

LING 70400 - Foundational Issues in Linguistics

Spring 2021 – GC, CUNY

Instructors: Sam Al Khatib (alxatib@alum.mit.edu)
Jason Kandybowicz (jkandybowicz@gc.cuny.edu)

Course description The goal of this course is to provide and encourage discussion of foundational issues in Linguistics. Training in the subdisciplines of Linguistics often starts with pre-established assumptions about the direction of inquiry, and the methods used to pursue it. But equally important to the results of inquiry is the motivation behind the commitments that shape it. In Linguistics these include commitments as to what the subject matter of Linguistics is, what constitutes knowledge of language, what counts as relevant data, and how data are best collected and modeled. In this course we provide a forum for discussing these issues.

Office hours By appointment this semester.

Prerequisites Syntax I and Phonology I. Permission from instructors is required for interested students who have not taken Syntax I or Phonology I.

Course goals:

This seminar provides a discussion forum for questions concerning the place of Linguistics in the cognitive sciences, and questions concerning the validity of the empirical and analytical methods employed by linguists. As such, the course is aimed to strengthen the grounds that more specialized courses build on, by encouraging critical assessment of the assumptions that linguists make (or take for granted) in their research.

Learning objectives:

The course aims to familiarize students with foundational issues and debates in linguistic research and to encourage unbiased critical reflection and discussion of linguistic methodology. Students will engage with primary literature, and (a) gain proficiency in topics that are not covered in more specialized Linguistics classes, and (b) exercise unbiased critical analysis and evaluation of linguistic argumentation. Students will develop and strengthen oral and written communication skills through in-class roundtable discussions and written reviews/reactions to readings.

Course requirements and grading policy

Attendance and class participation:	20%
Reactions to readings:	20%
Three critical reviews:	60% (20% per review)

Reactions to readings: For each reading assignment you must submit at least two questions (a) to demonstrate that you have read the assignment, and (b) to help shape class discussion. In addition, you must submit a blurb of at most 50 words that summarizes your opinion/reaction to the reading. You must submit this via email to both of us by 5pm on the Sunday before the lecture where that reading is scheduled.

Critical reviews: Some course readings have associated peer commentary papers. For each of these, you will choose one of its commentaries and write your own review of (a) the commentary, and (b) the relevant reply by the authors of the original paper. Your review should be 2-4 pages long, single-spaced, and should include the following three components: (a) a summary of the relevant parts of the original paper, (b) a summary of the commentary and the reply, and (c) a critical assessment of the points made in both. Your submissions may be individual or group-based (up to three people per group). Group work is strongly encouraged. You must submit your reviews by 5pm on the dates indicated in the course schedule.

Course schedule

DATE	TOPIC	READING
1 (T 02/02)	Introduction: explanation in linguistics	Newmeyer 2017 Egré 2015
2 (T 02/09)	Linguistic nativism?	Fukui & Zushi 2004 Sampson 2005 Ch. 2; optional Ch. 1
3 (T 02/16)	Poverty of stimulus as an empirical issue	Pullum & Scholz 2002
4 (T 02/23)	Poverty of stimulus as an logical issue	Fodor & Crowther 2002
(F 02/26)	REVIEW DUE: Pullum & Scholz commentary	
5 (T 03/02)	Other views of language acquisition	Ambridge, Pine & Lieven 2014
6 (T 03/09)	Communication in non-human animals	Fitch 2010
7 (T 03/16)	Language evolution	Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch 2002
8 (T 03/23)	Language universals	Evans & Levinson 2009
(T 03/30)	NO CLASS – SPRING RECESS	
9 (T 04/06)	Language and culture	Nevins, Pesetsky, & Rodrigues 2009
(F 04/09)	REVIEW DUE: Evans & Levinson commentary	
10 (T 04/13)	Data in linguistic theory controlled experiments vs. judgements	Featherston 2007
11 (T 04/20)	Data in linguistic theory (cont.) controlled experiments vs. judgements (cont.)	Phillips 2010 Gibson & Fedorenko 2013
12 (T 04/27)	Data in linguistic theory (cont.): assessing accuracy of judgements	Sprouse & Almeida 2013
(F 04/30)	REVIEW DUE: Featherston commentary	
13 (T 05/04)	Data in linguistic theory (cont.): linguistic theory and fieldwork	Davis, Gillon & Matthewson 2014
14 (T 05/11)	Open discussion	

BIBLIOGRAPHY

CLASS READINGS

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