

# ENG2157/4157 – Semantics and Pragmatics

## Course plan and syllabus for Autumn 2021

### i.e. What we will do on this course, and why

*It is astonishing what language accomplishes. With a few syllables it expresses a countless number of thoughts, and even for a thought grasped for the first time by a human it provides a clothing in which it can be recognized by another to whom it is entirely new.*

Gottlob Frege, 19th c. philosopher

*Comprehension involves more than the decoding of a linguistic signal. Although a language can be seen as a code which pairs phonetic and semantic representations of sentences, much recent work in psycholinguistics, pragmatics, and the philosophy of language shows that there is a gap between the semantic representations of sentences and the thoughts actually communicated by utterances.*

Dan Sperber & Deirdre Wilson, contemporary pragmatic theorists

#### About this course

This course is an up-to-date introduction to language and meaning for advanced undergraduates and beginning graduate students studying language or linguistics.

We will look into these questions (and more):

How do we communicate with each other?

What can we express in language?

How can we say one thing and mean another?

What does the structure of language have to do with the thoughts we use language to express?

#### Course promises

You'll learn the most important concepts and theories used by linguists to study meaning, and you'll learn how to apply them: i.e. how to analyse the meanings of words, sentences and utterances.

You will find out about the best current answers to the questions above, and more generally, you will:

*Develop a sophisticated understanding* of the relationship between language and meaning as it applies to words, sentences and utterances.

*Learn about:*

**Semantics:** different aspects of meaning in words, how word meanings relate to each other, how linguistic meaning relates to truth, and how linguistic structure contributes to sentence meaning.

**Pragmatics:** how language users achieve their goals in verbal interaction with others, including how they share information, how they tell each other to do things, and how they use language to negotiate social relations.

This course equips you with the knowledge and skills to do research on meaning and language. It's only a one-term course, so we can't cover everything, but you will get a good grasp of the basic foundations so that you can build on them later.

It also helps you to develop abilities that go beyond linguistics – and beyond academic work, into 'real life' – including critical reading, analysis of data, and comparison and evaluation of theoretical claims.

### **Seminars**

Fridays, from 12:15 to 14:00, Seminarrom 203, Georg Morgenstiernes hus

We will have seminars each week for **14 weeks**, 28 hours in all (with one week off: reading week).

For **dates**, see <https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/ilos/ENG2157/h21/timeplan/>  
and <https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/ilos/ENG4157/h21/timeplan/>

### **Contacting me**

The best way to reach me is by email – either through Canvas or directly to my UiO account [n.e.allott@ilos.uio.no](mailto:n.e.allott@ilos.uio.no) – I don't mind which you use.

My office is room 621, 6th floor of NT hus, Blindern campus.

## Your responsibilities (course expectations)

This course will only fulfill these promises if you promise the following in return:

**1. To attend seminars.** This course will rely largely on discussion in seminars. For this format to succeed, you must be present and on time. There is no official attendance requirement this term because of the Covid situation, but this course is structured around the seminars.

If you miss a seminar, it's your responsibility to make sure that you have covered the content.

**2. To read the assigned materials.** The papers, chapters and excerpts that we read will provide both the focus and jumping-off point for our seminar discussions and the tools – the concepts and methods – to follow and challenge the analyses that are proposed, and to propose your own analyses. Without the background from the reading, our discussion will lose a lot of its richness and you will struggle to perform the analyses.

**3. To work through the preparation tasks.** It's crucial that you do this preparation work, because it's the foundation for what we will be doing in the seminars. You aren't expected to immediately understand everything in the reading, or come to the seminars with perfect answers to all the questions! What is required is a serious attempt to work through them. That will help you develop a good basic understanding, and will reveal areas where there are problems. We can fix problems together in the seminars, and build on the basic understanding, by discussing problematic issues, and comparing different answers that different students have come up with. We'll then be able to discuss different analyses and much more.

*Important:* if you ever get really stuck with the preparation work, get in touch with me, and I'll help.

**4. To be attentive and participate in seminars.** Participation does not simply mean speaking aloud in seminars, although that is essential. You should participate by actively following the discussion, and by contributing to our semester-long conversation.

**5. To complete the required assignments in a timely fashion.** The assignments provide you with opportunities to practice writing about pragmatics using the knowledge that you will be acquiring, and to get feedback from me on your progress. This is essential preparation for the assessed portfolio, both in that you are practicing writing about pragmatics, and in that your assignments are drafts which you can rework and include in your portfolio.

In order to qualify to present the portfolio you have to complete both assignments to a satisfactory level. You are required to hand in your assignments on time.

### Important note

Students with special medical conditions or learning disabilities should contact the faculty so that special needs provisions can be made available to you:

<https://www.uio.no/english/studies/special-needs-leave-part-time/>

Please also feel free to get in touch with me about how I can ensure that your needs are accommodated in and out of the seminars in this course.

## Practical information

### Assessment

Your grade for the course depends only on the final exam.

In order to take the final exam, you have to submit the obligatory assignments and have them approved (by me).

On all assessed work, be *very* careful about plagiarism. Consequences for plagiarism can include having to submit a new assignment with a short deadline, failing the course, and/or suspension from the university. I'll post a file in Canvas with more information and links to the UiO regulations.

#### ENG2157 students

Official overview at <http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/ilos/ENG2157/>

#### Assignments

You are required to submit **two short assignments** in Canvas by the due dates. These assignments must be approved by me for you to be allowed to take the exam.

There will be several questions, asking for definitions, discussion and analysis of data. You aren't expected to write an essay.

The **first obligatory assignment is due on 25th September**. The questions will be made available at least two weeks before that.

The **second obligatory assignment is due on 6th November**. The questions will be made available at least two weeks before that.

#### Final exam

4 hour written exam

Time: December 6th at 9 am– 1pm.

Examination system: [Inspera](#)

The exam is based on the content of the whole course. It will test both your knowledge and your ability to apply it.

Later I'll make available (i) detailed assessment guidelines for the exam and (ii) old exam questions for you to practice on.

#### ENG4157 students

Official overview at <http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/ilos/ENG4157/>

You are required to submit **two short assignments** in Canvas by the due dates. These assignments must be approved by me for you to be allowed to take the exam.

There will be several questions, asking for definitions, discussion and analysis of data. You aren't expected to write an essay.

The **first obligatory assignment is due on 25th September**. The questions will be made available at least two weeks before that.

The **second obligatory assignment is due on 6th November**. The questions will be made available at least two weeks before that.

### **Final exam**

Home examination (i.e. you have several days to work on it).

Disclosure of exam assignment: December 13 at 11:00 am

Submission deadline: December 16 at 11:00 am

Examination system: [Inspera](#)

The assignment will be published in Inspera at 11.00 am on the day the exam starts.

The exam is based on the content of the whole course. It will test both your knowledge and your ability to apply it. It will also require you to critically engage with an academic text or texts – e.g. part of a published paper.

Later I'll make available (i) detailed assessment guidelines for the exam and (ii) old exam questions for you to practice on.

## Course structure

### Overall

*Introduction (1 seminar)*

*Part 1: Semantics: we look at how language encodes meaning (7 seminars)*

Fundamental questions: What do words mean, and how do those meanings combine to make sentence meanings? How do word meanings relate to each other and to things in the world?

*Part 2: Pragmatics: we look at communication and language use (5 seminars)*

Fundamental questions: How do speakers communicate more than they literally say or write? Are there rules or principles which guide our use of language?

*Conclusions and revision (2 seminars)*

### **Sources for the set reading**

**Book:** Saeed, J. I. (2016). *Semantics* (4th ed.). Malden, Mass.: Wiley. **(You have to get this one.)**

**E-book:** Kroeger, P. (2019). *Analyzing Meaning: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics* (Second corrected and slightly revised ed.). Berlin: Language Science Press. **Available free at:** <http://langsci-press.org/catalog/book/231>

Plus, on some weeks:

**Notes by me:** will be uploaded in Canvas

and/or

**Published chapters and papers:** will be uploaded in Canvas

### Detailed structure

(but note that I might revise this a bit as we go along: if so I'll give you an updated version)

### Introduction

#### **Seminar 1. How do we communicate?**

*Reading:*

How do we communicate? (online document) (15 pages)

Kroeger, sections 1.1–1.5 (9 pages)

How do humans communicate? How does it compare with animal signalling? What's the role of language? What's the evidence that we communicate more than the meaning of the words we use?

Relatedly: Why do we have two terms, 'semantics' and 'pragmatics'? What's the difference?

Includes brief previews of several topics that we will look at in depth later.

*Key concepts:* semantics, pragmatics, the distinction between sentences and utterances, properties of natural language or language use (arbitrariness, stimulus independence, displacement, systematicity, discrete infinity, productivity, compositionality), the code model of communication, calculability, implicatures, the linguistic underdeterminacy thesis.

## Part I: Semantics

### Seminar 2. Word meaning I: sense and reference

*Reading:*

Kroeger, chapter 2 (15 pages)

Saeed, chapter 2, pp. 22–37 (15 pages)

We start looking at word meaning this week. How can we use language to describe the world? How do words relate to concepts and how do they relate to the things that we use them to talk about? A crucial theoretical point today is that a purely denotational approach can't work. So words must also have *senses*. But what are senses? Images? No. Concepts? Perhaps. But what are those? Definitions? Prototypes?

*Key concepts:* representational and denotational theories of meaning; sense, denotation, and the distinction between sense and reference (or denotation); ambiguity; referring and non-referring expressions and uses; definite and indefinite descriptions; descriptive and expressive meaning; theories of concepts: definitions and prototypes.

### Seminar 3. Word meaning II: sense relations

*Reading:*

Saeed, chapter 3, pp. 51–74 (23 pages)

Kroeger, chapter 5, §5.1–5.3 (18 pages)

We look at relations between word meanings. Lexical ambiguity is widespread, but what are its limits? Is *cousin* in English ambiguous between “female cousin” and “male cousin”? What's the difference between homonymy (as with financial *bank* and river *bank*) and polysemy (e.g. the different senses of *book*)? Are words like *tall* and *bald* ambiguous? What other sense relations are there?

*Key concepts:* lexeme; sense (again); lexical ambiguity, vagueness, and indeterminacy, the ‘Do so’ test, the sense relations test, zeugma and the zeugma test; homonymy (homonym, homophone, and homograph); polysemy; synonymy; antonymy: complementary antonyms and gradeable antonyms, reverses, converses; hyponyms, hypernyms and taxonomic sisters; meronymy; states, inchoatives and causatives

### Seminar 4. Sentence meaning and truth

*Reading:*

Kroeger, sections 3.1–3.3 and 4.1–4.3 (18 pages)

Kearns (2011) sections 2.1 & 2.2 (8 pages)

A key part of what speakers of a language know when they understand a sentence is how it describes the world. We can understand this in terms of ‘truth conditions’: i.e. what the world would have to be like for the sentence to be true. Speakers also know about meaning relations between sentences: e.g. if some sentence *p* is true, then some other sentence *q* must be true (or

can't be true). These relations have been studied by logicians, in a simple system called 'propositional logic', so we look at that. This system also sheds light on the meanings of certain logical words: *and*, *or*, *if... then*, and *not*.

*Key concepts:* truth values and truth conditions; propositions; relations between propositions: entailment, tautologies, contradictions, paraphrases, inconsistent, contradictory and independent propositions; truth and validity; truth-functional and non-truth functional operators; logical operators: conjunction, disjunction, material 'implication', the biconditional, negation; truth tables; rules of inference: modus ponens and modus tollens.

### **Seminar 5. Situation type, tense and aspect**

*Reading:*

Saeed, chapter 5, pp. 112–133 (21 pages)

Languages allow us to talk about how events are positioned in time and how they 'occupy' time. Verb phrases generally refer to situations and there are various situation types: language distinguishes between states and processes, between processes that have an inherent end-point and those that are open-ended, and between temporally extended and point events. Situation type is related to (but not determined by) the lexical meaning of verbs. In addition, grammar encodes information about time in the tense and aspect systems, and we will look at Reichenbach's system for classifying these.

*Key concepts:* situation types: states, dynamic situations, stative verbs, durative/punctual distinction, telic/atelic distinction, semelfactives, iterative readings, 'activities', 'accomplishments', 'achievements', tests for semelfactives, tests for stativity, tests for telicity, tests for durativity; tense; aspect, progressive/simple distinction, perfect/simple distinction, perfective/imperfective distinction; Reichenbach's reference point theory.

### **Seminar 6. Deixis, character and content; compositionality**

*Reading:*

Saeed, chapter 7, pp. 189–196 (7 pages)

Notes by me (?? pages)

Kroeger, chapter 12 (11 pages)

This week we look at two separate topics. A theme that connects them is different types of meaning.

First, we look at words which encode sensitivity to context, including personal pronouns (*I, you, they* etc.) demonstratives (*this, that* etc.), and many other words (*today, here, come, go, local*). We look at the way the meanings of these words relate to speaker and hearer: so-called deictic centres. We also see that these words require us to distinguish two kinds of meaning: character and content.

Second, we return to compositionality – the fact that meanings of phrases depend on the meanings of their parts. A question: is that a fact about senses, or about denotations? Normally, denotations compose, but we see that there is a very interesting exception.



*Key concepts:* deixis, deictic centres; indexicals and indexicality, character, content, rigid designators; compositionality, predicate terms, the principle of substitutivity, empty terms, propositional attitudes, referential opacity, *de dicto/de re* distinction

### **Seminar 7. Quantification, binding and predicate logic**

*Reading:*

Kroeger, sections 4.4–4.5 (5 pages)

Kearns (2011) pp. 32–37, plus §§3.1, 3.2, 3.4 & 3.5 (14 pages)

We look at quantifiers this week: words like *all*, *some*, and *none*. Part of what speakers know about their meaning is that they are involved in certain entailments. For example, if *John is hungry* is true, then *Someone is hungry* has to be true. These entailments have been investigated by logicians, so we look at the second-simplest logical system, predicate logic. This also draws on what we said last week about predicate terms (*green*, *cat*, *jump*) and how they contribute to sentence meanings.

*Key concepts:* predicates and ‘arguments’, adicity; quantifiers: universal and existential, binding, the translation of sentences with *all* and *some*; rules of inference: universal instantiation, existential generalization; scope ambiguity.

## **Part II: Pragmatics**

### **Seminar 8. Speaker’s meaning and implicatures**

*Reading:*

Kroeger, chapter 8, and §3.4 (23 pages)

Grice, “Logic and conversation”, minus the introduction (14 pages)

As we saw back in week 1, what a speaker means by her utterance is not in general identical to the meaning of the sentence she has uttered. But how does this work? How can speaker and addressee coordinate on a meaning which is different from the linguistically encoded meaning? We look at the most influential proposal, which launched the study of pragmatics: Grice’s theory of conversation. We also look at another component of utterance meaning, presupposition, and some diagnostic tests for working out whether something is an entailment, a presupposition or an implicature.

*Key concepts:* conversational implicatures, the Cooperative Principle, the conversational maxims, violation of a maxim, apparent violation, maxim clashes, flouting of a maxim, the generalised/particularised distinction, conventional implicatures and non-truth-conditional meaning; properties of conversational implicatures: calculability, cancellability, nondetachability, reinforcability, presuppositions; distinguishing between components of utterance meaning.

### **Seminar 9. Speech acts**

*Reading:*

Saeed, chapter 8, §§8.1–8.4.2 (13 pages)

Kroeger, chapter 10 (13 pages)

Austin, Extract from “How to do things with words” (10 pages) – from Jaworski, A. & Coupland, N. (Eds.). (2006). *The Discourse Reader*. (2nd ed.). Abingdon: Routledge.

Languages typically encode in their grammar a distinction between declaratives, interrogatives and imperatives, sentences whose main purpose is (respectively) to make statements, ask questions and give orders. But the connection between grammatical mood and the ‘force’ of a speech act is not straightforward: not every use of a declarative makes a statement, and there are many more types of speech act, including promising, betting, and requesting. We look at the distinction between constatives, speech acts which describe the world, and performatives, speech acts whose main purpose is to change it, such as promises and namings. This distinction was introduced by JL Austin, as a way to draw attention to different kinds of action performed by utterances: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. We read an extract from Austin’s book, and also look at the most important refinements of the theory including the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts.

*Key concepts:* performatives, constatives, felicity conditions, misfires and abuses, explicit and implicit performatives, illocutionary force, locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, perlocutionary acts, , the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts, Searle’s distinctions between preparatory, sincerity, and essential conditions.

### **Seminar 10. Politeness**

*Reading:*

Saeed, §8.4.3 (3 pages)

Online notes (?? pages)

Brown & Levinson: Extract from “Politeness: Some universals in language usage” (22 pages) – from Jaworski, A. & Coupland, N. (Eds.). (2006). *The Discourse Reader*. (2nd ed.). Abingdon: Routledge.

It’s obvious that social factors influence language use. For example, why do speakers use implicatures and indirect speech acts, when we could just say what we mean directly? Sometimes the motivation is to avoid being rude or impolite. So we look at the most influential work in sociopragmatics: Penelope Brown and Staphen Levinson’s politeness theory. They propose that the driving force is the desire not to lose ‘face’ and not to cause loss of ‘face’ to others.

*Key concepts:* face, positive and negative face, Face Threatening Acts, politeness strategies, the ‘on the record’/’off the record’ distinction, positive and negative politeness redress; objections to Brown & Levinson’s theory.

### **Seminar 11. Pragmatics after Grice**

*Reading:*

Kroeger, chapter 9 (14 pages)

Carston (2011) §§1, 2, 3.1, 3.2, & 6 of “Relevance theory and the saying/implicating distinction” (14 pages)

This week we look at the most important development in pragmatics since Grice. What a speaker states/says/asserts/directly expresses is not fixed by the meaning of the sentence she utters. Consider a parent who says to a hurt child, *You're not going to die*. Intuitively, what she states or asserts is that the child is not going to die from her injury. We distinguish between different kinds of pragmatic contribution to the proposition expressed by the speaker, looking at Robyn Carston's defence of a pragmatic enrichment theory of some cases.

*Key concepts:* the linguistic underdeterminacy thesis, explicatures (and implicatures); pragmatic processes: disambiguation, reference assignment, saturation, enrichment; 'saturation' theories; sub-sentential utterances, the scope test

### **Seminar 12. Lexical pragmatics**

*Reading:*

Kroeger, chapter 5, §5.4 (2 pages)

Wilson & Carston (2007) "A unitary approach to lexical pragmatics" (27 pages) In N. Burton-Roberts (Ed.), *Pragmatics* (pp. 230–259). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Speakers can and often do use words to express meanings that are not the same as their linguistically encoded meanings. There's metaphor – *My lawyer's a shark*; metonymy – *The collector recently bought two more Picassos*; loose use – *That bottle is empty*; hyperbole – *I haven't had any food since breakfast. I'm starving!*; and cases without traditional names: e.g. *Buying a house is easy if you've got money*.

We look at Deirdre Wilson and Robyn Carston's theory, which treats many of these cases as outcomes of a single process of narrowing or broadening the meanings of lexical items. As we will see, this is closely related to last week's topic.

*Key concepts:* established and non-established senses; metaphor (including the distinction between conventional and creative metaphors), hyperbole, loose use, category extension; lexical broadening and narrowing; lexical entries: encyclopaedic and logical properties; the relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic; the *emergent property* problem; metonymy

### **Conclusion and revision**

### **Seminar 13. Language, meaning and thought**

*Reading:*

Elbourne (2011) chapter 8, "Meaning and thought" (15 pages)

Saeed, chapter 2, pp. 37–42 (5 pages)

My notes (?? pages)

We've looked at connections between language and communication, especially in the second half of this course. Another perspective on language asks about its connection with thought. We consider the following questions: Does the language we speak influence the way we think? If so, does it make certain thoughts unthinkable? Does (much of) our thought take place in a language-

like medium of some sort? If so, do we think (mainly) in natural language? We see that these aren't purely theoretical questions; we look at evidence from recent work.

*Key concepts:* The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: weaker and stronger versions; the Language of Thought hypothesis

#### **Seminar 14. Open questions; revision**

*Reading:*

To be decided.

This is our last seminar, and we'll keep it open for discussion of your questions and things you'd like to talk about more. We can also work through some old exam questions together.

*Key concepts:* Anything and everything covered above.