

LING 260 Meaning in Language

Winter 2025
CRN 3414
M,W 10:05 –11:25
ENGMD 279

Instructor

Luis Alonso-Ovalle

✉ luis.alonso-ovalle@mcgill.ca

☕ 1085 Dr. Penfield, room 314

Office hours: W 12:30pm–1:30pm

Teaching Assistant

Austin Kraft

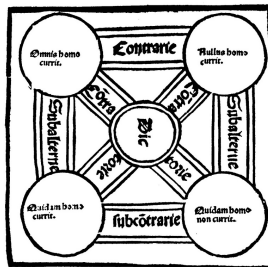
✉ austin.kraft@mail.mcgill.ca

☕ 1085 Dr. Penfield, room 117

Office hours: Tu 11:00am - 12:00pm

(only on the closest Tuesday
to the date assignments are due)

(See section 5 below for preferred methods of communicating with the instructor and TA and for virtual meetings during office hours.)



Square of opposition, Peter of Spain (1514) *Tractatus duodecim*, Johannes Knob, Strasbourg.

1 Course content

Overview

Language conveys meaning. How does language convey meaning? This is one of the questions prominently investigated in linguistics. How do linguists go about investigating meaning? What sorts of questions do they ask about meaning? What sorts of answers do they have to offer? This course addresses these questions. The course offers a hands-on introduction to the strategies that natural languages use to convey meaning. Requiring no previous background in linguistics, the course surveys fundamental properties of word and sentence meaning and their interdependence with context. It

provides an overview of the grammatical mechanisms that languages employ to construct the literal meanings of sentences from word meanings, it draws attention to different types of literal meaning that language can be used to express, and it explores how meanings can be anchored to real life situations. For practical purposes, the course will focus on English data, although illustrations from other languages will occasionally be attended to as well.

Goals

You should expect to learn about: (i) what *sorts of questions* linguists ask about language, and about meaning, in particular; (ii) what *sorts of answers* linguists have given to questions about meaning-related phenomena; (iii) some of the *concepts and tools* that linguists often reference or use in their answers to questions about meaning; (iv) how evidence-based *argumentation* can adjudicate between competing answers to questions about meaning in language.

Strategy

In this course, you will learn primarily by doing and practicing, as opposed to reading or memorizing. Problem sets in homework assignments will invite you to think about content covered during class and presented in lecture notes, sometimes by going through some of the same sorts of steps that professional linguists go through in their investigations. Problem sets may, for example, (i) require you to think of additional example sentences that make a particular point, (ii) let you practice notational devices used to describe aspects of linguistic meaning, or (iii) ask you to compare linguistic analyses and to develop and articulate your own argumentation. You should be expected to be challenged to go a bit beyond what you have done in class.

Topics

The topics covered in this semester's edition of the course (subject to possible revision) are:

- I. The study of language and meaning: the linguistic perspective.
- II. Knowledge of meaning: what we know when we know meaning.
- III. Meaning composition: putting meanings together in a sentence.
- IV. Context dependency: how meaning can depend on the utterance setting.

2 Materials

Lecture notes

We will follow closely *Meaning in Language*, a textbook by Bernhard Schwarz, one of my colleagues, and myself, under contract with Cambridge University Press. Draft chapters of the textbook will be made available online, through myCourses, as the course progresses, sometimes *after* in-class

discussion of the issues discussed in them. Occasionally, the drafts may undergo small revisions or updates. It is your responsibility to make sure that you always consult the latest version of the notes.

Course materials and copyright

Instructor generated course materials (e.g., lecture notes, handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions, etc.) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the [Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#).

3 Assessment

Five homework assignments:	45% (9% each)
Five quizzes:	10% (2% each)
Final exam:	45%

Homework assignments

There will be five homework assignments and five quizzes (see tentative schedule below). Assignments will be made available on myCourses one week before the due date. While each assignment will have equal weight in the final grade, assignments may vary to some extent in terms of length and difficulty.

Quizzes will be short assessments, typically with multiple-choice questions. They will also be delivered online via myCourses. Typically, they will be available for a period of 24 hours. Once you have started a quiz, you will have a limited time to complete it (the time may vary with the quizzes.)

Collaboration

You may discuss each homework assignment with one or two other students. If you do so, you must submit a *single joint assignment as a group* (via myCourses). You must not discuss your assignment with students outside of your group. The membership of your group can vary from one assignment to the next—that is, for each assignment, you may decide anew whether to work with (one or two) other students and, if so, who to work with.

4 Other rules for graded work

Any problem with grading on an assignment or quiz must be reported within one week of when the assignment or quiz was due.

All assignments must be typed. (Pictures, if required, may be drawn by hand.)

No late submissions will be accepted and no make-up assignments or quizzes will be offered. For serious medical emergencies involving absences of less than five days, the instructor needs to be

contacted within 24 hours of when the work was due for the case to be evaluated. For missing work involving absences of five days or more, students need to provide medical documentation.

5 Communicating

Communication method

E-mail will be the preferred method of communication with the instructor and the TA. You can expect the instructor and TA to respond to your e-mail questions and comments. However, please do not expect instant responses. We will try to respond within four working days (though we will be more vigilant closer to assignment due dates).

Office hours

The instructor and TA will be available office hours at the times stated above.

6 Other course rules

Final exam

According to Senate regulations, instructors are not permitted to make special arrangements for final exams. Please consult the Calendar, section 3.7, General University Information and Regulations. (See <http://www.mcgill.ca/students/exams/regulations> for more information on final and deferred exams.)

Academic integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures (see <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity> for more information).

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity>).

Right to submit in French

In accord with McGill University's [Charter of Students' Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Extraordinary circumstances

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

7 Getting additional help

Tutors

If you need more individual attention than the instructor or TA are able to provide, we encourage you to contact either the Student Tutorial Service (<https://www.mcgill.ca/tutoring/>) or SLUM (the Society of Linguistics Undergraduates at McGill; slum.linguistics@mail.mcgill.ca). It is understood that tutors help with the content of the course but do not help directly with assignments. Make sure that your tutor is knowledgeable about the course content, which can change from term to term.

Inclusiveness

As instructors of this course, we endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with us and [the Office for Students with Disabilities, \(514\) 398-6009](#).

8 Schedule (subject to possible revisions)

Note: Some of the lectures will be delivered by the Teaching Assistant, Austin Kraft, on the dates marked in the schedule below, subject to possible revision.

		TOPIC	ASSESSMENT
WEEK 1			
M	01/06	I. Language and meaning	
W	01/08		
WEEK 2			
M	01/13		
W	01/15		
WEEK 3			
M	01/20	II. Knowledge of meaning [Austin]	Quiz #1 due
W	01/22		Assignment #1 due
WEEK 4			
M	01/27		
W	01/29		
WEEK 5			
M	02/03	III. Meaning composition (1): APs.	Quiz #2 due
W	02/05		

WEEK 6

M	02/10	[Austin]	Assignment #2 due
W	02/12		

WEEK 7

M	02/17		
W	02/19		

WEEK 8

M	02/24	III. Meaning composition (2): DPs.	Quiz # 3 due
W	02/26		Assignment #3 due

READING WEEK

WEEK 9

M	03/10	[Austin]	
W	03/12		

WEEK 10

M	03/17	IV. Context dependency.	Quiz #4 due
W	03/19		Assignment # 4 due

WEEK 11

M	03/24	[Austin]	
W	03/26		

WEEK 12

M	03/31		Quiz # 5 due
W	04/02		Assignment # 5 due

WEEK 13

M	04/07		
W	04/09		

FINAL EXAM: TBA (FINAL EXAM PERIOD: 04/10 - 04/18)