Language is (perhaps, after consciousness) the biggest mystery. It is routine for us to understand and produce linguistic utterances, but it is not at all transparent to us how these utterances work at any level of abstraction, and how we represent them in our mind.

Modern linguistics and cogsci have worked at the task of producing a map of our linguistic competence for a long time. In recent times, the theoretical work in this field has been supplemented by an explosion of experimental work. This seminar provides a selective overview of experimental work on linguistic meaning. We will start by discussing the theoretical foundations of the enterprise, touching on Chomskyan linguistics and its relationship to semantics, as well as other cognitive approaches to meaning. After a crash-course session on experimental design, we will look at some case studies where experiments have had an important impact on debates in semantics and pragmatics.

The goal of this course is not to teach you how to set up your own experiments, but rather to teach you how to read critically the experimental sections of papers in psychology and cognitive science. You will also be in a better position to take courses on experimental design, should you so want.

Readings

We will be reading 2-3 papers per week. All readings will be posted in the following Google Drive folder:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ug6nnv90D4e-ufI7q71fjmD6cLI7zvd0B

Prerequisites

We will presuppose only willingness to learn some material that, from time to time, has (very light) formal aspects and might take you out of your comfort zone.
Assignments

If you’re taking the seminar for credit, you will be asked to do four things. (1) Show up at each session with a question about the readings. (2) Hand in a mini-squib\(^1\) (3-5 pages) and a mini-QALMRI\(^2\) (1-2 pages) on one of the sections of the class by the Friday of Week 8, at 8pm. (3) Hand in a longer (8-10 pages) squib and a QALMRI by the Friday of Week 8, at 8pm. (As a default, we expect the two sets of assignments to be based on different topics, but the default can be overridden.)

Your final grade will be determined as follows:

- Participation: 20%
- Mini-squib + QALMRI: 30%
- Final squib + QALMRI: 50%

Laptop usage advice

Of course, you’re allowed to do whatever you prefer with laptops/tablets/phones in the seminar. Just be aware that there’s abundant research suggesting that taking notes on laptops or tablets is inefficient and leads to distraction.

Week-by-Week Schedule

Notice: schedule and readings may be subject to change. Please make sure you keep up with announcements.

Week 1. Introduction: Semantics in generative grammar

No required reading for the lecture; eventually, please read

- Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* chapter 1;
- Lasnik, ‘Grammar, Levels, and Biology’.

Week 2. Alternative approaches: Jackendoff

- Required reading:
  - Jackendoff (2002), *Foundations of Language*, chapters 5 and 9-10
- Supplementary reading:
  - Harris, *Linguistics Wars*, chapters 5-6 and 9 (optional but highly recommended – it is as illustrative as it is entertaining)

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\(^1\)‘squib’ is linguists’ jargon for ‘short paper’.
\(^2\)A QALMRI is an systematic way to plan and summarize experimental studies. Examples will be provided!
Week 3. Experimental Methods

• Required readings:
  – Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2005 (QALMRI)

• Supplementary reading:

Week 4: Case study 1: Implicature

• Required readings:

Week 5: Case study 1: Implicature, continued

• Required readings:

• Supplementary reading:

Week 6: Case study 2: Mass/count

Required reading:

• Required readings:
• Supplementary reading:

Week 7: Case study 2: Mass/count, continued

Required reading:

• Required readings:

• Supplementary reading:

Week 8: Case study 3: Conditionals

• Required readings:
  – selections from Evans and Over, *If*

• Supplementary reading: TBA

Week 9: Case study 3: Conditionals, continued

• Required readings:

• Supplementary reading: TBA

Week 10: Loose ends

• Required readings: TBA

• Supplementary reading: TBA