

Guided research in LEL seminar descriptions 2021/22: semester 2

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.

Corpus Linguistics (Alexandra Krendel)

Corpus linguistics is the study of real-world language via the creation and analysis of corpora, which are datasets intended to be representative of a particular type of language. For example, we can use corpus linguistics to analyse how language is used generally across a given population (e.g. British English speakers and American English speakers), and within a certain genre (e.g. news language). These datasets are often very large, and so corpus linguists use automated analysis methods and dedicated corpus linguistics software packages to analyse them.

In this seminar series, we will establish exactly what corpus linguistics is, and how it pertains to other English Language/Linguistics topics you are interested in. The seminar series will be based around key readings on corpus linguistics, including *Corpus Linguistics: Method, Theory and Practice* (McEnery and Hardie, 2011) as well as a range of empirical research papers. These readings will cover the history of the field, theoretical debates within the field of corpus linguistics, as well as knowledge of the methods that corpus linguists use to investigate language. Students will come to the seminars prepared to discuss these readings in detail with their fellow classmates.

The mid-semester assessment for this seminar series will be an annotated bibliography, and the end-of-semester assessment will be an essay which relates corpus linguistics to your chosen sub-discipline of linguistics or other relevant research interest.

Critical Discourse Studies (Rowan Mackay)

This course introduces students to Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). Looking at the theoretical bases upon which the critical movement has been built, students will be encouraged to build upon their own skills in critical thinking. Formed into a sub-discipline of linguistics thirty years ago, the CDS movement brought together linguists who were keen not only to comment upon the role of language in society, but to engage politically and explicitly in societal problems (e.g. racism, sexism, religious intolerance, political power abuse). Students will be asked to read original work by foundational theorists, as well as several contemporary applications of critical approaches and, as such, those taking the course should be prepared to read widely and, for the final paper, follow their own interest and apply what they have learnt. The course will look at Social Semiotics, Ethnography, and various strands of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), most of which employ qualitative methods of analysis. This is multidisciplinary and politically engaged: students should be prepared to discuss, sensitively, often-controversial topics.

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).

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, focussing 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

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).

Iconicity in Language (Asha Sato)

The relationship between form and meaning in language has traditionally been considered to be arbitrary. However, iconicity, a non-arbitrary relationship between form and meaning based on resemblance, is now increasingly being recognised as key property of language, with roles in language learning, comprehension, processing and beyond. Common examples of iconicity in language include:

- (i) visual resemblances between form and meaning in sign languages (e.g. in BSL sign AEROPLANE)
- (ii) correspondence between form and meaning across sensory modalities (e.g. the bouba-kiki effect)
- (iii) the prosodic use of vowel length, pitch and volume to convey modulations in magnitude, intensity etc. (e.g. 'this is soooooo baaaaaaaaaad.')
- (iiii) co-speech gesture indicating the shape of an object being spoken about.

For the first weeks students will gain an overview of the literature on iconicity in natural language in both signed and spoken modalities, and of experimental approaches using artificial language learning. From there, students will branch off to deepen their understanding in an area of research on iconicity of their own choice. Possible areas of thought might include sound symbolism and ideophones, gestural iconicity, cross-modal and multimodal iconicity, iconicity in first/second language acquisition, iconicity and improvised communication, iconicity and systematicity, and others. Following their own line of inquiry, students will produce for assessment an annotated bibliography and a research proposal/experiment design in the format of an Open Science Framework pre-registration.

Language and Ethnicity (Zuzana Elliott)

This course will cover key terms and concepts of definitions of ethnicity, superdiversity, and how ethnicity contrasts with race and nationality. The course introduces students to language-ethnicity interface, and it covers the major methodological and theoretical frameworks for studying ethno-linguistics. Students will learn to apply these frameworks to the analysis of observed patterns of ethno-linguistic practice. The module also examines potential effects of ethno-linguistic practice in institutional and non-institutional settings, and defines sociolinguists' roles in combating ethno-linguistic discrimination. On successful completion of this course, students will be able to apply the practical and conceptual tools acquired for studying language and ethnicity to the analysis and interpretation of novel datasets; and summarise, describe, and evaluate the methods, results, and implications of selected case studies in ethnolinguistics. Seminars are used to focus on developing students' transferable skills in linguistic data analysis. The course requires extensive readings on a weekly basis which will be discussed in the seminars, thus the attendance to the seminars is crucial.

Language variation and change in digital communication (Christian Ilbury)

The aim of this seminar is to provide students with a chronological overview of sociolinguistic research on the topic of 'language variation and change in digital communication'. The course will first introduce earlier research on 'Computer Mediated Communication' (CMC) where we will critically evaluate the concept of 'txtspeak'. We will then move on to discuss more contemporary approaches which model the sociolinguistic constraints on variable patterns of language online, such as research in the emerging field of 'Computational Sociolinguistics'. Throughout the course, concepts from digital media studies (e.g., context collapse, imagined audiences) will be introduced so that students can consider how technological affordances and infrastructures constrain and enable types of digital interactions. Finally, we will critically assess the value and ethics of using social media data in sociolinguistics and debate whether such data can be used as a proxy for spoken language. Seminars will be varied and will involve activities such as discussions of weekly assigned readings, data workshops, and specialist training sessions.

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 a critical summary of a journal article and suggestions for future work (assignment 1) and an experiment proposal (assignment 2).

Semantics above the clause level (Dan Lassiter)

Formal semantics has largely focused on the meanings of individual sentences. However, previous discourse and the beliefs of speakers and listeners play a major role in determining how speakers can convey a given message, and possible interpretations of a sentence. To add to this complexity, the meaning of a text depends on coherence relations among the clauses and sentences that make it up, which are frequently not signalled explicitly. Understanding the literal message that a sentence conveys thus requires a detailed understanding of both sentence semantics and discourse structure.

This Guided Research seminar will focus on formal models of the relationship between sentence meaning and discourse structure, starting with the treatment of anaphora and presupposition in Dynamic Semantics and Discourse Representation Theory. These theories generate many more interpretations than are in fact observed, and so we will turn to efforts to constrain them by integrating ideas from Centering Theory, Coherence Theory, and theories of information structure.

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.