

**LING449R Topics in Psycholinguistics:  
Syntactic and Semantic Arguments in Language Acquisition  
T/TH 3:30-4:35pm  
MMH 1401G**

Instructor: Laurel Perkins  
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**Course Description**

This course examines syntactic and semantic representations of arguments and argument relations, and how those representations are acquired by infants learning their first language. We will begin with an overview of formal approaches to argumenthood and argument relations, and how these give rise to correspondences between verb meanings and verb distributions. We will then ask how these meaning-distribution correspondences are used by children acquiring a grammar. Coursework will involve critical examination of primary-source experimental literature in first language acquisition. Students will also learn principles of experimental design, culminating in a final project in which students design their own psycholinguistics experiment.

*Prerequisite:* LING311. Some experimental background is recommended (e.g., LING440, LING444, PSYC300, HESP300, HESP400, or psycho/ling lab experience).

**Course Goals**

- To gain familiarity with theories of how child learners acquire argument structure and verb meanings, and basic experimental findings in these areas
- To gain familiarity with research methods used to study child language acquisition
- To develop skills in experimental design, and an understanding of how psycholinguistics research is conducted in practice
- To learn to critically evaluate published experimental findings
- To develop skills in effective scientific writing

**Course Website**

This course will make use of the Canvas Learning Management System, an electronic resource used to facilitate class communication. Please check the ELMS course page regularly at <http://www.elms.umd.edu>.

**Required Readings**

Students will be required to read 1-2 articles per class meeting, which will include a combination of review chapters and primary source experimental literature. All readings will be provided on ELMS.

**Expectations and Grading Procedures**

Class participation	20%
Discussion board posts	25%
Practice sets	25%
Final project	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

### ***Class participation (20%)***

Students are expected to participate actively in class discussions. This requires thoroughly reading and digesting the assigned readings for that day ahead of time, and being prepared to discuss your thoughts and questions about those readings. Participating in class is valuable for everyone in this seminar: it makes you an active learner and greatly increases your understanding of the material, it benefits your classmates who may have had the same question or may benefit from hearing a different perspective from their own, and it benefits the instructor in tailoring the course material to better serve your learning needs.

Active participation means speaking up when you find something unclear, when you see a connection between a particular topic and other material we have discussed in this course, and when you are unconvinced by the logic of an argument or have a different argument that you would like to propose. All discussion is expected to be respectful and inclusive towards the different identities, backgrounds, and perspectives of your fellow students and instructor.

### ***Discussion board posts (weekly; lowest 2 scores dropped; 25%)***

In order to facilitate your understanding of the readings and prepare for class discussion, students will be expected to post on the assigned readings through the online class discussion board on ELMS. These posts will consist of two parts:

1. In the first part, you will be asked to respond *once per week* to a short prompt about the readings for that week. This prompt may ask you to reflect on key concepts in the readings, relate the readings to other concepts discussed previously in class, or share a question you had about the readings.
2. In the second part, you will be asked to comment *once per week* on a fellow student's discussion board post. This comment may consist of agreeing or disagreeing with a point made in the post, and explaining in detail why you agree or disagree; connecting a point made in the post to other themes from the course readings or lecture; providing clarification to a question in the post; or asking a question about a point made in the post, and explaining the relevant background to your question. Comments should be substantial (about a paragraph), providing enough detail for the original poster to understand the background that motivated your comment.

In order to receive credit, posts must be submitted no later than **11:59pm the day before class** (that is, no later than 11:59pm on Mondays and Wednesdays). Late posts will not receive credit, but your lowest two scores will be dropped from your final grade. Students are only required to post one response and one comment per week, but are welcome and encouraged to continue discussing by posting and commenting more frequently. Just as in class, posts on the discussion board are expected to be civil and respectful towards other points of view.

### ***Practice sets (6 total, 25%)***

There will be 6 practice sets spaced throughout the semester. These practice sets are designed to cement your understanding of the background material in formal syntax and semantics and experimental design, and to give you the opportunity to practice some of the technical tools for creating your own psycholinguistic experiments. In order to receive credit, practice sets must be submitted via ELMS by **11:59pm on the due date** (specified in the course schedule below).

### ***Final project: Experiment proposal (30%)***

Each student will be assigned to a small group (2-3 people) to design an original psycholinguistics experiment investigating a specific question about the acquisition of arguments of verbs and clauses.

Topics will be selected from the following open research questions in the field:

- Hierarchical clause structure: do infants represent a structural asymmetry between subjects and objects in clauses from the onset of syntactic development?
- Argument-drop: when and how do infants identify that subjects and/or objects in their language are obligatorily overt, or can be dropped if salient in the discourse?
- Intransitive syntax: when and how do infants identify whether new intransitive verbs are unaccusative or unergative?

Although the experimental design will be collaborative within your small groups, you will each be responsible for submitting an individual written proposal for the experiment. Your full experiment proposal will consist of four parts: (1) a literature review, surveying the existing literature on the topic and introducing the hypotheses that you will be testing in your experiment (30%); (2) a methods section, describing the design and methods you will use to test these hypotheses, and the results that are predicted under each hypothesis (30%); (3) a full stimulus list, describing and explaining the linguistic and non-linguistic stimuli that will be used in your experiment (20%); and (4) one full sample trial from your experiment (both audio and video) to demonstrate your stimuli in action (20%). Deadlines for these proposal sections are spaced throughout the semester, to allow for feedback and revision before the final proposal deadline. Groups will give a brief presentation of their proposals on the last day of class.

While we do not have the time to implement your experiment proposals within a semester-long class, students with particular interest in pursuing this research further may apply to launch their experiment with the Linguistics Department's language acquisition lab in an upcoming semester. For more information about undergraduate research opportunities in the department, contact Laurel or Dr. Bleam.

### ***Assignment submission policies***

All written assignments must be typed and submitted in **PDF** format via ELMS in order to receive credit. Audio-visual materials may be submitted via email if they are unable to be uploaded via ELMS. Any assignment turned in more than 10 minutes after the submission deadline will be considered late. **Late assignments will not be accepted and will be assigned a zero.** Exceptions to this policy may be made in cases of extenuating circumstances that are brought to the instructor's attention in a timely manner.

### **Course Schedule**

All readings will be made available on ELMS. This schedule may be changed or revised as the semester progresses.

<b><i>Week</i></b>	<b><i>Date</i></b>	<b><i>Topic</i></b>	<b><i>Readings</i></b>	<b><i>Assignments</i></b>
1	1/25	Course introduction		
<i>Formal Background: Linguistic Theories of Argumenthood and Argument Relations</i>				
2	1/30	Syntactic arguments, part 1	Williams 2015, Ch. 3	
	2/1	Syntactic arguments, part 2	Williams 2015, Ch. 3	
3	2/6	Semantic arguments	Williams 2015, Ch. 4	
	2/8	Thematic relations	Williams 2015, Ch. 6	Practice Set 1 due

4	2/13	Linking and framing, part 1	Williams 2015, Ch. 11	
	2/15	Linking and framing, part 2	Williams 2015, Ch. 11 Levin 1993, Introduction	
<i>Bootstrapping in Language Acquisition: Mapping Between Scenes and Sentences</i>				
5	2/20	The learning problem: constraints on grammar acquisition	Lidz 2006	
	2/22	Intro to semantic bootstrapping, part 1	Pinker 1984, Ch. 2, pp. 37-47	Practice Set 2 due
6	2/27	Intro to semantic bootstrapping, part 2	Pinker 1989, Ch. 1 Gropen et al. 1989	
	3/1	Intro to syntactic bootstrapping, part 1	Gleitman 1990	
7	3/6	Intro to syntactic bootstrapping, part 2	Gillette et al. 1999	Final project groups assigned, meet before Spring Break
	3/8	Experimental design overview	Maclin & Solso 2007, Ch. 3, 5, 6	
8	3/13	Scene representations	Leslie & Keeble 1987 Carey 2009, Ch. 5, pp. 157-173	Practice Set 3 due
	3/15	Sentence representations	Gertner et al. 2006	
<i>3/19-3/23 (Spring Break) No Class or Office Hours</i>				
9	3/27	Bootstrapping: argument number, part 1	Lidz & Gleitman 2004a Yuan et al. 2012	
	3/29	Lab: CHILDES		
10	4/3	Bootstrapping: argument number, part 2	Gertner & Fisher 2012 Pozzan et al. 2015	Practice Set 4 due
	4/5	Bootstrapping: argument roles, part 1	Scott & Fisher 2009	
11	4/10	Bootstrapping: argument roles, part 2	Lidz, White & Baier 2017	Literature review due
	4/12	Lab: Adobe Premiere		
<i>Some Wrinkles: Variability Within and Across Languages</i>				
12	4/17	Argument-drop	Suzuki & Kobayashi 2016 Lidz, Gleitman, & Gleitman 2003	Practice Set 5 due
	4/19	Passives	Becker & Kirby 2016, pp. 230-257	
13	4/24	Dative alternations, revisited	Viau & Lidz 2011	Methods section due
	4/26	Lab: Praat		
14	5/1	Universality and variability	Goldberg 2004 Lidz & Gleitman 2004b	Practice Set 6 due
	5/3	Filtering variability	Perkins, Feldman, & Lidz 2017	
15	5/8	Left open as slack	TBD	Stimulus list due
	5/10	Class presentations		
<i>5/17 (Finals Week) Full Experiment Proposal Due</i>				

## **Course Procedures and Policies**

### ***Attendance and Absences***

Students are expected to attend classes regularly. Consistent attendance offers students the most effective opportunity to gain command of course concepts and materials. Students claiming an excused absence must notify the course instructor in a timely manner and provide appropriate documentation. The notification should be provided either prior to the absence or as soon afterwards as possible.

The University of Maryland's policy provides that students should not be penalized because of observances of their religious beliefs. Students shall be given an opportunity, whenever feasible, to make up within a reasonable time any academic assignment that is missed due to individual participation in religious observances. It is the student's responsibility to inform the instructor of any intended absences for religious observances **before** the day to be missed.

### ***Use of Electronic Devices in Class***

Electronic devices can be useful educational resources, and we will throughout the course of the semester be using them for lab tutorials on experimental design technology. However, electronic devices can also be disruptive to your own learning and that of your classmates if used inappropriately. **Students are expected to limit their use of such devices to classroom activities only**, such as taking notes and participating in tutorials. Any other activities (e.g. checking email, texting, etc.) are inappropriate during class time.

### ***Academic Integrity***

The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit <http://www.shc.umd.edu>. To further exhibit your commitment to academic integrity, remember to sign the Honor Pledge on all examinations and assignments: "**I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this examination (assignment).**"

What this means in the context of this course: students are permitted, and indeed encouraged, to work together on practice sets and on their final project. However, all work you submit in this course must be written by **you individually, in your own words**. Ideas of other authors that we are reading in this course, or that you read on your own, must be properly cited. Any idea or information that is not cited is assumed to be your individual contribution; otherwise it is plagiarism. Plagiarized material will not be accepted for credit, and will be reported to the Honor Council.

### ***Disability Support***

Students with a documented disability should inform the instructor within the add-drop period if academic accommodations will be needed. NB: The university requires you to meet with me in person to provide me with a copy of the *Accommodations Letter* and to obtain my signature on the *Acknowledgement of Student Request* form. We will plan together how accommodations will be

implemented throughout the semester. To obtain the required Accommodation Letter, contact Accessibility and Disability Service (<https://www.counseling.umd.edu/ads/>).

***Diversity***

The University of Maryland values the diversity of its student body. Along with the University, I am committed to providing a classroom atmosphere that encourages the equitable participation of all students regardless of age, disability, ethnicity, gender, national origin, race, religion, or sexual orientation. Potential devaluation of students in the classroom that can occur by reference to demeaning stereotypes of any group and/or overlooking the contributions of a particular group to the topic under discussion is inappropriate.

For more information on the general course policies and support services provided by the university, including information on learning workshops, tutoring, writing help, and student rights, please visit <http://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html>.