Natural language ontology: sums, events, and degrees
École Normale Supérieure, Département d’Etudes Cognitives

Instructors:
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Level: M1 & M2
Semestre: S2, ECTS : 6
Number of hours: 19h30 (13 classes)
Prerequisites: Students should have already taken an introductory course in logic or in natural language semantics. (If in doubt, contact the instructors.)

1a. Course description
What are the fundamental building blocks of natural language – the primitive objects that language manipulates and makes reference to? In order to explain semantic regularities both within and across languages, linguists have been led to postulate various kinds of objects, including material entities (people, things and portions of matter), but also more abstract objects, like events or degrees. These objects constitute an ontology implicit in our use of natural language. The course will study this natural language ontology by focusing on a variety of topics: mereological sums in connection with plurals and mass terms, events in connection with verbs and aspect, degrees in connection with scalar adjectives and scalar verbs. We will investigate the logical structure of these systems, and how these logical properties are reflected in the way we use language for quantification, counting, and measuring. Empirically, the course will draw examples from a wide range of languages and language families, including both spoken languages and sign languages.

1b. Description du cours
Quelles sont les composantes fondamentales du langage naturel - les objets primitifs que le langage manipule et auxquels il fait référence ? Afin d'expliquer les régularités sémantiques à l'intérieur des langues et entre elles, les linguistes ont été amenés à postuler divers types d'objets, y compris des entités matérielles (personnes, choses et portions de matière), mais aussi des objets plus abstraits, comme des événements ou des degrés. Ces objets constituent une ontologie implicite dans notre utilisation du langage naturel. Le cours étudiera cette ontologie du langage naturel en se concentrant sur une variété de sujets : les sommes méreologiques en relation avec les pluriels et les termes de masse, les événements en relation avec les verbes et l'aspect, les degrés en relation avec les adjectifs scalaires et les verbes scalaires. Nous étudierons la structure logique de ces systèmes et la manière dont ces propriétés logiques se reflètent dans la façon dont nous utilisons le langage pour quantifier, compter et mesurer. Empiriquement, le cours s'appuiera sur des exemples tirés d'un large éventail de langues et de familles de langues, y compris les langues parlées et les langues des signes.
2. Assessment

* Take-home exercises (60%)
* A short (maximum 6 pages) research paper or critical review of a research paper (40%)

3. Textbook and readings

The course does not have a textbook. Mandatory readings will be assigned on a weekly or bi-weekly basis (depending on the topic and the length of the article), and optional readings will also be suggested. Readings will be made available for download on the course website whenever possible. They may include (among others) works by Champollion, Deal, Krifka, Kuhn, Link, McNally, Nicolas, Rett, Rothstein, Winter, Wellwood.

4. Course website

Readings and assignments will be posted here:
https://app.schoology.com/course/6551095142

5. Tentative schedule

The following material will be covered over 13 classes of 1h30. The exact schedule may vary slightly depending on the pace of the course.

**Introduction**
1. Ontology in the world, cognition and the grammar

**Mass/count**
2. Mereology and count/mass in English
3. Count/mass in Mandarin
4. Count/mass in Nez Perce

**Plurals**
5. Interpretations of plurals
6. Formalizing plurals (collectivity and distributivity)
7. Reciprocity
8. Structured pluralities

**Times and degrees**
9. Times and degrees in spoken and sign language

**Events**
10. Events; Telicity I (incremental themes)
11. Telicity II (degree achievements) in English and LSF
12. Gather/numerous
13. Pluractionality
6. Course policies

**Attendance.** Regular attendance of, and punctual arrival at, lectures are crucial to succeed in this course, and they are mandatory for all students registered for credit. This is important both for your individual success in this course, and for every other students’ success. Keep in mind in particular that, by arriving late, you are jeopardizing your own but also your classmates’ education by disrupting the flow of lectures.

**Participation.** You are strongly encouraged to participate in lectures. This means asking deep and challenging questions, but also asking simple questions, asking for clarification, saying “I’m just not getting this, please explain it in some new way” or “I’m lost, can you remind me why we’re talking about this?” You can ask questions in French at any time.

**Homework.** All homework assignments are to be handed on time. You can write up your answers in French or in English. (NB: you will not lose points for grammatical mistakes!) Naturally, exceptions will be considered on a case by case basis given adequately documented extraordinary circumstances.

**Discussing assignments with classmates** You are allowed (and to some extent encouraged) to discuss homework assignments with your classmates. However, two things are required if you engage in substantive discussions of solutions: (i) you must indicate in your write-up the names of classmates with which you discussed solutions in some depth, and (ii) you must write up your answers to the assignment by yourself. Under no circumstances are you to share typed-up answers to the assignments or to discuss the actual write-ups. Use this opportunity for collaboration with your classmates wisely: working with a classmate who is more comfortable than you on a particular topic can help you understand that topic better; working with a classmate who knows less than you about a particular topic can help you consolidate what you know and force you to reassess fundamental elements of your knowledge. But you should collaborate with classmates in very small groups that are relatively well balanced in terms of understanding of the material.

**Academic honesty policy** Cheating will not be tolerated and may cost you your grade as well as have deeper repercussions in your academic career. The following is a non-exhaustive list of examples of what counts as cheating in this course: (i) signing on the attendance sheet without attending the class (e.g. signing and leaving, or signing for someone else); (ii) copying the homework write-up of another student, with or without that student’s knowledge; (iii) copying elements of your solutions of exercises from sources in the literature without giving them due credit; (iv) using the same homework to validate two courses.