" turns out to be intricate, systematic, and involves an elegant system of rules and principles which linguists attempt to discover. These remarks hold for *all* languages, even though particular languages differ from each other in the details of their systems.

Sometimes the fact that we all have this rich, unconscious knowledge is surprising. After all, we are all taught little bits of “grammatical rules” in school, and so we are sometimes misled into thinking that to “know” a language is to know some words and the bits of “rules” we learn in school. But think about the fact that even if you never went to school, you would nonetheless be perfectly fluent in your native language. You could say things that have never been said before, and understand things that you’ve never heard before. You would also know what “sounds funny” in your language and isn’t in accord with the system of that language. This involves all sorts of knowledge that is never explicitly taught - neither in schools, or by parents. Linguists make a distinction between prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar. The former is what you learn in school about how you are “supposed to” talk or write. We are not interested in this (many of these so-called rules are actually rather artificial ones). We are interested in what people *actually* do, and we are interested in describing and “modeling” what it means to know a language .

The goal of this course is to illustrate these remarks: to show you how languages are systematic and intricate systems. We will be concerned with discovering the tools that linguists use to “model” the system that speakers of a language (any language) have mastered, usually without any conscious awareness of what that system is. We’ll look not only at English but at many other languages. Languages differ in interesting and rich ways in their particular systems - but all are systematic and all make use of certain common principles and tools.

If focusing on the structure of language (what I am calling the “rule-governed” systematic knowledge) sounds “dry” to you, then you probably should not take this course. You will also be disappointed if what you are looking for is a course that deals with language as a vehicle for interpersonal relations, or for a course on language as a vehicle for literature. So beware: this course focuses on somewhat technical material and on analytic techniques. If you like puzzles, you will probably enjoy looking at language this way. If you find languages fascinating systems, you will probably enjoy looking at language in this way. And, while there are a great number of very interesting topics regarding language that we will *not* be covering, it turns out that an understanding of the structure of language actually illuminates many of these. For example, studying certain principles of poetry, studying the ways in which speakers manipulate language for social identity etc are all actually enhanced by an understanding of the basic principles of linguistic theory. There are a number of other interesting applications of linguistics - including legal applications, applications to the study of language change which in turn is used to understand population migrations, etc.

The last part of the course will address a few ways in which understanding linguistic structures and the tools of linguistic theory can be applied to domains beyond just language structure itself, but the bulk of the course will be on developing those tools.

Tentative outline and dates

Introductory Remarks

Sept. 6 - 11
General remarks; course objectives
Misconceptions about language
Language as an intricate rule governed system

Sounds and Sound Systems (Phonetics and Phonology)

Sept. 13-20
Articulatory Phonetics
International Phonetics Alphabet
Sounds of English, and of other languages
Classifying sounds according to the parameters
that go into making them (features)

Sept. 25-27
Features, Natural Classes, and the notion of phoneme
Underlying forms and phonological rules
Determining the underlying form

Oct. 2-Oct. 4
More on phonology -
Rule interactions, rule orderings, and types of
phonological rules cross-linguistically

The syntax of words: Morphology

Oct. 9 - 16
Morphology: the structure of words
Morphological processes cross-linguistically
The notion of a morphological process:
formal part, semantic part

Oct. 18
Midterm

Form, Meaning, and Use: Syntax, Semantics and Pragmatics

Oct. 23 - N
Syntax of “artificial languages”
Applying this to the syntax of natural languages
Semantics as a window into the syntax

Nov. 6 - 13
Semantics 1 - Compositional semantics
Syntax and Semantics interaction
The distribution of “negative polarity items”
Lexical semantics (Word meaning)
Compositional semantics

Nov 15 Pragmatics: The distinction between meaning and use

Application I: Language Change and Historical Linguistics

Nov. 20-27 Indo-European
Features and their role in Sound Change
Classifying languages

Application II: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Nov. 29-Dec. 4 Does the language one speaks dramatically affect
how one thinks? - A critical look using linguistic
tools
Misconceptions
How could we really tell?

Application III: Open

Dec. 6 To be decided. Possibly a class on:
Are some languages more “primitive”/simpler
than others?
Linguistics in the popular press