Overview: This seminar summarizes and evaluates the evidence that has become available in recent years regarding just how different the languages of the world really are in terms of the meanings they express (or in other words, in terms of how they represent "reality") and discusses the implications for cognition. The discussion will be based primarily on the instructor’s own research in the domains of temporal and spatial reference and event representation, but will take into account as much of the available literature as is feasible. Along the way, an introduction to Semantic typology, the study of crosslinguistic variation in semantics, will be provided.

Goals: The instructor will defend the following theses, which will be discussed during the seminar:

- There are no “fixed points” in the association between form and meaning – no concepts that are universally lexicalized or grammaticalized.
- Nevertheless, contra Evans & Levinson 2009, there are apparent semantic and pragmatic universals – albeit universals of a rather more abstract nature. Thus, the available evidence so far suggests that the semantic systems of all languages submit to an analysis that postulates basic ontological categories such as perdurants, continuants, regions of space, time intervals, and vectors. These are not uniformly expressed as such, but speakers of all languages seem to nevertheless produce utterances that refer to them. Similarly, the pragmatic machinery involved in the interpretation of utterances – speech acts, implicatures, presuppositions – seems to not be language-specific at the most basic level.
- Similarly, the mapping of form and meaning at the syntax-semantics interface is subject to “soft”, violable constraints such as a preference for iconic representations.
- However, these apparently universal categories of and constraints on linguistic meaning cannot simply be derived from some innate language of thought, as proposed by Fodor 1975 and, in much more moderate form, Pinker 2007 and many others. Instead, the available evidence suggests on balance that cultural transmission and diffusion is the best explanation for these shared tendencies.

Prerequisites: If this is your first course on semantics, please talk to the instructor.

Meetings: MF 2:00-3:20pm 115 Baldy
Instructor: Dr. Jürgen Bohnemeyer – Office 642 Baldy Phone 645-0127
E-mail jb77@buffalo.edu Office hours F 12:00 – 2pm; M/W by appointment

Coursework: Every student is expected to lead the discussion on two of the readings, for which they provide a summary handout according to specifications by the instructor. Term papers should be based on original data gathered by the student from multiple speakers of a language other than their first language (exceptions may apply) or the typological analysis by the student of available data and should address any of the questions raised during the seminar or
contribute to semantic typology in some other form. The project can be self-designed (bonus points) and/or rely on one of a range of different stimulus kits to be provided by the instructor. The studies will include semantic and syntactic analysis of the collected data and write-up of a roughly 10-page summary. The overall grade will be computed as follows:

- Leading reading discussions, including handouts – 40%
- Data collection project, including analysis, comparison, and report – 50%
- Overall participation – 10%\(^1\)

**Outline**

Syntax of the reading assignments:
- \(a; b\) – read \(a\) and \(b\)
- \(a; (b)\) – read \(a\) plus optionally \(b\)
- \(a/b\) – read \(a\) or \(b\), depending on which one was selected for discussion in class (and read the other optionally in addition if you’re interested)
- \((a,b)/c\) – read either \(a\) and \(b\) or \(c\), depending on which one was selected for discussion in class (and read the other optionally in addition if you’re interested)

Then from there continue with: intro to typology – Matthew on word order?; Evans in press; maybe Viberg and Evans & Wilkins on polysemy studies based on dictionary data; Berlin & Kay as landmark extensional study; Lucy on etic grids; my own yet to be written paper on elicitation techniques etc.

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<th>Part</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<tr>
<td>I Questions and hypotheses</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Effability; translatability; interface uniformity; UTAH</td>
<td>Von Fintel &amp; Matthewson 2008; Jackendoff &amp; Culicover 2005: -44-56, 73-88, 94-103</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Semantic primitives: expressive equivalence, isomorphism, strong lexicalization;</td>
<td>Goddard 1994; (Durst 2003; Bohnemeyer 2003)</td>
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<td>LABOR DAY</td>
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<td>Substantive universals and the toolkit hypothesis; universalism, relativism, and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis</td>
<td>Evans &amp; Levinson 2009; Levinson 2003</td>
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<td>II Methods</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Semantic categorization and linguistic typology</td>
<td>Evans in press; Bohnemeyer 2011; Dryer 1992</td>
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<td>Gathering extensional data; etic grids (JB on the road; videos of CIFCL lectures 5-6 will be made available to students)</td>
<td>Kay &amp; Maffi 1999; Lucy 1997; Kay 2006</td>
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<td>Primary and secondary sources</td>
<td>Viberg 1984; Evans &amp; Wilkins 2000</td>
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<td>Analyzing extensional data: quantitative and qualitative approaches</td>
<td>Levinson &amp; Meira 2003; Majid et al 2008</td>
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<td>Regier et al 2007; (Kemp &amp; Regier 2012;)</td>
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\(^1\) Participation is assessed 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.
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<td>Lexicalization across languages</td>
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<td>The lexicalization of motion paths</td>
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<td>The language-specificity of Conceptual Structure</td>
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<td>IV</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>The grammaticalization of functional categories; temporal semantics in tenseless languages</td>
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<td>Tense and the cognitive representation of time</td>
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<td>The semantic and cognitive basis of functional categories</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Is the noun-verb distinction universal? If so, in which sense?</td>
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<td>The semantic basis of lexical category systems: predication vs. dynamicity</td>
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<td>The type system</td>
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<td>Argument structure classes</td>
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<td>Constraints on form-to-meaning mapping: event segmentation</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>The design of the interface: in search of the event phrase</td>
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<td>FALL RECESS</td>
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<td>VII</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Spatial frames of reference: linguistic, cultural, and environmental factors</td>
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<td>Implicatures</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Presuppositions</td>
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<td>VIII</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sources of crosslinguistic uniformity; the case for cultural transfer</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Reading list

Readings will be uploaded to UBlearns under “Course Documents” as we go along.


109-169.


25-46.


188.

Levinson, S. C., Meira, S., & The Language and Cognition Group (2003). ‘Natural concepts’ in the spatial
topological domain – adposition meanings in crosslinguistic perspective. Language 79: 485-516.

Levinson, S. C. & Wilkins, D. P. (2006a). The background to the study of the language of space. Levinson,

--- (2006b). Patterns in the data: Toward a semantic typology of spatial description. In Levinson, S. C.

W. H. Goodenough (ed.) (1964), Explorations in cultural anthropology.]


Cognition.


pdf

Majid, A., J. S. Boster, & M. Bowerman. (2008). The cross-linguistic categorization of everyday events: A


by Martin Haspelmath, Ekkehard König, Wulf Oesterricher, and Wolfgang Raible, 1227-1250.
Berlin: de Gruyter.


Matthewson, L. (2006). Presupposition and cross-linguistic variation. Proceedings of the 26th Meeting of
the North-Eastern Linguistic Society: 63–76.

Shuy (eds.), Studies in Linguistic Variation: Semantics, Syntax, Phonology, Pragmatics, Social
Situations, Ethnographic Approaches, 255–268, Georgetown University Press.

339.


and motion descriptions in Yucatec Maya and Juchitán Zapotec. Memoria del IX Encuentro


