

Ling 434: Second language acquisition - syntax

FS 2008

Course description, assignments, grading norms

Instructor: Prof. S.E. Carroll Canada Research Chair in Second Language Studies)	Day: Tuesdays & Thursdays Start: 09.09.08 End: 05.12.08
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Undergraduate Student Advising

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Course description

Targeted students

This course targets advanced undergraduate students of linguistics who are interested in *second language acquisition* (SLA) syntax.

This course is recommended for all those students interested in doing undergraduate thesis research or graduate research in second language acquisition with a focus on the L2 acquisition of morpho-syntax.

This course *may* also be useful for those who plan on teaching a foreign language in that it addresses essential background knowledge. It will certainly provide some insights into thinking about questions of syntactic knowledge which might be useful for curriculum and classroom methodology. I am available for discussion outside of class on how to construct research projects in applied linguistics.

Warning! Warning! Warning!

This course is not a survey course. By this, I mean that we will not be surveying in-class the now large literature on the full range of syntactic topics which have been investigated in SLA populations. The textbooks and especially the background reading materials will provide you with sources of information to pursue on your own.

I am interested in formulating a theory of second language acquisition. Part of that theory presupposes structural description of syntactic knowledge, but the hard part comes in integrating linguistic theory into a broader framework of psycholinguistic function (perception, memory, speech processing, structural parsing, meaning integration, all aspects of reading, as well as planning and producing speech or writing). As a result of this perspective, questions of syntactic theory will be subordinated to problems of human psychology. My approach to SLA is **not** one where the sole purpose is to test syntactic theories against data from L2 populations. If this is what you are looking for, this course is not for you.

Goals of this course

This course has a number of different goals for students of linguistics:

- to introduce them to a *linguistic approach* to second language acquisition themes and research problems;
 - Second language acquisition sits at the crossroads of linguistics, psychology, sociology, neurology, and language education (including educational policy & planning, language testing, materials development & design, and curriculum studies). There are many different approaches one can take to problems of second language acquisition. We will view SLA as the construction of mental *grammars* and we will use theories of syntax to characterise their organisation.
- to introduce students to a subset of problems related to the acquisition of *syntactic knowledge* of a second language, thereby deepening your understanding of syntactic description, analytical tools and theories;
 - Language is complex. We cannot simultaneously study all of its complexity, and so we break it down according to *linguistic levels of analysis*. In other courses, you may study SLA grammars from the perspective of their sound system (phonetics and phonology), their word patterns (morphology) or their meaning (semantics & pragmatics). Here we will focus on patterns at the word, phrase, sentence, and utterance level (morpho-syntax).
- to provide increased knowledge of the syntactic description of various languages involved (always at least two, in this area of research). The best studied languages are English, German and Spanish, but increasingly we are learning more about the L2 acquisition of French, Chinese, Swedish, Dutch. For students with a particular interest in the syntax of a given language, examining the L2 literature, or conducting your own research, is an interesting way to develop greater knowledge about its grammar;
- to introduce students to some of the most influential researchers in SLA syntax (Hawkins, Schwartz, Sprouse, White & their students). These are generativists working in a minimalist framework. This is only one type of framework that one might use. We will focus in this course on the *argumentation* used to justify particular analyses.
- to practice analytical skills such as classification and tree-drawing acquired in previous courses in linguistics. You will practice Adger-type analyses of simple L2 data.
- to introduce students to useful corpora consisting of L2 data;
- to begin to conduct research on a relevant problem in a research team arrangement. You will have a choice between investigating negation or investigating the mass/count agreement distinction from a corpus of learner English.

Prerequisites

Students must have successfully passed Ling 203 and Ling 301 with a grade of at least C+. Linguistics 311 or 313 are highly recommended as background preparation.

Pedagogical philosophy behind the structure of this course

There is an old saying in educational psychology that pupils and students learn what you teach them, and – like it or not – what you teach them is what you focus on and assess through your assessment methods. When a course focuses on tests as its primary assessment method (in particular, with a true-false format), students learn that what matters is propositional content. The ability to put knowledge to use (a critical skill) fades into the background. In this course, I would like to make skills development and the application of knowledge paramount.

Nonetheless, most courses attempt to convey some critical information which students are expected to master, and that will be true here too. **So there will be a test based on the contents of lectures and readings (30% of the final grade).** See below.

To facilitate distinguishing the different kinds of knowledge which I expect you to acquire and master in this course, I will organise it into two sections.

Tuesdays: brief lecture about themes or issues which are not directly treated in the obligatory readings, but which are essential background for understanding issues related to second language acquisition (henceforth *SLA*). This part of the course will present the usual *overview* that you ought to expect from a lecture. Attendance is obligatory.

Thursdays: You read, you think, you ask questions, you learn. Thursdays are for “experiential learning”. Thursdays will also be devoted to group discussions of obligatory readings, for reviewing the answers to the assigned problems and for anything else you think merits our attention.

Assignments

There will be three distinct types of assignments

- Exercises (individual work)
- Test on lectures and textbook readings content (individual work)
- Essay written in 2 drafts (individual work)

The essay will deal with one of two topics.

A. In the ESF corpus, you will look at the various recordings of a single learner and study negation in SLA. You will carry out a *case study* of that learner.

This means that you will state what the system of negation looks like at the initial stage, the final stage, and the intervening stages. You will describe how the system progresses towards the target. This task presupposes that you have described what the target system of English look likes (so you will have to read some relevant literature).

You are free to choose to look at (i) propositional negation, e.g., ways of expressing in the syntax what we would render in the semantics as **Neg (Proposition)**, e.g. “John didn’t eat the cookies”, “*It is not the case* that John ate the cookies”, “Jean a *pas* mangé les biscuits”, “Johann hat die Keks *nicht* gegessen” etc.

or (ii) constituent negation, e.g., “At *no* time, did John eat the cookies”, “John did not *not* eat the cookies”, “John ate *no* cookie”, “Jean a mangé *aucun* biscuit”, “Johann hat *keine* Keks gegessen”

or (iii) tags such as, “didn’t he”, “isn’t it”, “aren’t they”.

You will pick one form of negation only to study.

B. In the ESF corpus, you will look at the various recordings of a single learner and study that person’s use of number agreement within the count/mass noun contrast, e.g., “I bought *some* paper to write on” vs. “I bought *two* sheets of paper to write on”. Other examples: “We ate *some* rice” vs. “We ate *several* pizzas”/*“We ate *several* rice” or “I have *some* jewellery from my mother” vs. *“I have *a dozen* jewellery from my mother”, compare “I have *a dozen* necklaces from my mother”.

Additional background readings will be posted on Blackboard to provide a theoretical framework for treating both of these topics. We will also discuss the theoretical claims in class.

Summary of assignments, value, and due dates

Activity	Value	Due date
(i) Exercises	20%	September to mid-November
(ii) Brief written description of essay topic + preliminary bibliography	10%	October 17 th 2008
(iii) First draft of essay	20%	November 28 th (noon) 2008
(iv) Test on contents of readings lectures.	30%	December 2nd 2008
(v) Final draft of essay	20%	December 12 th (noon) 2008

Make-up test

There will be a make-up test in the week following the end of classes for anyone who fails the test. Students who miss the test for no good reason (meaning no documentation of a health problem from a doctor) will **not** be permitted to sit the make-up test. Students who pass the test but are not satisfied with their grade will also **not** be permitted to sit the make-up test.

Academic accommodation for students with disabilities

It is the student's responsibility to request academic accommodations. If you are a student with a documented disability who may require academic accommodation and have not registered with the Disability Resource Centre, please contact their office at 403-220-8237. Students who have not registered with the Disability Resource Centre are not eligible for formal academic accommodation. You are also required to discuss your needs with your instructor no later than fourteen (14) days after the start of this course.

Late submissions

Written assignments which are submitted late due to illness must be accompanied by appropriate medical documentation which specifies (i) that you were unable to work due to a precise medical problem, and, (ii) that you were unable to work on the day the assignment was due *and a relevant period leading up to the due date*. Should a note from your physician state, e.g., merely that you had a cold or the flu on the due date, I will construe this as saying that you were in a position to hand in the assignment on the following day. In short, if you have been incapacitated for several days, please be sure to communicate this to your physician. (And it wouldn't hurt to let me know either...)

Other problems (death in the family, pregnancy, other personal problems) should be brought to my attention *well before the deadline*. I am not interested in prying into your private affairs. Everyone has problems from time to time which interfere with work. The university expects you to find adult ways of coping. I expect you to recognise that you cannot hide the fact that you won't make a deadline, so don't try.

In the absence of proper communication regarding such matters, I will invoke the academic equivalent of on-the-job penalties, namely,

- assigning an "F" (fail) grade for any work not submitted, and
- deducting one letter grade for each week of 5 workdays or part thereof that an activity is late.

In other words, if you would normally get a "B" on a written assignment but submit it 3 days late, you will get a "C+"; if you submit it 6 working days late, you will get a "C".

Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct

Plagiarism occurs when a student submits or presents work in a course as if it were his or her own work done expressly for that particular course, when, in fact, it is not. Most commonly plagiarism exists when:

- a) the work submitted or presented was done, in whole or in part, by an individual other than the student submitting or presenting the work as his or her own (this includes having another person impersonate the student in an examination or test, or otherwise substitute the work of another individual for the student's own in an examination or test),
 - b) parts of the work submitted or presented by a student claiming to have authored the work are taken from another source written by someone other than the student, and without reference to the original author,
 - c) the whole work submitted or presented by a student claiming to have authored the work (e.g. an essay) is copied from another source written by someone other than the student,
- and/or
- d) a student submits or presents work in one course which he or she has also been submitted in another course (although it may be completely original with that student) without the knowledge of or prior agreement of the instructor involved.

While it is recognized that scholarly work often involves reference to the ideas, data and conclusions of other scholars, intellectual honesty requires that such references be explicitly and clearly noted. Some course assignments call for students to work in groups. Unless noted otherwise in writing, students must write up their own answers for submission of the assignment. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism.

Please note with respect to point (c) above that it is violation of Canadian copyright law to reproduce an entire work even with reference to the original author without the explicit permission of the original copyright holder. Needless to say, handing in an essay written by someone else even while acknowledging that it was written by someone else will not meet course requirements for original pieces of writing.

In submitting your work, you will be required to sign a statement saying that you have read this document, in particular, this section of the document, that you understand its contents, and that you are the sole author of the work you submit (or the joint author with named individuals in the case of pairs or group work).

Plagiarism is an extremely serious academic offence. Possible penalties for plagiarism include: failing the assignment, failing the course, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.

Any student who voluntarily and consciously aids another student in the commission of plagiarism is also guilty of academic misconduct.

Distribution of Grades:

A+ = 95-100; A = 90-94; A- = 85-89; B+ = 80-84; B = 75-79; B- = 71-74; C+ = 67-70; C = 62-66; C- = 58-61; D+ = 54-57; D = 50-53; F < 50%