

**Course:** LIN438/538 Semantics  
**Term:** Fall 2013  
**Instructor:** Jürgen Bohnemeyer  
**Text:** Bohnemeyer & Wilkins in prep.

**Overview:** This course offers an introduction to the methods and epistemological foundations of empirical research on semantic behavior for beginning graduate students and advanced undergraduate students. Lexical semantics, the study of word meaning, is primarily covered in this course, whereas the companion course, LIN443/543 *Semantics II*, is dedicated to compositional semantics, or the study of sentence meaning. Both courses also deal with pragmatics, the study of utterance meaning. While there is arguably no clear “logical” order among the two courses, and you are in fact free to take them in any order you like, students commonly prefer to start with 438/538, perhaps among other things because it is the less technical of the two and because compositional semantics presupposes a solid grounding in syntactic theory and analysis.

**Requirements:** If this is your first linguistics course, please come talk to me.

**Goals:** Semantics is a core discipline of linguistics, in the sense that research in all other domains of language presupposes acquaintance with some basic concepts and analytical tools of semantics. In addition, semantics is an important “interface” between linguistics and the other disciplines of the cognitive sciences, in particular, psychology, cultural anthropology, and computer science (artificial intelligence).

The textbook for this course, Bohnemeyer & Wilkins in prep., will be written as the course unfolds. Each lecture/class will be accompanied by a unique section of the book. A draft of each section will be made available to the participants in preparation of the lecture/class during which we will discuss it. This book differs from existing semantics textbooks in that it is centrally organized around the epistemological conditions and methods of empirical research on semantic behavior. It thereby responds to a growing demand created by the ongoing empiricist turn in the cognitive sciences. The book and the course aim to prepare the readers/students for the gathering and analysis of semantic data in a broad range of research contexts, from fieldwork to psycholinguistics and child language research. What all these contexts have in common is that the researcher cannot simply rely on interpretations of their own native speaker intuitions. How to do semantic research without relying on such intuitions, empirically, by the standards of the social and behavioral sciences - that is the central question the book and the course aim to answer.

**Classes:** M/F 2:00-3:20 PM in 107 Talbert  
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Office hours M/W 3:30-4:30pm; F by appointment

**Course work:**

- The section of the book to be read in preparation of a given class will be posted on Ublearns as a Word document under Course Documents (ideally) at least two days before the class. Students are encouraged to provide feedback in the form of suggested edits, comprehension questions, and comments using the commenting and editing tools of Word. Upload the annotated version of the document to the Discussion Board on Ublearns. **These annotations will count toward your participation grade.**
- Twelve short weekly homework assignments, involving mostly analysis of data provided with the assignments. These will be administered as online tests through Ublearns. Performance on the best ten accounts for 60% of the overall grade. **No replacements/make-ups.** Students in 438 and graduate students from other departments will have their point scores multiplied by a factor of 1.5.
- Take-home midterm and final exams, essentially longer homework assignments that review the entire course (based on problems that occurred in previous assignments, but with different data). The exams will likewise be administered online. Again, grading will be adjusted to undergraduate vs. graduate level.
- Term paper. Graduate students, and exceptionally, with permission of the instructor, students in 438 as well, have the opportunity to submit a short term paper (5-10 pages) instead of or in addition to the take-home exam. The paper must present an original semantic or pragmatic analysis formulated within the theoretical frameworks introduced in the course.
- In-class participation. I grade participation as follows: Regular active participation – A; regular attendance and occasional active participation – B; regular attendance, no active participation – C; irregular attendance, no active participation: D; poor attendance, no active participation: F. **Attendance will be taken at the beginning of every lecture.** Attendance counts as irregular if the student missed more than one lecture unexcused and as poor if more than three lectures were missed unexcused. **Active participation can be achieved both in-class and through uploading feedback on the reading assignments to the Discussion Board.**

**Rolling assignment schedule:** Assignments need to be completed within one week after they are released. They are released and must be completed, respectively, at the beginning of class on the particular day. They will be discussed during the class following the one during which they are released.

**Assessment:** Best 10 HW assignments – 60%; midterm – 10%; final exam – 10%; in-class participation – 20%.

**Learning outcomes:** The following table identifies the intended learning goals of the course and maps them to the instruments that will be used for the assessment of the students' success. **Keep in mind, however, that all of these assessment instruments are designed not only to test attainment of the learning goals, but simultaneously also to solidify, enhance, and refine them.** The undergraduate (U) and graduate (G) program goals referenced in the table are stated in an appendix to this syllabus.

Part of the course	Instrument	Outcomes	Program goals covered
I – Meaning and its study	HW #1 and Midterm exam	Learn to classify signs in terms of their semiotic properties	U: Core concepts; Problem solving. – G: Research.
	HW #2 and Midterm exam	Learn to diagnose entailments	U: Core concepts; Problem solving; Critical thinking; Life skills. – G: Theoretical foundations; Research.
II – Meaning and the properties of language	HW #3 and Midterm exam	Learn to diagnose performative uses of verbs	U: Problem solving. – G: Research.
	HW #4 and Midterm exam	Learn to diagnose non-compositionality and different types of ambiguity	U: Core concepts; Problem solving. – G: Theoretical foundations; Research.
III – Semantic theories, metalanguages, and ontologies	HW #5 and Midterm exam	Learn to prove the (in)validity of inferences through translations into propositional calculus	U: Core concepts; Problem solving; Critical thinking; Life skills. – G: Theoretical foundations; Research
	HW #6 and Midterm exam	Learn to translate English sentences into a non-quantificational version of predicate calculus	U: Problem solving; Critical thinking. – G: Research
	HW #7 and Final exam	Learn to diagnose semantic roles and translate English sentences into neo-Davidsonian event calculus	U: Core concepts; Problem solving. – G: Research
IV – Semantic phenomena	HW #8 and Final exam	Learn to classify semantic elicitation methods; learn to analyze the semantic extension of lexical items by isolating semantic and pragmatic meaning components	U: Core concepts; Problem solving; Data collection. – G: Methodologies; Research
V – Gathering semantic data	HW #9 and Final exam	Learn to diagnose selection restrictions and isolate the senses they discriminate among	U: Problem solving. – G: Research
VI –	HW #10 and	Learn to classify semantic and	U: Core concepts; Problem

Semantic analysis; VII – Semantic domains	Final exam	pragmatic inferences in terms of entailments, implicatures, and presuppositions	solving; Critical thinking; Life skills. – G: Theoretical foundations; Research
	HW #11 and Final exam	Learn to classify figurative meanings in terms of the type of semantic transfer and the source and target domain they involve	U: Core concepts; Problem solving; Critical thinking; Life skills. – G: Theoretical foundations; Research
	HW #12 and Final exam	Learn to diagnose and classify lexical-semantic relations	U: Core concepts; Problem solving. – G: Research
	Final exam	Learn to diagnose polysemy	U: Core concepts; Problem solving. – G: Research

**Paperless class:** Readings will be posted on UBlerns/Course Documents two days ahead of class. Assignments will be posted on UBlerns/Assignments under “Tests”. The same holds for the final exam.

**Outline:** The readings listed in the outline are sections of Bohnemeyer & Wilkins in prep. Additional readings may be uploaded to UBlerns as we go.

Part	Week	Day	Topics	Reading
I Meaning and its study	1	1	What is empirical semantics?	1.1
		2	Meaning and interaction	1.2
	2	1	<b>LABOR DAY</b>	
		2	Reference and representation; Elements and goals of a scientific theory of meaning	1.3 – 1.4
II Meaning and the properties of language	3	1	Meaning, modality, and the semiotics of language	2.1
		2	Semantic and pragmatic meaning	2.2
	4	1	Lexical and compositional meaning	2.3
III Semantic theories, metalanguages, and ontologies	4	2	Propositional calculus	3.1
		5	1	Predicate calculus
	6	2	Event semantics	3.3
		1	Metalanguages and semantic primitives	3.4
IV Semantic phenomena	6	2	Hermeneutic and empirical approaches	4.1
		7	1	Reference, truth, entailments, contradictions
	7	2	Meaning composition and anomaly	4.3
		8	1	Contextual appropriateness
	8	2	Graded category membership and semantic transfer	4.5
		9	1	Evidence from the structure of the mental lexicon; Conversational and

			corpus data	
V Gathering semantic data	10	2	Elicitation: from meaning to utterance	5.2
		1	Elicitation: from utterance to meaning	5.3.
VI Semantic analysis	11	2	Positive and negative evidence	6.1
		1	Isolating sense meanings	6.2
	12	2	Identifying and classifying implicatures	6.3
		1	Identifying presuppositions	6.4
		2	Diagnostics in (lexical) semantics	6.5
VII Semantic domains	13	1	The nominal lexicon	7
		2	Space	8
	14	1	Events and time	9
		2	<b>FALL RECESS</b>	
	15	1	Causality	10
		2	Propositions and worlds	11

## Bibliography

*The textbook:*

Bohnemeyer, J. & D. P. Wilkins. In prep. *Empirical semantics: A textbook for semantic research in the social and behavioral sciences*. Manuscript, University at Buffalo

*Other readings to be discussed:*

Bierwisch, Manfred. 1987. On the nature of semantic form in natural language. In F. Klix & M. Hagendorf (eds.), *Human memory and cognitive capabilities: Mechanisms and performances*. North-Holland: Elsevier. 765-783.

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[JB et al. 2007] Bohnemeyer, Jürgen, Nichols J. Enfield, James Essegbey, Iraide I. Ibarretxe-Antuñano, Sotaro Kita, Friederike Lüpke, & Felix K. Ameka. 2007. Principles of event representation in language: The case of motion events. *Language* 83(3): 495-532.

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- [VVLP] Van Valin, Robert W. Jr., & Randi J. LaPolla. 1997. *Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## **Appendix: Undergraduate Program Learning Outcomes**

### *1. Core concepts*

Students will comprehend the core concepts of linguistics (including ones those in phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, or semantics), as well as the basic literature that assumes such concepts.

### *2. Grasp of cognitive/social aspects of language*

Students will achieve an awareness of language in its broader cognitive and social context.

### *3. Language diversity awareness*

Students will develop an awareness of linguistic diversity and variability.

### *4. Critical thinking*

Students will master the ability to construct arguments for choosing between alternative analyses of linguistic phenomena and to identify relevant data bearing on the analyses.

### *5. Problem solving*

Students will be able to analyze linguistic data from English or other languages and to construct descriptions of particular linguistic phenomena in particular languages.

### *6. Data collection*

Students will be able to develop basic collection and analysis skills.

### *7. Communication skills*

Students will attain the skills necessary to prepare written and oral presentations on linguistic topics.

### *8. Life skills*

Students will comprehend and appreciate cultural differences among speakers of different languages, be capable of applying the analytic skills acquired through the study of linguistics to other areas of life, and ascertain the importance of language in human endeavors.

## **Appendix II: Graduate Program Learning Outcomes**

### *1. Similarities and differences across languages (M.A. and Ph.D.)*

Languages vary in their grammars, lexicons, sound systems, and practices of language use. Students will demonstrate understanding of phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic similarities and differences among the world's languages.

### *2. Theoretical foundations (M.A. and Ph.D.)*

Students will demonstrate that they understand central questions that have formed the basis for various approaches to the description and modeling of human languages, as well as current issues specific to the core subfields within linguistics.

*3. Research (M.A. and Ph.D.)*

Students will be able to articulate hypotheses about linguistic phenomena, identify and assemble relevant data, and analyze and assess the results.

*4. Methodologies (M.A. and Ph.D.)*

Linguistic research involves data from a variety of sources, including gathering of acceptability or semantic judgments, lab experiments, field research, corpus studies, interviews, and use of secondary sources such as reference works. Students will be exposed to several of these methodologies and master at least one of them.

*5. Ethical issues (Ph.D.)*

Students will demonstrate understanding and respect of the ethical norms involved in linguistic research.

*6. Professional communication skills*

A. M.A. and Ph.D.: Students will attain the skills necessary to prepare written presentations on linguistic topics.

B. Ph.D: Students will acquire the professional skills needed to communicate the results of their research at academic conferences and other forums, and write up their results in preparation for submission to proceedings and journals.