Grammar, Meaning and Discourse

1. Goals

We’ll try to cover, and examine a range of core concepts in grammatical theory and description, discuss how they related to the communication of meaning, and (from the other perspective) how the need to communicate various semantic and pragmatic meanings drives the use of these grammatical units/concepts/structures/whatever-they-are when we construct discourse.

Sounds terrifying. And what does it all mean in practical terms. I’ll try again:

The course is about the organisation of words in languages in terms of meaning-carrying units, and the organisation of textual units of different size in terms of words.

That’s all very neat, but there’s a mass of assumptions in there that need to be addressed, like:

- what’s a word?
- what do you mean by ‘organisation’?
- how do you put words together?
- what if you have more than just two things coming together?
- are there different kinds of words? bits of words? bits of SENTENCES?
- do you put them together? And if not, …
- just what is going on anyway?

We’ll look at the basic principles that we can use to discover some (not THE) answers to some of these questions, and then have a tour of the structural and typological variation found in some different languages. And then mess with our heads by looking at different ways of looking at the questions, formally.

I guess we could say that, by doing this course, we’ll

- learn about search-and-detection procedures; then
- learn what sort of ways language(s) can code meanings, and non-meanings, and
- what sort of things languages can code, and finally
• learn about some alternative ways to think about the structures that we find in languages.

That seems reasonable. We’ll start by discussing some aspects of English for a grounding, and then go on to a range of other (in some ways harder!) languages to develop a feel for the kind of variation that you need to be able to account for, in order to say that you’ve developed a robust ‘model’.

2. Assessment

Linguistics in general is best done by practice, and so there’ll be quite a bit of continuous assessment, split into small assignments, one bigger assignment, and then a take-home exam. The assignments should be completed individually. Problems for group solution will come in the tutorials, and walked through in class, and I’m not adverse to the idea of a group project, or even a class project. I’ve got one idea I’d LOVE some group to take me up on. Ask.

If you hand in an assignment late, and still want to get a mark, you will have to firstly show good reason why you couldn’t hand it in on time, and then do a catch-up assignment in its place. Talk to me before it becomes late, that’s far and away the best thing to do, then we can work something out that doesn’t penalise you, or hassle me. Which surely is what it’s all really about.

Here’s a guide to how the assessment can go, though I’m open to suggestions.

1. 4 SMALL PROBLEM SETS (8% EACH FOR A TOTAL OF 32%)

Five topical problem sets will be assigned. They must be handed in within one week of being assigned; this shouldn’t be too hard, as they won’t be monsters. Two of these come before the mid-term break, and two after; the dates are on the course calendar. Nothing due to be done over the break.

2. ‘PARTICIPATION’ (10%)

I know, I know, it’s all very horrid knowing that there’s nothing, objectively, you can do to influence this one, but it’ll at least encourage you to turn up. That’s gotta be a good thing, no? If you like, we could make some class presentation thingy assessable, if you like, to make it feel like you’ve got more input into this part of the assessment, but that strikes me as just mega-stressful. Anyhow, your choice.

3. 1 MAJOR(ISH) PROJECT (30%), OR ESSAY-LIKE THING

This should be a (roughly) 3000-word essay on something relevant to the course (provided the topic has been discussed with me by 31/10) at the latest. This could be either an essay on something of theoretical confusion that you’ve been bothered by (not after a conclusion or solution really, just your musings), or the application of more cunning reasoning to a set of data you’ve either found in some descriptive work on a language, or which we’ve talked about and I’ve directed you to. Whatever, it’s due mid-April-ish. It should demonstrate the application of at least some of the skills and knowledge that has been learned in the course, or earlier.

Ideally, you should pick a time very shortly after the mid term break (early March, thus), and come and talk to me about what you’re thinking of for a topic, so we can work together to delimit the size (not too big, not too small), and make sure you don’t omit some essential library resources.
I’ll try and come up with a list of possible topic types either just before or just after the mid-term break, in case you’re feeling stuck for ideas.

4. **EXAM (30%)**

A two-hour exam, to be done at 8.30 - 10.30, Monday 21st April. It’ll be a not-too-long exam. All and any materials are allowed: everything, that is, except for another linguist (you count as linguists).

5. **YES, I KNOW THAT THAT ADDS UP TO 102%**

6. **THE SURPRISE**

You’ll find out soon enough.

### 3. **Syllabus**

The following is a rough guide to the material that we’ll be covering, and (roughly) when. It is necessarily both abbreviated, and somewhat dense. Overly dense, really. We’ll also be doing a fair bit of problem solving in class, and could well not quite cover all the ground I’ve outlines below, and I for one won’t be sad if we get sidetracked into something else that we collectively turn out to be interested in. I hope we will. I’ll be aiming for it.

- **Weeks 1 and 2: January 22nd and 29th**
  - Overview: basic concepts, terminology. Morphology versus phonology versus syntax versus the lexicon. Form and meaning. The notion of ‘word’. Learning to classify words.

- **Weeks 3 and 4: February 5th and 19th**
  - Grammatical features, inflectional systems, realisational versus incremental theories of morphology

- **Weeks 5 and 6: March 5th and 12th**
  - Typology of structures from a functional perspective. When to stop looking. Productivity, constituency. Paradigms and Øs, the ‘elsewhere’ principle and markedness.

- **Weeks 7 and 8: March 19th and 26th**

- **Weeks 9 and 10: April 2nd and 9th**
  - Variation, pragmatics, establishing discourse functions, morpho-lexical conditioning. Opacity versus compositionality, phonological versus grammatical words; bracketing paradoxes