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LING 472.01: Generative Syntax

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Instructor:

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Course status: CO-CONVENING

The course in Generative Syntax co-convenes graduate students earning a Linguistics MA (enrolled in LING 572) and undergraduates earning a bachelor's degree and pursuing a Linguistics minor or option (enrolled in LING 472). Consequently, participants in this course must satisfy differing coursework obligations as per the two classifications, graduate or undergraduate. While the responsibilities may vary, the learning outcomes are common to both courses.

Coursework: LEARNING OUTCOMES

Coursework encourages students of syntax to overtly display skills including but not limited to those listed below.

- a) master notions of categoriality (i.e., parts-of-speech from traditional grammar studies, word-/morpheme classes in pre-generative *structural* linguistic analysis) by means of capably identifying (i) categories, (ii) types of gradience exhibited by categories, and (iii) forms from human languages permitting more reliable distinctions among varieties of gradient categories
- b) grasp methods, pre-generative (structural, linear organization) but mostly generative (hierarchical organization), of translating (or mapping) categories into computable representations in formal notation, predominantly at the level of sentence-formation systems, and then apply some of these methods in the analysis of various human languages
- c) proficiently and operationally draw distinctions between human language categories (described as form-classes) and constituencies (described as function-classes) in analyzing sentence-level data into their individual segments, classically a principle of organization whereby form (noun phrase) functions as sentential subject or verbal object
- d) recognize the progression of syntactic theory as a series of missed generalizations, or statements that make data appear complex (e.g., this set of sentences follows three different rules) when a single statement accounts for all of it (this set of sentences follows this one single rule)
- e) mark transitions among syntactic theories using the analytical methods that characterize each one as it becomes more general than previously, starting at Chomsky as graduate-student to early versions of Government & Binding (a.k.a. Principles and Parameters), roughly three decades from 1951 to 1981 (not including Barriers model of 1986)

Course materials:

Textbooks

Aarts, Bas. 2017. *English Syntax and Argumentation*, 5th Ed. New York: Palgrave.

Poole, Geoffrey. 2011. *Syntactic Theory*, 2nd Ed. New York: Palgrave.

Selections

Passages from other texts posted and scheduled on the Moodle internet supplement for the course.

Course grading:

I evaluate final grades based on the exams and the assignments. Your final grade equals 45% for the assignments, 25% for the midterm and 30% for final. I assess a final grade based on the points that you accrue from assignments and exams. I gauge points in several ways: according to a percentage (points you earn divided by the total amount of available points), a percentile (points earned by each student, which are compared and measured on a "curve"), and a quartile (points earned by each student, compared and distributed in fourths, e.g., top 25%, bottom 25%, etc.). These three measurements help me make a course assessment represented by traditional letter grades with +/-.

Course Guidelines and Policies

Late Policy

All activities, assignments or exams given to the instructor after its due-date are not guaranteed to be either graded (and entered into the grade record) or returned (i.e., students must keep track).

Attendance Policy

Perfect attendance is desired but not expected; excessive absences typically intersect adversely with **late policy** and affect final grades. Students who miss the first two class meetings must drop the course (see URL presented below):
(http://archive.umt.edu/catalog/14_15/academics/academic-policy-procedure.php: under the heading **Class Attendance/Absence Policy**)

Withdrawal Policy

To know more information about how to withdraw from your course, see the URL below:

<http://www.umt.edu/registrar/PDF/Registrars-DropForm.pdf>

Academic Honesty Policy

All students must observe academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to academic penalty by the instructor of the course and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. As a student in this course and at this university, you must be familiar with the Student Conduct Code (see URL presented below):

(http://www.umt.edu/vpsa/policies/student_conduct.php)

Special Accommodation Policy

If you believe you need special accommodation in this course due to some learning challenge that has been verified by Disability Services for Students, please talk to your instructor as soon as possible so that you can both resolve some appropriate accommodation.

Disability modifications

The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction based on alliances among students with disabilities, instructors, and Disability Services for Students (DSS). If you think you may have a disability adversely affecting your academic performance and also have not previously registered with the DSS, then please contact the DSS staff in Lommasson Center Room 154 or call 406-243-2243. I intend working with you and Disability Services to offer an appropriate modification.

Technology Policy

You may, of course, take class notes on a laptop or iPad or the like. Aside from that, I expect that technology will not intrude during class time. Please turn your phones to “vibrate” or a similar setting that will not disturb the class.

Do not plan to receive phone calls during the class period

Course Description:

“Creativity is predicated on a system of rules and forms, in part determined by intrinsic human capacities. Without such constraints, we have arbitrary and random behavior, not creativity.”

Noam Chomsky, Reflections on Language, p. 133

Creativity constituted the earliest notions (mid 1950s) of generativity, or the ability of all humans to create (i.e., generate) both infinite numbers of novel sentences and sentences of infinite length. This property of all languages served as evidence for a *generative* syntax that became known as Transformational Grammar (TG), a reaction against behavioral theories of language learning and the structuralist theories of language knowledge used to complement behaviorism (circa 1957). The leading advocate for TG at the time, Noam Chomsky, argued persuasively that behaviorists relied too much on language experience to explain development and therefore could not explain the human mind's capability for creating utterly unique sentences never experienced before, revealing a generative capacity. The mind, according to generative grammars, includes *a priori* (prior to experience of language) a finite body of language knowledge. Such knowledge takes the form of syntactic structures (properties of a mental computational system). These structures function as the source of innovative and conceivably endless phrases and clauses that are derived from basic phrasal and clausal constructions altered by certain transformational rules (thus TG).

In the initial theory, transformational rules affected the structural description (SD) of a sentence (SDs are formal objects defined mathematically as combinatorial computations) and, as a result, caused a structural change (SC) that gets realized by moving, adding, deleting or substituting structural material. A decade later, a glut of transformational rules grew too unwieldy to account for development, so other generative theories evolved from TG: First, the Standard Theory, which assumed that a component dedicated exclusively to language knowledge (or competence) is independent from language use (or performance); then, the Extended Standard Theory, which assumed that a lexicon (mental dictionary) functions independently of the component generating computational combinations; and, finally, the Revised Extended Standard Theory, which assumed that rules reflect an interaction of deeper, more abstract principles of generativity (we will study this theory by building up to it through relevant features of former theories). All theories evolving from TG preserve the notion of transformational rule in some form, yet the concept *generative* no longer refers to its original sense of seemingly unlimited creativity but now denotes instead with a degree of mathematical precision "how sentences of the language are in fact characterized by the grammar" (Chomsky, *Rules and Representations*, p. 220). Most currently, the term refers to how principles controlling the computational system (a universal grammar, UG) routinely gain access to features in the lexicon (constituting extremely restricted language-specific parameters).

"Imagine a scientist... who is unencumbered by the ideological baggage that forms part of our intellectual tradition and is thus prepared to study humans as organisms in the natural world."

Ibid. p. 139

Catalog Descriptions: LING 472/572

- A study of the human language sentence-formation system, the means for expressing semantic information as propositional content. Emphasis on the abstraction of utterances in the form of mathematical objects. This course is co-convened with LING 572.
- An investigation of human language sentence-formation systems, construed as functions (combinatorial computations) mapping utterances (physical sounds) to propositions (mental meanings). Emphasis on abstracting away from observable cross-linguistic data in favor of underlying formal (i.e., computational) structures. This course is co-convened with LING 472.