Guided research in LEL seminar descriptions 2021/2022

Semester 1 seminars

Agreement (Peter Ackema)

A lot of natural languages (though not all) show a curious phenomenon: the morphological shape of one element in a sentence can vary depending not on its own properties, but on the properties of another element in the sentence. This is what is known as agreement. In English, for example, the finite verb in a clause shows a shape ending in –s when the subject of the clause is third person singular, but not otherwise: she likes to sing versus I like to sing. In other languages, we encounter agreement for other features besides person and number as well, such as gender. We also encounter agreement between other elements than subject and finite verb, for instance between possessor and possessed in a possessive Noun Phrase. The phenomenon of agreement can shed an interesting light on the interplay of morphology, syntax, and semantics, as the morphology by which agreement expresses itself can be influenced by factors such as the word order between the ‘controller’ and the ‘target’ of agreement, the case morphology born by the controller, and the semantics of the controller. We will start by going through the first three chapters of Greville Corbett’s book Agreement (Cambridge University Press, 2006), and then look at literature that discusses the syntactic, morphological and semantic factors that condition agreement. Depending on people’s interests, we can also look at issues such as how agreement is processed/produced and the acquisition of agreement.

Coordination: syntax and discourse (Rob Truswell)

Coordination is meant to be a really simple part of syntax. We learn about it in our very first syntax classes, as a constituency test: if "a dog" and "a cat" can be coordinated in "I saw a dog and a cat", then they're both constituents, of the same category. This suggests a structure like [NP [NP a dog] and [NP a cat]]: take two NPs, stick "and" in the middle, get a bigger NP.

It's not that simple, in all sorts of ways. In this seminar, we will focus on two challenges and the interactions between them.

1) THE SYNTACTIC CHALLENGE: Ross (1967) proposed the Coordinate Structure Constraint (CSC), which states that you can't move out of coordinate structures, unless you move out of every conjunct simultaneously. So you can't say "Here's the lute that Henry [[plays __] and [sings madrigals]]", you can't say "Here are the madrigals that Henry [[plays the lute] and [sings __]]", but you can say "Here are the madrigals that Henry [[plays __] and [sings __]]". From the perspective of approaches to movement that you may be familiar with from LEL2D, Intro Syntax, or Syntax: Theory and Practice, the CSC is "weird", but there are other theories of syntax (particularly following from Gazdar 1981) which make it look more normal. So coordination is an invitation to discriminate between syntactic theories.

2) THE PRAGMATIC CHALLENGE: The canonical coordinate structure is formed with "and", and we have a rough understanding of the semantics of "and" from elementary logic: "P and Q" is true iff P is true and Q is true. But in reality, "and" does much more than that. Often, for instance, it describes narrative sequences: "I went to the store and bought some whisky" means something different from "I bought some whisky and went to the store". This suggests that the interpretation of coordination is often asymmetrical: unlike logical coordination, "P and Q" often means something different from "Q and P". Nevertheless, there are clear limits on what "and" can do. For instance, it can't be used for elaborations: "I had a great meal yesterday. I went to Burger King" means something very different from "I
had a great meal yesterday, and I went to Burger King". So the pragmatic challenge is to find a description of what coordination (particularly with "and") can do, what it can't do, and why.

3) THE INTERACTION: Most puzzling of all, the pragmatics of coordination seems to influence the syntax. Many asymmetric interpretations of coordinate structures also allow asymmetric patterns of movement, violating the CSC. So in contrast to the data given in (1), you can say "Here's the whisky which I [[went to the store] and [bought __]]", moving only out of the second conjunct (see Ross 1967, Lakoff 1986, Deane 1991, Kehler 2002). This interaction is terrifying: neat, encapsulated grammar isn't meant to be influenced by messy, general cognition. It could mean that the CSC doesn't actually hold as a syntactic principle, that these asymmetric examples are somehow not true coordination, or that our entire theory of syntax is broken and lies in tatters.

In this seminar, we will explore this interaction, and its implications for theories of syntax and discourse semantics. We will work through classic readings on the topic, using a forthcoming survey by Daniel Altshuler and myself as a guide. There is loads left to do in this area: most of our understanding derives from a couple of dozen constructed English examples, and haphazard crosslinguistic comparisons, so there is plenty of scope for students to make original empirical contributions, as well as surveying aspects of the literature.

Descriptive analysis of intransitive verbs in Nuer (Tatiana Reid)

In this data-driven research seminar, students engage with the descriptive analysis of intransitive verbs in Nuer, a West Nilotic language spoken in South Sudan and Ethiopia. This topic, on which there are no earlier publications, presents challenges and opportunities to develop expertise in a) syntax and semantics and b) morphophonology, phonology and phonetics. As for a), Nuer intransitive verbs divide into different form-based classes depending on whether they are intransitive roots, derived antipassive verbs or verbs derived from adjectives, and they also present derivations affecting valence. As for b), they present a rich system of morphological marking, which mostly involves stem-alternations: changes in vowel quality, voice quality, vowel length, tone and stem-final consonant of the predominantly monosyllabic stems. As such, this topic will allow you to develop expertise in phonology and phonetics, morphophonology, and syntax and semantics. In particular, this seminar builds on and extends your expertise in syntactic / semantic phenomena (cf. LEL2D), and will allow you to develop expertise in ear-based transcription and use of Praat to deal with tone, voice quality and vowel length (cf. LEL2B).

During the first three weeks you will gain understanding of key grammatical concepts, Nuer morphosyntax, and Nuer phonology. We will work through the usual fieldwork preparation procedures, including getting ethics clearance, collecting information about our linguistic consultant, obtaining informed consent, preparing elicitation sessions, recording the data and preparing to conduct elicitation sessions online with a speaker in South Sudan (or Kenya). From early on we will have audio elicitation sessions with a Nuer speaker to demonstrate the phenomena that you will read about in your assigned readings. From week four onwards you will participate, on a weekly basis, in a) a whole-group elicitation sessions; b) small-group elicitation sessions; and c) a whole-group sessions to discuss findings and problems. Please note that (a-b) will be scheduled for morning hours as the internet connection in South Sudan and Kenya is better before noon. The course requires active involvement, and synchronous learning activities predominate. Willingness to spend considerable time working on your session notes is essential. Assessment: (1) outline of research question and methodology for your project report, (2) a descriptive report on the topic of intransitive verbs in Nuer. This project paper delivers on the goal set out in assignment 1 and is a development of it.
Dialect Syntax (Craig Sailor)

We’ll look at recent work that aims to bring together (a) detailed empirical study of dialectal variation within the syntax of a single language and (b) theoretical syntax in the generative tradition. This has recently become a very dynamic area of research that has broken down some traditional academic boundaries, and also has the potential to increase the understanding of syntactic concepts by non-academics. Topics will include appropriate methodologies; examinations of how empirical dialect study and syntactic theory building can be mutually beneficial; specific case-studies of syntactic phenomena. As well as readings from the literature, part of the work for the course will involve interacting with existing online resources. A central focus for this will be the recently developed Scots Syntax Atlas (SCOSYA), but participants will be encouraged to also look at other available corpora/databases, including the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project and Multilingual Manchester. The assessed work for the seminar will consist of a project proposal, and a write-up of the project itself. The nature of the project is fairly open and can depend in part on the interests of each participant. It could for example be an analysis of a particular phenomenon, drawing on data from available resources, such as those mentioned above, or a worked-out proposal (possibly including a pilot) for a study of a syntactic phenomenon which has not been fully investigated, and which is expected to show dialectal variation (whether in English or in any other language).

Experimental Approaches to Language Evolution (Simon Kirby)

The last ten years has seen an explosion of interest in empirical approaches to the origins and evolution of language. Whereas once it was seen as being primarily amenable only to speculative theories, it is now considered a topic that can be investigated in the experiment lab. Arguments about the origins of language based only on appeals to plausibility are now being replaced by ones that stand or fall on the results of experiments with human participants. We will look at why this has happened, and how it is possible to make hypotheses about language origins that make predictions which can be tested experimentally. We will cover two of the main paradigms in this new area - the silent gesture paradigm, and iterated learning. These recreate in a miniaturised lab setting the process of language emergence and language transmission respectively. Students will be organised into small teams and develop, run, and analyse their own silent gesture experiments. These experiments require participants to communicate a range of meanings (usually displayed as cartoon illustrations, videos, or written phrases) using only gesture and no speech. In doing so, they spontaneously improvise strategies (for example, word order) to convey information. These are remarkably consistent across participants but do not necessarily reflect the native language the participants speak. Because of this, silent gesture is seen as a window onto the cognitive biases that may be at play in the very early stages of language emergence.

Historical Phonology and Phonological Theory (Patrick Honeybone)

This seminar will be based on reading and discussion, with some taught input. We will consider a fundamental issue in historical phonology which links closely, and in several different ways, to concerns in theoretical phonology: is phonological change exceptionless? We will see that there is major disagreement about this in the literature, and we will consider how that can be the case. You might think that the answer should be easy: yes or no? But we will see that the question is, in fact, difficult (and therefore interesting) to answer in multiple ways. For example, there is disagreement about how to interpret certain types of historical data and cases of change, and there is also even disagreement about what we mean by ‘phonological change’. The first part of the seminar will set the scene and will consider some of the basic issues, with some taught material; we will then move on to consider a set of readings which engage with this issue from a number of perspectives,
covering such topics as the existence of 'lexical diffusion', the distinction between change in lexical and postlexical phonology, and the existence and interpretation of frequency effects. We will see that attempts to answer this basic question ('is phonological change exceptionless?') have connected with fundamental issues in phonological theory and arguably go to the heart of our understanding of what phonology is. Assessment will be (i) an article review, focusing on one of the pieces that we read, and (ii) an essay.

Linguistic Modularity (Craig Sailor)

'Modularity' refers to the theory in cognitive science that the mind comprises a set of discrete but interconnected computational systems (modules), each highly specialized and independent. This theory was a cornerstone of the Cognitive Revolution in the 50s and 60s; as such, it has been a critical component of generative linguistic theory from the beginning. From the Principles & Parameters era right through to Minimalism, the architecture of grammar is generally viewed as an “inverted Y” shape: syntax is at the top, providing the input to phonology on the one hand, and to semantics on the other. This modular organization of grammar imposes strict boundary conditions on how linguistic theories – and, indeed, languages – may behave. This seminar explores those boundary conditions and the predictions they make. We’ll start off by reading about the general properties of cognitive modules, alongside examples of other cognitive systems that are thought to be organized in a modular way (e.g. the visual system). Then we’ll look at how Modularity has been deployed in linguistic theory, and contrast such approaches with non-modular alternatives (e.g. Connectionism). To narrow the scope of our inquiry and provide some empirical grounding, we’ll focus on the interface between the syntax module and the phonology module. We’ll look at various morphophonological phenomena whose domains of application appear to be defined syntactically (e.g. tone sandhi, liaison, phrasal stress, and intonation) in order to develop a picture of how linguistic modules can and cannot “talk” to one another.

Universals of Language (Jenny Culbertson)

One of the most hotly contested ideas in linguistics is the notion of language "universals": features that all languages share (at some level of representation). Putative universals have been proposed for centuries, with typological data from language samples used both to support and refute them. This course aims to introduce students to a new approach to the study of universals, which uses experimental tools to investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying hypothesised universals. The course gives students experience reading, critiquing, and generating scientific hypotheses, with the goal of designing novel behavioral experiments to test them. Assessments will be group-based.
Semester 2 seminars

Acoustic correlates of phonological contrast (Rebekka Puderbaugh)

Phonemic contrasts and phonological categories form the basis of phonological theory, yet their relationship to the phonetic reality of speech sound is not yet fully understood. Due to variability as a result of individual speaker characteristics, speech styles, dialects, and languages, methods for phoneme description and identification often rely on the judgment of documentary linguists, who transcribe spoken utterances using symbols representing articulatory parameters such as voice, place and manner. Despite the articulatory nature of phonetic transcription, the acoustic signal is actually much easier to access, annotate, and share in a principled and reproducible way. This seminar will focus on the acoustic presentations of segmental phonemic contrasts, with particular attention on the variation and overlap of various acoustic correlates across categories that are nominally the same in different languages. Students will be asked to choose a particular contrast or series of contrasts and compare them between at least two languages that share them. The assessment for this seminar will be: (i) an annotated bibliography, due mid-semester; and (ii) an essay, due at the end of the semester.

Community Studies in Sociolinguistics (Lauren Hall-Lew)

This course introduces students to the traditional methodology of variationist sociolinguistics: the community study. Students will be introduced to every aspect of classic research design, with particular attention paid to the role of social theory in both methodological and analytic decisions. This is a highly reading-intensive and writing-intensive option, suited to those students whose primary interest is sociolinguistics. Each week requires over 100 pages of reading and the production of at least 200-300 words of writing for formative feedback. The first half of the semester entails a thorough reading of all of William Labov’s landmark study, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. The second half of the semester will explore at least three other studies (a combination of books and journal articles, to be chosen by vote among the students). Every week, each student will submit a response to that week’s reading. These responses will be circulated among other class members, and students will be required to comment on at least two other students’ responses. The first assignment will be a partial summary of Labov’s New York City study for a particular non-academic audience (to be decided by the student, in consultation with the instructor). The second assignment will be a project proposal for a new community study.

English historical syntax (Linda van Bergen)

English Historical Syntax has become a very lively and varied area of research, stimulated by the increasing availability of text corpora from various periods of English as well as interest in aspects of English Historical Syntax in relation to syntactic theory and linguistic change. In this seminar, we will explore some selected properties of syntax and syntactic change in the history of English and discuss different accounts, which will also introduce various approaches to syntactic change more generally. Some aspects of morphology may be included where relevant. Topics we are likely to look at include: aspects of word order/clause structure, especially “verb second” phenomena in early English; the origin of periphrastic do; modals. Assessment will consist of an assignment involving analysis/discussion of data (assignment 1), and an essay (assignment 2).
Global Englishes (Claire Cowie)

In this seminar, students will explore recent case studies of contact between English and other languages in intensely multilingual environments. For historical reasons, English is assumed to be the code associated with globalisation in these situations. However, they are more likely to be characterised by a complex mix of contact Englishes (such as Singlish or Nigerian Pidgin English), which have local associations, L1 Englishes such as American or British English, and regional languages. Depending on the context, platform or medium, there are different rules of engagement and meanings for these codes. Understanding of the case studies will be supported by more theoretical reading in the subfields of sociolinguistics of globalisation, World Englishes, and translanguaging. Case studies feature: Bollywood and Nollywood films, migrant groups in Singapore, hip hop artists in South Korea and Japan, domestic and medical labour outsourced from the Philippines, outsourced voice based services from India, online forums connecting the Nigerian diaspora, English as a Medium of instruction in universities in the Middle East. We will pay attention to the formal properties of varieties of English in each situation; and also the language ideologies associated with the language contact phenomena. The short assessment will consist of a literature review; in the longer assessment students will undertake a qualitative analysis of globalisation and language contact in a form of media (film, music, social media, or online forum).

Predictability and Informativity (Hannah Rohde)

The premise of this course is that communication depends in part on the belief that people will tell us things that we’re interested in hearing. In this sense, language can be understood as a channel by which speakers convey, among other things, newsworthy and informative messages (i.e., content that is otherwise unpredictable to the comprehender). We therefore might expect comprehenders to show a preference for such messages. However, psycholinguistic studies on language comprehension often point to a preference for the opposite (i.e., processing ease for real-world predictable content). Several decades of research have shown that comprehenders can deploy knowledge about situation plausibility to generate fine-grained context-driven predictions about upcoming words. This course reviews this work and then considers how to test whether comprehenders can also deploy this knowledge in favor of newsworthy content. The goal is to draw a distinction between our guess of what a speaker is likely to encounter in the world and what they are likely to *say* about it. We will read psycholinguistic papers on predictability and formal pragmatic papers on informativity. We will discuss how to design experiments that test language users' awareness of these two components during processing. Assignments will consist of crafting two pieces that constitute important components of experimental psycholinguistic papers: a Methods section (assignment 1) and a Results & Discussion section (assignment 2).

The phoneme in linguistic research (Rebekka Puderbaugh)

Despite its long history, the phoneme nevertheless remains a concept that is often variably or incompletely defined across the many different subfields of research in linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychology, speech science and related fields. The concept of the phoneme is introduced early on in the study of linguistics, often using structuralist methods for identifying and describing contrastive categories of sounds in a particular language. In generative approaches to phonology, the phoneme is related to the underlying representation of such contrasts in the minds of those who speak the language. In speech perception, studies show that speakers divide the continuous speech signal into discrete categories along various dimensions depending in part on the language(s) that an individual person knows. In speech technology, researchers look for ways to relate phonemes as represented in orthographic forms of language to the acoustic output produced by speakers, or vice versa. In this seminar, we will consider the phoneme from a variety of historical and
contemporary perspectives looking for commonalities and differences between and among them. The assessment for this seminar will be: (i) an annotated bibliography, due mid-
semester; and (ii) an essay, due at the end of the semester.

Wh-words: syntax, semantics, typology (Rob Truswell)

The point of this seminar is to spend a lot of time worrying about the typology of a small
class of words, and hopefully build from there towards an understanding of one of the ways
in which English (and actually, quite a lot of Indo-European languages) are syntactic outliers
from a typological perspective. The focus is on the syntax and semantics of words used to
ask content questions. Every language has such words. In English, they are "who", "what",
"which", "when", "where", etc. Call these, and their equivalents in other languages, "wh-
words". We will explore the syntactic and semantic typology of wh-words, with a particular
focus on non-interrogative use of these words.

English wh-words have a handful of other uses. They can make exclamatives ("What a
clever dog!"), free relatives ("I'll eat [what you cook]"), and headed relatives ("I'll eat [the
meal [which you cook]]"). These latter two uses are crosslinguistically very rare, and largely
confined to Indo-European languages and languages in close contact with Indo-European.
It is more common for wh-words to have indefinite uses. An example is Passamaquoddy,
where "Ma=te keq wen ol-luhke-w" (NEG=EMPH what who thus-do.3-NEG) translates as
"no-one did anything" (Bruening 2007).

Even given the rarity of these individual uses of wh-words, it is surprisingly rare for a
language to have wh-relatives *and* wh-indefinites. This is probably related to a syntactic
fact: wh-relatives more or less always involve wh-movement, while wh-indefinites are
typically in situ. This basic syntactic difference suggests a more subtle semantic difference:
wh-words interpreted in, for instance, Spec,CP may have semantic properties which are
congenial to relative clause formation, while wh-words interpreted in situ may have semantic
properties which make it natural to use them as indefinites.

In this seminar, we will initially focus on the relationship between wh-interrogatives and wh-
indefinites, which has been the subject of a rich recent theoretical and typological literature,
starting with Beck (1996) and Haspelmath (1997). We will then try to work out where wh-
relatives fit in, a question which has been less thoroughly explored. A likely conclusion is
that they don’t fit in very well, and that wh-words in wh-relative languages are quite different
beasts from wh-words in wh-interrogative languages. Students may choose to go in various
directions from there: there are plenty of loose ends in diachrony, typology, and fundamental
language description, as well as in syntactic and semantic theory.

Form and function in language evolution (Matt Spike)

What is language good for? This seems like an odd question, as language is embedded in
so many aspects of our lives: it’s hard to imagine human communication, culture, or even
thought in the absence of language. In fact, there is no consensus within linguistics and
cognitive science on which of these roles language is well-designed for, if any. In this
course, we will survey the growing body of work on functional explanations of
language, putting a particular focus on theories and methods which have been recruited
from outside of linguistics, and how these are used to talk about ideas such as
communicative efficiency, computational simplicity, and the dynamics of biological and
cultural evolution.

There are two main aims of this course:

1. An accessible introduction to a literature which can seem wilfully intimidating at first: I
will give you a non-technical primer on the basic concepts in each area, showing you
how to stop worrying about any (often badly-explained) equations and focus on what they actually mean instead.

2. An opportunity to compare these different kinds of explanation, and see past some of the rhetoric in this debate.

The format of this course will be a combination of:

1. Tutorial introductions (asynchronous) to topics including:
   - Evolutionary dynamics in biology and culture
   - Information theory and efficient communication
   - Computational complexity, tractability, and learnability
2. Workshop/discussion sessions (synchronous) on these topics, focusing on specific papers from a selection of theoretical backgrounds and methodologies (i.e. ranging from theoretical linguistics to experimental and empirical studies)
3. Group poster presentation sessions (synchronous): students will prepare a conference-style poster on a paper of their choice (which can be on any relevant topic within or outside of linguistics, using any methodology), and will present these and respond to questions from other students.

Supplementary aims of this course are to provide students with a number of research skills/tools, including:

- literature and bibliography management software
- guidance on effective and efficient posters and presentations, online and offline
- collaborative research tools
- literature and bibliography management software

Possible Guided Research Seminar: Semantics Topic (TBA—New staff member)
We expect to have a new Semantics lecturer in post sometime in 21/22, but won’t have confirmation about what they will teach until later in the summer.

Possible Guided Research Seminar: Sociolinguistics Topic (TBA—New staff member)
We expect to have a new Sociolinguistics lecturer in post sometime in 21/22, but won’t have confirmation about what they will teach until later in the summer.