

The limits of syntax

the theory of syntactic variation and change

Practical information

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Office hours Wednesdays 09:00–12:00 or by appointment

Course module MM2 (6LP).
Time & place Wednesdays 12:00–14:00, 14:5.110.
Website <http://www.luisvicente.net/mm2-ws1314>

Course description

We know that natural languages occupy only a small region within the space of possible languages. Furthermore, they are not evenly distributed within this region, but rather tend to cluster around specific points of variation. In this course, we will explore a number of phenomena that inform us about the limits of syntactic variation, and we will discuss various proposals about why these limits (and no others) exist. In addition, we will also discuss how these limits restrict the possibilities of diachronic variation.

Pass requirements

Squib #1	15%
Squib #2	15%
Paper presentation	20%
Final paper	50%
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	100%

Squibs A *squib* is a very short paper (two pages at most; one page is perfectly acceptable). The first squib is due on December 4; the second is due on January 22. Here is what *Snippets* (a journal that publishes only squibs) says:

A squib is to be brief, self-contained and explicit. It may do any of the following things:

- point out an empirical phenomenon that goes against accepted generalizations or that shows that some aspect of a theory is problematic;
- point out unnoticed minimal pairs that fall outside the scope of any existing theory;
- point out an empirical phenomenon that confirms the predictions of a theory in an area where the theory has not been tested;

- explicitly describe technical inconsistencies in a theory or in a set of frequently adopted assumptions;
- explicitly describe unnoticed assumptions that underlie a theory or assumptions that a theory needs to be supplemented with in order to make desired predictions;
- call attention to little-known or forgotten literature in which issues of immediate relevance are discussed.

We also encourage submissions that connect psycholinguistic data to theoretical issues. A proposal for a pilot experiment in language acquisition or language processing could make for an excellent snippet. The earliest *Linguistic Inquiry* squibs exemplify the kind of note we would like to publish. Some of them posed unobserved puzzles. For instance, a squib by Postal and Ross in LI 1:1 (“A Problem of Adverb Preposing”) noted that whether or not we can construe a sentence-initial temporal adverb with an embedded verb depends on the tense of the matrix verb. A squib by Perlmutter and Ross in LI 1:3 (“Relative Clauses with Split Antecedents”), challenging the prevailing analyses of coordination and extraposition, noted that conjoined clauses neither of which contain a plural noun phrase can appear next to an “extraposed” relative that can only describe groups. Other squibs drew attention to particular theoretical assumptions. For instance, a squib by Bresnan in LI 1:2 (“A Grammatical Fiction”) outlined an alternative account of the derivation of sentences containing *believe* and *force*, and asked whether there were principled reasons for dismissing any of the underlying assumptions (among them that semantic interpretation is sensitive to details of a syntactic derivation). A squib by Zwicky in LI 1:2 (“Class Complements in Phonology”) asked to what extent phonological rules refer to complements of classes. None of these squibs was more than a couple of paragraphs; all of them limited themselves to a precise question or observation.

You are encouraged to read some issues of *Snippets* (<http://www.ledonline.it/snippets>) to get a better understanding of what a squib looks like.

Paper presentation Each class will begin with a student presenting a paper pre-assigned by me, as a means to introduce the topic that we will be discussing that week. The presentation should take between 25 and 30 minutes and it should highlight the main insight of the paper in question. If you are presenting, you should be ready to answer whatever questions your classmates might have.

Final paper On any topic of your choice, so long as it relates to the theme of this course. The parameters of the paper are:

- Deadline: Sunday, March 2 at 23:59; submit it by email to vicente@uni-potsdam.de (only .pdf files, please).
- Length: 13 to 17 pages, single-spaced, 2.5cm margins on all sides, 12pt font size. Don’t try to cheat by using a larger font, wider margins, wider spacing, or using separate pages for the title and/or the table of contents.

In order to ensure that you finish your paper in time, you will have to submit a one-paragraph abstract on or before November 27. This abstract should contain basic information about what the topic of your paper and a few key bibliographical references. Possible topics include:

- Track a specific pattern of language change (in syntax, phonology, morphology, etc) across time.

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- Track a specific pattern of language variation (in syntax, phonology, morphology, etc) across dialects of a language or separate languages.
 - Discuss how existing theories of syntax can (or can't) account for observed patterns of change and/or variation.
 - Discuss how existing theories of language acquisition explain (or don't explain) observed patterns of change and/or variation.
 - If you are good at programming or interested in learning about it, write a simulation to model a specific pattern of language change or language acquisition.