Expected background

1. Either: a two-course graduate sequence in formal semantics (can be currently enrolled in Semantic Theory 2)

2. Or: At least one course (undergrad/grad) in formal semantics plus knowledge of a sign language that is equivalent to two semesters (can be currently enrolled in ASL 2), or active research in sign language semantics

Most students should also expect to spend time outside of the course gaining additional familiarity with sign languages (in Case 1 above) or practicing semantics (in Case 2) in order to understand some of the readings below.

→ We’ve scheduled ASL-English interpreters at each class, but if you have any accessibility concerns of any sort please don’t hesitate to reach out.

Course aims

• To explore central debates about: the nature of the semantic representations, especially the role that language modality (signed vs. spoken) may play in the construction of meaning

• To introduce signers with basic experience in semantics (the linguistic study of how language encodes meaning) to semantic questions in sign linguistics

• To increase semantic students’ comfort and proficiency with reading and discussing sign language research.

• To provide opportunities to practice constructing and defending arguments based on empirical evidence.

Tentative syllabus

1. Introduction to formal approaches to meaning and background in sign language linguistics - Shopping week (Jan 23)
   - Sign languages in linguistics
   - Semantics in sign languages
   - Challenges of semantic fieldwork
– Transcribing visual languages
– Basic phonology and syntax in ASL and other sign languages
– Language processing and arbitrariness of the sign

- Optional readings:
  – Zucchi (2012)

2. Negation and Modals (Jan 30)

Negation and Scope, Modals and Variation

- Readings:
  – Deal (2015)
  – Shaffer and Janzen (2015)
  – Pfau and Quer (2007)

- More optional readings:
  – Ferreira-Brito (1990)
  – Geraci (2005)
  – Herrmann (2014)

3. Pragmatics and Information Structure (Feb 6)

Topics and sentence-initial position, Focus and sentence-final position, Backgrounding

- Readings:
  – Kimmelman and Pfau (2016) (overview)
  – Wilbur and Patschke (1999)
  – Herrmann (2014)
  – Caponigro and Davidson (2011)

- More optional readings:
  – Matsuoka and Gajewski (2013)
  – Pfau et al. (2010)

4. Arbitrary referential loci (Feb 13)

Arbitrary locus assignment, Loci as variables

- Readings:
  – Lillo-Martin and Klima (1990)
  – Rathmann and Mathur (2002)
5. More on Loci (Feb 20)

Analysis as variables, features, and/or pictures, Dynamic accounts and loci

• Readings:
  – Kuhn (2015b) (overview handbook article)
  – Schlenker (2011)
  – Schlenker (2013)

• More optional readings:
  – Schlenker (2016)
  – Kuhn (2015a)

6. Quantification (Feb 27)

• Readings:
  – Petronio (1995)
  – Abner and Wilbur (2017)
  – Kuhn (2017a)

• More optional readings:
  – Kimmelman (2017)

7. Connectives, demonstratives, and more on loci (March 6)

• Readings:
  – Nevins (2011)
  – Koulidobrova and Lillo-Martin (2016)
  – Davidson (2013)

• More optional readings:
  – Graf and Abner (2012)
  – Asada (2017)

(Spring break, March 13)

8. Motivated referential loci (March 20)

Motivated locus assignment, Presuppositions and locus height, Plural sets and quantifier domains, Definiteness and specificity

• Readings:
  – Schlenker et al. (2013)
  – Barberà (2016)
9. Event structure and Verbal Form (March 27)

Morphology and/or iconicity?, Telicity, Verbs and adjectives

- Readings:
  - Rathmann (2005) (Select portions)
  - Malaia and Wilbur (2012)

- More optional readings:
  - Kuhn (2017b)
  - Davidson et al. (2018)
  - Kuhn and Aristodemo (2017)
  - Aristodemo and Geraci (2017)

10. Embedding and Role Shift (Apr 3)

Evidence for embedding, Interpretation of indexical expressions, Point of view (POV) predicate, Demonstrations, Monsters

- Readings:
  - Quer (2005)
  - Davidson (2015)
  - Schlenker (2017)

- More optional readings:
  - Benedicto and Brentari (2004)

11. Grammaticalization and Emergence of semantic structure (Apr 10)

Recursion, quantification, temporal sequencing, scales

- Readings:
  - Pyers and Senghas (2007)
  - Kocab et al. (2016)
  - Pfau and Steinbach (2011)

12. Experimental Pragmatics and Acquisition (Apr 17)

Further experimental studies involving loci

- Readings:
  - Davidson and Mayberry (2015)
13. Final project presentations (Apr 24)

Final paper due May 4

Course requirements

All students will be required to present at least two papers during the course of the semester (20% of final grade), participate in class (10% of final grade), complete 500-word reading comments for each of 10 weeks (30% of final grade) and turn in a final research paper on a topic in sign language semantics/pragmatics (40% of final grade). Collaboration on final projects is encouraged, as is course synergy (presenting on a topic that you also write about), although collaborators will be evaluated semi-independently.

Course website

The course website supercedes the tentative schedule outlined in this document. The most recent schedule and PDFs of all readings can be found be on our course site at:
https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/38320
Bibliography


Kuhn, J. (2017b). Telicity and iconic scales in asl.


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