LING 419E – Topics in Syntax
Investigating Linguistic Competence: Theory and Methods

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Fall 2020
Last updated: November 11, 2020

1   Course information

- Instructor: Adam Liter (he/him/his)[1] (also, please feel free to just call me "Adam")

- Meeting times: TuTh 12:30 PM – 1:45 PM EST via Zoom (more on this below)

- Office hours: Tu 2:00 PM – 3:00 PM EST and by appointment, via Zoom (https://umd.zoom.us/j/98029511265)

- Prerequisites: LING 311 – Syntax I

- Communication: All time-sensitive course information will be posted as announcements on ELMS (it's a good idea to enable email notifications). You can contact me through ELMS or my UMD email at any time to discuss questions, absences, and/or accommodations. You are responsible for checking your email and ELMS inbox with regular frequency.

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[1] These are the personal pronouns that I use. If you're unfamiliar with this practice of sharing the pronouns that you want others to use when referring to you in the third person, I'd encourage you to read https://www.mypronouns.org/what-and-why and/or to visit https://trans.umd.edu.

The University of Maryland recognizes the importance of a diverse student body, and we are committed to fostering equitable classroom environments. I invite you, if you wish, to tell us how you want to be referred to both in terms of your name and your pronouns (he/him, she/her, they/them, etc.). The pronouns someone indicates are not necessarily indicative of their gender identity.

The pronouns that I use will be part of my Zoom name. You're welcome to do the same, if you'd like. Of course, how you identify in terms of your gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and dis/ability, among all aspects of your identity, is your choice whether to disclose (e.g., should it come up in classroom conversation about our experiences and perspectives) and should be self-identified, not presumed or imposed.

I will do my best to address and refer to all students accordingly and will support you in doing so as well. I want everyone to feel safe, included, and empowered to take part in discussion, even as we have course meetings over Zoom.

1.1   Course description

This course will explore how it is that we can study the mental grammar (i.e., competence) given that humans do not have conscious access to—or knowledge of—their linguistic competence. As a jumping off point, we will discuss the difference between acceptability and grammaticality, why it is that we can so often ignore this distinction (e.g., Sprouse & Almeida 2013), and why we can nonetheless be led astray when we do ignore it (e.g., Kush et al. 2018). We'll consider alternative linking theories between acceptability and grammaticality (e.g., Lau et al. 2017) and some rebuttals (e.g., Gorman 2013, Sprouse et al. 2018). We'll also explore why this issue is often much more vexed when studying the linguistic competence of children. We'll look at several case studies where extralinguistic factors have obscured grammatical competence in children (e.g., Grolla & Lidz 2018), and we'll discuss methods for mitigating the effects of such extralinguistic factors when studying children's grammars.

1.2   Zoom class meetings

Class meetings will be held snychronously via Zoom. Ideally, you will attend such meetings synchronously. This is a small discussion-based class. My goal is to get you to think critically about fundamental aspects of linguistic inquiry that have so far most likely been taken for granted in the courses you've taken. You will get the most out of it if you attend synchronously, and your classmates will also get more out of the class if they have others to discuss things with. Two of the best ways to think, in my opinion, are by talking and by writing. I am therefore expecting that you will be able to attend meetings synchronously and engage in discussion. If this will be an issue for you, *please let me know as soon as possible*, and we can discuss whether we can make alternative arrangements, *but I'd strongly prefer if you can attend class synchronously*.

1.3   Learning in a pandemic

Everything is pretty hard right now. You most likely know people who have lost their jobs, tested positive for COVID-19, been hospitalized, or perhaps have even died. You may have increased or decreased work responsibilities, and either situation brings added stress in the current global climate. You may be caring for more people than you would otherwise be caring for (young or old), and you may be facing uncertain job prospects.

To reiterate, things are really hard right now. I'm fully committed to making sure that you get everything out of this class that you were hoping to get out of it. I will do my best to adapt this class to meet everyone's needs, and I'm happy to work with you and make what accommodations I can in order to make this an enjoyable and rewarding class for you.

I can only do this if you talk to me about any issues you're having. You do **not** need to share personal information if you're having trouble with something this semester. If you do tell me you're having trouble, I will not judge you or think less of you. And I hope you'll extend me the same grace.

So if something is going on, talk to me, and we can work together to find a solution.

1.4   Continual feedback

Relatedly, given that this semester will look so different than other semesters, I encourage you to give me feedback at *any point* during the semester about what is working for you, what is not working for you, what I could be doing better, etc.. If you feel comfortable emailing me with any feedback you have about how I could improve the course and your ability to learn during a pandemic, please do so. If you'd rather that the feedback be anonymous, you can fill out this anonymous Google survey: <https://forms.gle/k7mGm95EUzryDTxo8>. I'll check the results of this survey weekly. I'll do my best to incorporate any feedback I get via email or via the anonymous survery into my teaching during the semester.

1.5   Course outcomes

By the end of this course, you should have acquired and/or significanlty honed several different skills and abilities, some of them being particular to linguistic inquiry and some of them being more broadly applicable.

Linguistic-specific skills that you will have acquired and/or significantly honed by the end of the semester include:

- the ability to read and understand glossed data from non-English languages
- the ability to critically evaluate implications of the competence/performance distinction

More broadly applicable skills that you will have acquired and/or significantly honed by the end of this course include:

- the ability to reason and think critically about fundamental assumptions of a field of inquiry
- the ability to reason and think critically about a theory and hypotheses and how to test the predictions of theories/hypotheses
- the ability to design an experiment to test predictions of a hypothesis
- the ability to read primary research articles and synthesize the main points of such articles, even when you do not understand everything in the article

2   Readings

You do not need a textbook for this course. We will be reading primary literature from the field of linguistics. PDFs of all readings will be made available on ELMS.

3   Responsibilities, expectations, and evaluation

3.1   Grades

All assessment scores will be posted on the course ELMS page. If you have questions about how something was scored, don't hesitate to ask me about it. The breakdown is as follows:

Assignment	Weight
Participation	10%
Reading responses	40%
Paper presentation	10%
Final paper	40%

Final letter grades will be assigned based on the cutoffs given below. Numerical grades will be rounded to the nearest integer before being converted into letters (e.g., 89.5% → 90% → A−, and 89.49% → 89% → B+). Final grades will not be curved.

A+	A	A−	B+	B	B−	C+	C	C−	D+	D	D−	F
98%	93%	90%	87%	83%	80%	77%	73%	70%	67%	63%	60%	<60%

3.2   Participation

As discussed in §1.2, part of the goal of the class is to get you to discuss ideas, which helps in critically engaging with and thinking about them. As such, I expect everyone who can attend class meetings synchronously to be engaging and participating in class. These are stressful times with the COVID-19 pandemic, so participation will be assessed relatively loosely, roughly according to the following scale:

Consistently engaged and insightful	10
Occasionally engaged	5
Often not engaged	2
Not engaged at all	0

3.3   Reading responses

Most class days, there will be at least one reading (usually a journal article or book chapter) assigned. You are to read it before class, and you are also to turn in a reading response **by 6:00 AM EST** the day of class (e.g., the reading responses for a reading for Tuesday must be turned in by 6:00 AM EST on Tuesday so that I can read them over before class).

Each reading response should be 2 paragraphs. All of the reading responses together are worth 40% of the final course grade. Each reading response will be graded on a 6-point scale, and the lowest three grades will be dropped. Each reading response should be two paragraphs long (details below), and each paragraph will be worth 3 points; the following rubric will be used to grade each paragraph:

Thoughtful response that clearly demonstrates having done the reading	3
Response demonstrates having done the reading	2
Response demonstrates having done the reading but not engaging with the content	1
Response clearly indicates not having done the reading	0

Moreover, particularly given the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone will be allowed to turn in as many of the reading responses late as you wish, with no explanation needed. **However, all reading responses must be turned in by *11:59 PM EST, Friday, December 18***, so that I have time to grade them. Moreover, as much as possible, I **strongly discourage you from putting off the reading responses till**

the very end, lest they overwhelm you. *If there are extenuating circumstances, and it seems like this flexibility is not enough for what you need, please talk to me, and we can figure out an arrangement.* Your physical and mental health should definitely be the top priority.

In each reading response, **the first paragraph** should summarize (i) what you took the main point(s) of the reading to be, in your own words, and (ii) what argument(s) the author(s) offered in support of the main point(s). In **the second paragraph** of your reading response, raise a point that you would like to discuss further. This could be something in the reading that you did not understand; if you didn't understand something, do your best to state what was unclear or confusing. It could be something that you wish to discuss further, perhaps because you disagree or are unsure of whether you agree. If you disagree, say why. If you are unsure of whether you agree, explain why you are not totally convinced by the author(s).

Finally, reading responses that are submitted late can either follow the original reading response format, or, alternatively, you can write two thoughtful responses (each response should be 1 paragraph long) to two of the other posts in the discussion thread.

There will not be a reading response due when one of the main three final paper milestones is due, but you are *still expected to do the reading for class*.

3.4   Paper presentation

Each of you will be expected to present one paper to your classmates. This is worth 10% of your final course grade. You should think of this as an expanded version of the reading response.

Depending on the paper, I may spend the first part of class going over background information if that is necessary for everyone to understand the paper. Then, you will present the paper for 15 minutes. You should prepare slides to share with the class. In your slides, you should summarize the main point(s) of the paper and summarize the arguments/support the author(s) offered in favor of the main point(s). Aim for 7–10 minutes of summary (a good rule of thumb is 1 minute per slide). In your summary slides, be sure to include any relevant graphs/tables/etc. that support the main point(s) of the paper.

Then, you should lead a 5–8 minute discussion about the paper. Be prepared to pose at least one *specific question* to your classmates for discussion. This could be about something you disagree with, don't understand, etc.. Here are some examples of good discussion questions:

- Chomsky (1986) distinguishes between E-language and I-language and proposes that an I-language-like conception of language is what linguists (as cognitive scientists) should be studying. Do you agree with this distinction, and, if so, do you agree that this is what linguists should be studying? Why or why not?

- Sprouse et al. (2016) show that there is variation in island effects both across languages and across dependency types (relative clauses vs. wh-phrases). Do you think this variation reflects genuine differences in grammaticality? If so, why? If not, why not?

Papers that you can sign up to present are marked with an asterisk in the tentative schedule in §6. I will distribute a signup form in the first or second week of the semester.

You are also encouraged to meet with me during office hours to talk about your presentation, though

this is not necessary.

3.5   Final paper

For your final paper, you will be designing and proposing an experiment related to the core concepts covered in this class. You will have four topics to choose from (though you can propose your own, if you talk to me about it early enough in the semester and if it fits with the content of the course).

More details can be found in a separate document about the final paper on ELMS. There will be four milestones (three main ones) throughout the course of the semester. This is to ensure that you don't leave this paper to the last minute, especially since it is such a big part of your grade, and it also allows me to give you feedback throughout the semester that you can incorporate into the final writeup.

Each of the main three milestones will be worth 5% of the final course grade, and the final paper itself will be worth 25% of the final course grade (for a total of 40% of the course grade).

No late work for the final paper will be accepted *unless there are extenuating circumstances*. I'd rather not allow the possibility of late work for the final paper because the milestones occur early and often in the semester precisely so that you can get feedback on your work and make your final paper the best that it can be. Instead, I'm being flexible about late work for the reading responses. Nonetheless, if there are extenuating circumstances, please talk to me, and we will figure something out. Again, we are living through a pandemic, so I understand there may be extenuating circumstances, and we can definitely come up with a solution as long as you *talk to me about the extenuating circumstances*.

Regarding the milestones, I'll do my best to provide timely feedback that will hopefully help you write the best version of your final paper that you possibly could. Additionally, you can turn in a revised version of each milestone based on the feedback I provide, and your final grade for that particular milestone will be the average of your original milestone grade and your new milestone grade. You can do this for each milestone if you wish; it is optional.

4   Course policies

4.1   Campus-wide policies

Please visit https://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html for the Office of Undergraduate Studies' full list of campus-wide policies (concerning, e.g., academic integrity, accessibility and accommodations, grades and appeals, etc.) and feel free to follow up with me if you have questions.

4.2   Attendance

You are expected to attend meetings synchronously, as discussed in §1.2. If you anticipate being unable to attend many/most classes synchronously, *please talk to me as early in the semester as possible* so that we can figure out whether we can make alternative arrangements that will still allow you to be successful in this course.

4.3   Late work

To reiterate what was covered in §3.3 and §3.5, you are allowed to turn in as many reading responses late as you wish, no questions asked, as long as they are submitted before 11:59 PM EST, Friday, December 18. Beyond that, late reading responses will not be accepted. Late work for the final paper will not be accepted.

But, again, I'm willing to make exceptions and alternative arrangements if there are extenuating circumstances. Please *talk to me as early as you can about any extenuating circumstances*. Your physical and mental health are the top priority.

4.4   Group work

You are allowed to discuss assignments, both the reading responses and the final paper, with each other. Again, discussion and talking through something is one of the best ways to think about something, so talking with other students about assignments is in fact even encouraged. However, **all writeups must be done individually**, and any discussion/collaboration with your fellow classmates should be acknowledged in the writeup.

Moreover, for the final paper, some of you will end up working on the same topic. Again, you're encouraged to talk to one another about the final paper, but, *in addition to all writing being done individually*, **all stimuli creation must also be done individually**. You *cannot* share stimuli with one another for the experiments that you'll be designing.

4.5   Experiments

There is no experimental requirement or extra credit option for this class. But the Department of Linguistics is sometimes recruiting paid participants for studies (pay for behavioral experiments is usually $10–12/hour). If you're interested, visit http://umlinguistics.sona-systems.com to browse the current selection of studies being offered.

5   Resources and accommodations

5.1   Accessibility and Disability Services

The University of Maryland is committed to creating and maintaining a welcoming and inclusive educational, working, and living environment for people of all abilities. The University of Maryland is also committed to the principle that no qualified individual with a disability shall, on the basis of disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of the University, or be subjected to discrimination. The Accessibility & Disability Service (ADS) provides reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals to provide equal access to services, programs and activities. ADS cannot assist retroactively, so it is generally best to request accommodations several weeks before the semester begins or as soon as a disability becomes known.

Any student who needs accommodations should contact me as soon as possible so that I have sufficient time to make arrangements. For assistance in obtaining an accommodation, contact Accessibility and Disability Service at 301-314-7682, or email them at adsfrontdesk@umd.edu. Information about

sharing your accommodations with instructors, note taking assistance, and more is available from the Counseling Center.

5.2   Student resources and services

Taking personal responsibility for you own learning means acknowledging when your performance does not match your goals and doing something about it. I hope you will come talk to me so that I can help you find the right approach to success in this course, and I encourage you to visit UMD's Student Academic Support Services website to learn more about the wide range of campus resources available to you.

In particular, everyone can use some help sharpen their communication skills (and improving their grade) by visiting UMD's Writing Center and schedule an appointment with the campus Writing Center.

You should also know there are a wide range of resources to support you with whatever you might need (UMD's Student Resources and Services website may help). If you feel it would be helpful to have someone to talk to, visit UMD's Counseling Center or one of the many other mental health resources on campus.

5.3   Basic needs security

If you have difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or lack a safe and stable place to live, please visit UMD's Division of Student Affairs website for information about resources the campus offers you and let me know if I can help in any way.

5.4   Course evaluation

Please submit a course evaluation through CourseEvalUM in order to help faculty and administrators improve teaching and learning at Maryland. All information submitted to CourseEvalUM is confidential. Campus will notify you when CourseEvalUM is open for you to complete your evaluations for fall semester courses. Please go directly to the Course Eval UM website to complete your evaluations. By completing all of your evaluations each semester, you will have the privilege of accessing through Testudo, the evaluation reports for the thousands of courses for which 70% or more students submitted their evaluations.

6   Tentative schedule

The following schedule *is subject to change*, but should give an idea of the overall plan for the semester. Readings and assignemnts are due on the date that they're listed. If no page/section/chapter ranges are given, you are expected to read the entire reading.

- Reading responses (RR) are due at 6:00 AM EST on the date that they're listed

- Final paper milestones (M0, M1, M2, and M3) are due at the start of class (12:30 PM EST) on the date that they're listed

- The final paper (FP) is due at 3:30 PM EST on Monday, December 21

Date	Topic	Reading	Assignments
Tu 09/01	Intro, course overview, project overview		
Th 09/03	Final project overview; Delimiting a field of inquiry, Universal Grammar (UG)	Chomsky (1986: §1–§2.1)	RR
Tu 09/08	Final project overview; Delimiting a field of inquiry, Universal Grammar (UG)	Final project instructions	
Th 09/10	What is language (E-language vs. I-language), Y-model of grammar	Chomsky (1986: §2.2–§2.4.1)	RR
Tu 09/15	Competence vs. performance	Chomsky (1986: §2.4.2) and Chomsky (1965: 3–15)	M0 & RR
Th 09/17	Grammaticality and acceptability	Schütze (2011)*	RR
Tu 09/22	Do we need formal quantitative methods?	Gibson & Fedorenko (2013)*	RR
Th 09/24	Only in some cases do we need such methods	Sprouse & Almeida (2013)*	RR
Tu 09/29	Subjacency & ECP	Lasnik & Uriagereka (1988: 20–22, 104–111)	M1
Th 10/01	Subjacency & ECP		
Tu 10/06	Subjacency & ECP, 2 × 2 design	pp. 11–29 of these slides from a class Jon Sprouse taught	
Th 10/08	Whence islands	Sprouse et al. (2012: 82–100, 114–118)*	RR
Tu 10/13	Crosslinguistic island variation?	Sprouse et al. (2016: 307–325)	RR
Th 10/15	Crosslinguistic island variation (continued)?	Sprouse et al. (2016: 325–342)	RR
Tu 10/20	Crosslinguistic island variation (continued)?	Kush et al. (2018)*	RR
Th 10/22	Crosslinguistic island variation (continued)?	Lu et al. (2020)*	RR
Tu 10/27	Some potential issues with the 2-by-2 design	Keshev & Meltzer-Asscher (2019)*	RR
Th 10/29	Overflow, final project work time		M2
Tu 11/03	Acceptability under an interpretation	Dillon & Hornstein (2013)*	RR

Th 11/05	Group work time on final projects (Adam "away" at virtual conference)		
Tu 11/10	Gradient grammars	Lau et al. (2017)*	RR
Th 11/12	Downsides of gradient grammars	Sprouse et al. (2018)*	RR
Tu 11/17	Principle B delay	Avrutin & Thornton (1994)*	RR
Th 11/19	Principle B delay is a task effect	Conroy et al. (2009)*	RR
Tu 11/24	Overflow/Final project work time		M3
Th 11/26	No class		
Tu 12/01	Medial wh productions	Thornton & Crain (1994)*	RR
Th 12/03	Cognitive control and medial wh productions	Grolla & Lidz (2018)*	RR
Tu 12/08	Children's non-understanding of passives	Hirsch & Wexler (2006)*	RR
Th 12/10	Children's understanding of passives	O'Brien et al. (2006)*	RR
M 12/21			FP

References

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