

Experimenting with meaning

Andrea Beltrama

October 29, 2018

Areas: Semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics.

Level: Advanced undergraduate/Graduate.

Course proposal: Content, structure, and pedagogical goals

Overview. Experimental methods have acquired a central role in linguistic research. In this class, we will explore how lab-based tasks have transformed and enriched the enterprise of studying meaning, a key component of human language. We will consider this notion in its broadest sense, engaging with foundational phenomena in semantics and pragmatics (e.g. implicatures, presuppositions, quantifiers, gradability), as well as with the perception and emergence of *social meanings* in sociolinguistics. By reading and discussing original articles from a variety of sources and approaches, we will gain a more comprehensive understanding of the different types of content conveyed through the use of linguistic expressions. Besides focusing on the individual studies, we will build connections between the topics that the different investigations address, as well as the methods that they rely on; in particular, we will critically reflect on how experimental data can enhance and extend linguistic theory, and on how they relate to other sources of evidence normally used in the study of meaning (e.g., introspective judgments, corpus data).

Content summary. The course is divided in three parts, each dedicated to a particular variety of meaning. For each area, we will deal with two representative phenomena; we'll start with several foundational readings to establish the necessary background, and then move on to engage with different types of experimental studies. We will focus on processing and acquisition approaches alike.

Part 1: Semantic meaning. We will start with consider the conventional, literal meaning associated with linguistic forms. Focusing on gradable adjectives and quantifiers – two types of linguistic phenomena that are deeply entrenched in the grammatical system of any language – we will analyze how studies of language processing and acquisition have been used to test specific hypotheses about the grammatical rules that govern their licensing and interpretation, as well as their combinability with other linguistic forms.

Part 2: Pragmatic meaning. However fixed and entrenched conventional meaning can be, they are

constantly re-analyzed and integrated with contextual information. Most of these operations pertain to the domain of pragmatics, that is, the interaction between semantic meaning, context and the intentions and our assumptions about the communicative intentions and goals of the speaker. In these weeks we will consider implicatures and presuppositions, two phenomena that have been widely investigated in the history of linguistics, focusing on how the rise of experimental techniques has allowed us to explore them under a new light.

Part 3: Social meaning. Besides semantic and pragmatic content, language forms also convey a *social meaning*, that is, a package of socio-psychological qualities that consciously or unconsciously convey information on the speakers' identity, their stances and their attitudes. Although this type of content has been mostly investigated in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, two subfields that have little overlap with semantics and pragmatics traditionally defined, it very much constitutes an important component of what words "say" when used in communication. Similar to the cases above, the surge of experimental methodologies has allowed us to investigate this type of content from a novel perspective, gaining important insights in the process. We'll focus on two complementary areas of investigation on social meaning, both which have greatly benefitted from the development of experimental methods: How do listeners extract social meaning from linguistic forms? And how does social meaning, conversely, inform speakers' processing of linguistic forms?

Pedagogical goals - The course interweaves collective discussion with individual, original work, providing students with the opportunity to become familiar with the literature, building their own bibliography and developing an independent critical perspective on the readings. The diversity of the approaches and the phenomena discussed in the class, as well as the emphasis on building connection between them, will push the participants to engage with different perspectives of linguistic analysis, thus developing a high degree of intellectual flexibility. Finally, by providing the option of designing and presenting an original experimental project on an issue of interest, the class gives students the opportunity to use the course materials to expand their own research program.

Pre-requisites - The class does not presuppose coursework in any specific topic other than an **Introduction to linguistics** class. While we will dig deep in the investigation of certain phenomena, we will always start with background readings that will build the necessary theoretical foundation. Because of the strong cross-disciplinary orientation of the class and the amount of reading assignments, the course requires *active* participation, willingness to engage with challenging readings and openness to different perspectives.

Evaluation - The final grade will be based on the following:

- Attendance and participation (**20%**) - Students are expected to do the readings before the class for which they are assigned. In addition, every registered student will lead discussion on a particular paper at least once over the course of the quarter. The schedule of presentations will be decided in the first week.
- Three response papers (**10%** each; 2 pages, double spaced) For each of the three parts of the class, students will be asked to submit a 2 double-spaced response paper engaging with (at least) three readings and raising (at least) two questions for class discussion.

- Term project (**50%**) Students can can **either** work a critical analysis of some body of experimental studies **or** outline an original experimental project on a topic of their choice. The final project consists of the following parts:
 - A 1-page proposal, including references, due in Week 10 (**10%** of the final grade).¹
 - A final presentation, held in Week 14. (**10%** of the final grade).
 - A 15-20 pages double-spaced paper, due at the end of class. (**30%** of the final grade).

Sample syllabus and reading list

- **Week 1:** Introduction. Varieties of meaning, varieties of evidence. **Read:** Grice (1957), Chierchia (2000), Eckert (1989), Krifka (2011)
- **Week 2-5:** Part 1: Semantic meaning.
 - Gradable adjectives. **Read:** Kennedy and McNally (2005), Kennedy and McNally (2010), Sedivy (1999), Panzeri and Foppolo (2011), Syrett (2009), Sassoon and Zevakhina (2012).
 - Quantifiers and negative polarity items. **Read:** Giannakidou (1997) (selected excerpts), Lidz and Musolino (2002), Tieu (2015), Xiang et al. (2016).
- **Week 6-9:** Part 2: Pragmatic meaning.
 - Implicatures: **Read:** Grice (1975), Horn (2004), Levinson (2000), Noveck (2001), Pouscoulous et al. (2007), Doran et al. (2012), Papafragou and Musolino (2003), Sedivy (2007)
 - Presuppositions: **Read:** Simons (2006), von Stechow (2008), Schwarz (2016), Chris Cummins and Katsos (2013), Chemla and Bott (2013), Kim (2015)
- **Week 10-13:** Part 3: Social Meaning -
 - What is social meaning? **Read:** Eckert (1989), Agha (2005), Kiesling (2005), Drager (2013), Campbell-Kibler (2010)
 - How do we extracting social meaning from linguistic forms? **Read:** Bender (2000), Campbell-Kibler (2007), Hay (2009)
 - How do we integrate social meaning when processing linguistic forms? **Read:** Niedzielski (1999), Squires (2013), D'Onofrio (2015), Staum Casasanto (2008)
- **Week 14:** Students' presentations.
- **Week 15:** Wrap-up, TBA

¹Students should come talk to me about the topic of their interest no later than Week 9.

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