

Linguistics of Signed Languages

01:615:461
Summer (III) 2009
Linguistics Department
Rutgers University

- Instructor:** Aaron Braver
abraver@rutgers.edu (please include “461” in your subject line)
18 Seminary Place, Room 301 (College Avenue Campus)
- Class Meetings:** July 6 – August 12
Mon, Tues, Weds, Thurs, 10 am – 11:50 am
Lucy Stone Hall A, Room 137 (Livingston Campus)
- Office Hours:** Wednesdays, 1 pm – 3 pm and by appointment
18 Seminary Place, Room 301 (College Avenue Campus)
- Prerequisite:** Linguistics 201 (Introduction to Linguistic Theory)

About this course

Starting around the 1970s, linguists began to study signed languages in the same way they studied spoken languages. This course serves as a broad overview of that research, focusing on phonology, syntax, and semantics, as well as Deaf arts and culture. We will examine data from a number of natural signed languages, especially American Sign Language (ASL) and Australian Sign Language (Auslan). A major goal of this course is to investigate (and largely disprove) a number of false assumptions about signed languages. We will explore specific linguistic phenomena in signed languages, and compare them with phenomena found in spoken languages.

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify false assumptions about signed languages
- Identify common features of signed language phonology, syntax, and semantics
- Relate phenomena in signed languages to phenomena in spoken languages
- Appreciate the diversity in signed languages of the world

No knowledge of ASL or any other signed language is required or assumed. This is *not* a language instruction course.

Assignments and Grading

Assignments (40%)

Each unit will have at least one homework assignment worth 10 points. In-class assignments will include summaries of course materials and readings, reflections on lectures, and

short-answer questions. In-class assignments will be worth 2 points each.

Midterm exam (20%)

A midterm exam will be given in class on **Tuesday, 7/21**.

Final exam (30%)

A final exam will be given in class on **Wednesday, 8/12**.

Participation (10%)

In addition to attending class, you are encouraged to ask and answer questions, make relevant comments, and generally contribute to discussions. Participation will be evaluated on both the quantity and quality of your contributions—keep in mind that any question that helps you understand the material is of high quality.

Extra credit

The best way to earn a good grade in this course is to participate in class, turn in your assignments on time, and prepare adequately for the exams. There will be no extra credit assignments for this class. Grades are earned, not given—and as such, it is impossible for me to give you a grade other than the one you earn according to the criteria outlined in this syllabus.

Policies and expectations

Attendance

Summer courses fit the equivalent of an entire semester into a six week period. As such, each day of a summer class corresponds to more than one day of a regular semester class. After two unexcused absences, one-half grade level will be deducted from your final course grade for each day that you are absent.

University policy (University Regulation on Attendance, Book 2, §2.4.7B) requires that no penalty be imposed upon students who are absent from class because of religious observances, and allows for students to make up the work missed because of such absence. Please notify me as early as possible in the semester of an upcoming absence for religious reasons.

Responsibility for course material

You are responsible for all material covered in class, assigned readings, and homework assignments. Any of this material may appear in exams, homework assignments, or in-class assignments. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to learn about any material or assignments you miss from your classmates. It is not an instructor's responsibility to make up for your absence or re-teach the material.

Late work

Assignments must be submitted on time—this is before the start of class, unless otherwise specified. *Assignments turned in after the deadline will receive zero points.* There is no partial credit for late work. Since circumstances sometimes unavoidably prevent the timely, satisfactory completion of homework, the lowest homework grade will be dropped. Neither the midterm exam nor the final may be postponed, taken early, or retaken.

Exceptions will only be considered for extraordinary circumstances, as determined by the instructor. Verification, such as a doctor's note, may be required before exceptions are considered. If you know in advance that you will miss an assignment or exam due to such an extraordinary circumstance, please notify me as soon as possible so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

Academic integrity

While discussing assignments for this course is encouraged, each student is expected to do their own work. This means that you may not copy another student's work, or allow another student to copy yours. Each student must write up their assignments separately. Copying from another source, or misrepresenting ideas as your own constitutes plagiarism—please cite any sources you use, or other students you have worked with on assignments. If you have any questions, please consult the instructor, a dean, or the university's academic integrity policy at <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/>.

Office hours

Office hours for this course are Wednesdays from 1 pm – 3 pm (and by appointment) in room 301 of 18 Seminary Place, on the College Avenue Campus. Attending office hours is a good way of clarifying any questions you might have, discussing course material you find interesting, or seeking additional help. If you attend office hours for help on an assignment, it is important that you attempt the assignment on your own first. Since summer courses move quickly, it is a good idea to ask for help or clarification as soon as possible. Students who come to office hours tend to do better than those who do not.

Suggestions and complaints

I welcome suggestions and complaints at any time. The sooner an issue is brought to my attention, the sooner it can be remedied. You may provide anonymous feedback at any time at <http://rci.rutgers.edu/~abraver/feedback.html>.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits me from discussing your course performance with your parents or other family members. If you need to discuss your course performance, please contact me directly.

The Bylaws of the Linguistics Department state that any complaint must first be directed to the instructor. Only if the complaint is not resolved to the satisfaction of all parties will it be referred to the Undergraduate Program Director, followed by the Chair of the department,

then the Dean of the school. This procedure does not apply to complaints about specific grades assigned to particular students, about which the instructor is the final arbiter.

Materials

All readings will be made available on the course Sakai site. Please contact me immediately if you cannot access the Sakai site.

Additional Resources

The following dictionaries may prove useful to look up examples referenced in readings and throughout the course. Do keep in mind that signed languages, like spoken ones, have regional and dialectal variation, so you may benefit from checking more than one source.

- ASLPro: <http://www.aslpro.com/cgi-bin/aslpro/aslpro.cgi>
- ASL Browser: <http://commtechlab.msu.edu/Sites/aslweb/browser.htm>
- Signing Savvy (ASL): <http://www.signingsavvy.com>
- Auslan Signbank: <http://www.auslan.org.au/dictionary>

Schedule

This schedule is subject to change. Please check the course Sakai site for updates.

M, 7/6	<p>Introduction to signed languages What are signed languages? Signed languages of the world History of signed language research</p>
T, 7/7	<p>What is modality Effects of modality Age of signed languages</p> <p><i>Reading</i> <i>What Is Sign Language?</i> (brochure for LSA by Perlmutter) <i>Syntax of American Sign Language</i> (NKMBL) Appendix §A.1, A.2, A.4</p>
W, 7/8	<p>Are signed languages ‘real’ languages? Communication vs. language Animal communication</p> <p><i>Reading</i> Chapter 5 of <i>Language Matters</i> (Napoli)</p>

- R, 7/9 Origins of signed languages
 Myths about signed languages
 Gesture or language?

Reading
Where did Nicaraguan Sign Language Come From? (Senghas website)
A New Language Arises and Scientists Watch it Evolve (NYT article by Wade)
Myths About American Sign Language (Markowicz) pp. 1-3
- M, 7/13 **Signed language art and media**
 Signed languages in hearing media
 Deaf art and media

Homework due: Are signed languages ‘real’ languages?
- T, 7/14 **Signed language phonology**
 Phonology review
 How can signed languages have phonology?

Reading
Contemporary Linguistics pp. 79-116 (review as needed)
SL&LU (Sandler/Lillo-Martin) pp. 113-119
- W, 7/15 Organization within the sign
 Syllable structure in signed languages

Reading
Sonority and Syllable Structure in ASL (Perlmutter) pp. 407-411
SL&LU (Sandler/Lillo-Martin) pp. 216-220
- R, 7/16 Patterns and natural classes in signed languages
 Features in signed languages
 Non-manual marking

Reading
Language Matters (Napoli) pp. 56-58
Australian Sign Language (Johnston/Schembri) pp. 81-101
SL&LU (Sandler/Lillo-Martin) pp. 60-63
- M, 7/20 Data day: phonological processes
 Midterm review

Homework due: Phonology

Reading
Linguistics of ASL (Valli/Lucas) pp. 41-45, 57-61, 70-72
Australian Sign Language (Johnston/Schembri) pp. 114-116, 130-136
- T, 7/21 **Midterm exam**

- W, 7/22 **Deaf culture and Deaf rights**
 The history of Deaf America
 Cross-cultural communication
 Deaf rights
Reading
Language Matters (Napoli) pp. 61-70
- R, 7/23 **Morphology of signed languages**
 Classifiers
 Non-concatenative morphology
Reading
Australian Sign Language (Johnston/Schembri) §6.2.2.2, pp. 172-173
Linguistics of ASL (Valli/Lucas) pp. 76-82
Australian Sign Language (Johnston/Schembri) pp. 165-172
- M, 7/27 **Syntax of signed languages**
 Syntax review
 How can signed languages have syntax?
Homework due: Morphology
Reading
Contemporary Linguistics pp. 187-196, 207-210, 216-217 (review as needed)
Linguistics of ASL (Valli/Lucas) pp. 137-144
SL&LU (Sandler/Lillo-Martin) pp. 304-308
- T, 7/28 Non-manual marking and traditional views of syntax
 Wh-questions
Reading
SL&LU (Sandler/Lillo-Martin) pp. 60-63, 432-445
Australian Sign Language (Johnston/Schembri) pp. 96-99, 154-156
- W, 7/29 Other Syntactic phenomena
 Syntactic parallels with spoken languages
Reading
Myths About American Sign Language (Markowicz) pp. 5-6
SL&LU (Sandler/Lillo-Martin) pp. 472-474
The Syntax of ASL (NKMBL) pp. 149-152
- R, 7/30 **Deaf culture and Deaf rights**
 Cochlear implants
 Movie: *Sound and Fury*

- M, 8/3 **Semantics of signed languages**
 Semantics vs. semiotics
 Arbitrariness and iconicity

Homework due: Syntax

Reading
Course in General Linguistics (de Saussure) ch 1 §1-2, pp. 65-69
Myths About American Sign Language (Markowicz) pp. 4-5
Linguistics of ASL (Valli/Lucas) pp. 6-8
Australian Sign Language (Johnston/Schembri) pp. 232-242
- T, 8/4 Iterativity/aspect
 Time reference

Reading
Australian Sign Language (Johnston/Schembri) pp. 148-154
Linguistics of ASL (Valli/Lucas) pp. 105-108, 113-116
- W, 8/5 Pronoun reference/deixis and agreement

Reading
SL&LU (Sandler/Lillo-Martin) pp. 23-29, 39-42
Linguistics of ASL (Valli/Lucas) pp. 91-97
- R, 8/6 **Acquisition of signed languages**
 Manual babbling and age of first production
 Acquisition of signed phonology

Reading
 To be determined
- M, 8/10 Signed 'motherese'
 Typical mistakes

Homework due: Semantics

Reading
 To be determined
- T, 8/11 **Wrap up**
 Reassessment of myths
 Final review
- W, 8/12 **Final exam**