

Fall 2006

Introduction to Semantics

Lecture: V61.0004-01, M/W 11AM–12:15, SILV 706, 74616

Recitation: V61.0004-002, W 4:55PM–6:10, SILV 512, 74617

Instructors: Chris Barker (office hours: 719 Broadway, 4th floor, room 426, 2–4 Mon)
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Final exam: Monday, December 18, 10AM–11:50AM

Subject and goals

This course is an introduction to the study of meaning. More specifically, the meaning of expressions and sentences in natural languages like English. We will be addressing the question of how it is possible for human beings to understand sentences they have never heard before, and what might be the characteristics of the mental faculties that allow us to do this. We will attempt to give precise analyses of the meanings of various words by using concepts from set theory, logic and syntactic theory, the basics of which will be taught in the first few weeks of class. Attention will also be paid to foundational issues such as the question of what kind of thing the meaning of a sentence might be.

Some issues discussed, such as presupposition and ambiguity, might be of interest to those whose interests are primarily literary; but it should be emphasized that the course has a mathematical flavor to it. If you have taken a course in mathematical or philosophical logic, the techniques taught in this course will seem familiar. If you took logic and hated it, it is possible that coming at it from the direction of natural language will seem more, well, natural. It is also possible that you will still hate logic, but you will at least appreciate it as a useful tool for understanding linguistic meaning.

Requirements:

- Attending class.
- Constant reading assignments.
- 10–12 problem sets (i.e., homework assignments), given out on Wednesdays and due at the **beginning** of class the following Monday.
- One midterm and one final.

Weight of the requirements in the final grade: homeworks and participation, 30%; midterm, 30%; final, 40%.

The readings supplement and complement the lectures, but certainly cannot replace the lectures. Much, perhaps even most, of the material covered in the course will be available only in lecture.

The final exam will be cumulative, with more emphasis on material not covered in the midterm. If a student misses either exam without a written excuse acceptable to the instructor (e.g. a doctor's note), they receive zero points for that exam.

Policy on cheating. Pretending the work of another is your own is immoral and wrong, and will not be tolerated. We encourage you to discuss the homework assignments with other people, including other classmates. However, you must write up your homework on your own. In particular, it is expressly forbidden for you to examine anyone else's homework unless you have already handed in your answers.

Tentative syllabus:

During the first half of the course, Mondays will be devoted primarily to developing formal tools and techniques (logic, grammars, etc.). Wednesdays will be devoted primarily to exploring topics in the meaning of natural languages (usually, though not always, English). The two halves of the course complement each other: the tools and techniques will allow us to analyze natural language more precisely, and studying natural language in depth will motivate developing new formal tools.

Two sources of reading material will be used. The first is a textbook by Allwood et al., *Logic in Linguistics* (Cambridge University Press), available at the usual textbook selling place. The second is a reader available at Unique Copy Center on Greene between Waverly and 8th for \$44. Both the textbook and the reader are required.

In the tentative schedule below, *Allwood* refers to chapters in the textbook, and the remaining names (e.g., *Fromkin*, *Aitchison*, etc.) refer to authors of chapters and papers included in the reader.

Week	Monday	Wednesday
1	(<i>Labor Day, no class</i>)	Introduction [Allwood 1, Fromkin 7]
2	Set theory [Allwood 2]	Words and concepts [Aitchison 4-8]
3	Inference [Allwood 3]	Word/world [Bowerman, Talmy]
4	propositional logic [Allwood 3,4]	syntax
5	predicate logic [Allwood 5]	syntax
6	(<i>Cols day, no class</i>)	comparison with other lgs. [Fromkin 7]
7	MIDTERM	count/mass, telic/atelic [Fromkin 9]
8	predicate logic	predicate logic
9	tense [Reichenbach]	modality
10	adjectives, intensionality [Fromkin 7]	tenses and pronouns [Partee]
11	determiners [Fromkin 7]	negative polarity [Fromkin 8]
12	scope and binding [Fromkin 8, Reinhart]	determiners and adverbs [Fromkin 8, Lewis]
13	presupposition, focus [Keenan]	adverbs [Fromkin]
14	pragmatics [Grice]	information, computation
15	wacky stuff (metaphor, sarcasm, etc.)	review

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Help. Your instructors are committed to helping you succeed in this course. Please don't hesitate to contact either of us. For questions about content or homework, sending email to both of us (rather than to just one) is the most efficient strategy. If our office hours are not convenient for you, we would be happy to schedule an appointment. **Additional assistance** for this class is available to you free of charge at the College Learning Center located on the 1st Floor of Weinstein Hall (right behind Java City). For information on one-on-one and group peer tutoring, please stop by the CLC or go to their website: <http://www.nyu.edu/cas/clc>