

# Linguistics of Signed Languages

01:615:461 (Spring 2011)

Linguistics Department

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Syllabus Version 1.2, 10 February, 2011

- Instructor:** Aaron Braver  
abraver@rutgers.edu (please include “461” in your subject line)  
18 Seminary Place, Room 001 (CAC)
- Class Meetings:** Mondays, 4:30pm–5:50pm, Murray Hall, Room 112 (CAC)  
Wednesdays, 4:30pm–5:50pm, Scott Hall, Room 105 (CAC)
- Office Hours:** Wednesdays, 3:00pm–4:00pm and by appointment  
18 Seminary Place, Room 001 (CAC)
- Prerequisite:** 01:615:201 (Introduction to Linguistic Theory)

## About this course

Starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, linguists began to study signed languages in much the same way they studied spoken languages. This course serves as a broad overview of that research, focusing on phonology, syntax, and semantics, as well as Deaf arts and culture. We will examine data from a number of natural signed languages, especially American Sign Language (ASL) and Australian Sign Language (Auslan). We will also read several scholarly articles written about issues in signed language linguistics. A major goal of this course is to investigate (and disprove) a number of false assumptions about signed languages. We will explore specific linguistic phenomena in signed languages, and compare them with phenomena found in spoken languages.

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify and argue against false assumptions about signed languages
- Identify and explain common features of signed language phonology, syntax, and semantics
- Relate phenomena in signed languages to phenomena in spoken languages
- Appreciate the diversity in signed languages of the world

No knowledge of ASL or any other signed language is required or assumed. This is *not* a language instruction course.

# Assignments and Grading

## Assignments (30%)

### Homework

Each unit has one homework assignment, which will be graded out of 10 points. Additional homework assignments may be added at the discretion of the instructor. Homework assignments are worth 25% of the total course grade.

### In-class assignments

In-class assignments will include summaries of course materials and readings, reflections on lectures, and short-answer questions. In-class assignments will be graded out of 2 points each. In class assignments are worth 5% of the total course grade.

## Presentation (10%)

Students will form groups to present a summary of one or more articles assigned to them, and to lead discussion about their article(s). Presentations should last approximately 10–15 minutes per group member (this may vary based on the number and complexity of the articles each group is assigned). Further details of the presentations and group formation will be provided in class.

## Midterm exam (20%)

A midterm exam will be given in class, tentatively on **Wednesday, 3/9**.

## Final exam (30%)

A final exam will be given on **Friday, 5/6 from 4pm–7pm**.

## Participation (10%)

In addition to attending class, you are expected to ask and answer questions, make relevant comments, and generally contribute to discussions. Participation will be evaluated on both the quantity and quality of your contributions—keep in mind that any question that helps you understand the material is of high quality. Students who participate significantly in every class meeting will receive the full 10%; less participation will result in a lower score.

If you are uncomfortable talking in class, you may accrue participation points by discussing course content with me via email, posting in the forums on the course Sakai site, or by coming to office hours.

## Extra credit

Grades are earned, not given—and as such, it is impossible for me to assign you a grade other than the one you earn according to the criteria outlined in this syllabus.

The best way to earn a good grade in this course is to participate in class, turn in your assignments on time, and prepare adequately for the exams.

From time to time, participants may be needed for experiments run by members of the linguistics department. If such a need arises, you will be notified of how you can participate in the experiment. For each hour of experiment participation, you will earn 1% of extra credit applied to your final course grade, up to a maximum of 3%. You must request from the experimenter and present to me a receipt showing your participation in the experiment.

Department policy states that no student may be excluded from participating in an extra credit experiment, even if the student does not speak the target language, or has a speech or language disorder.

## **Keeping track of your grade**

You can track your assignment grades on Sakai. Navigate to the course Sakai site, then click on the 'Gradebook' link in the lefthand navigation bar.

## **Policies and expectations**

### **Attendance and punctuality**

You are expected to come to class and to participate fully in class discussions and exercises. Please make an effort to arrive on time.

This is an advanced course, and it will move quickly. As such, it is crucial to attend class regularly. After four unexcused absences, a full grade level will be deducted from your final course grade for each additional day that you are absent. After eight total unexcused absences, you will automatically receive an F in the course.

University policy (University Regulation on Attendance, Book 2, §2.4.7B) requires that no penalty be imposed upon students who are absent from class because of religious observances, and allows for students to make up the work missed because of such absence. Please notify me as early as possible in the semester of an upcoming absence for religious reasons.

### **Responsibility for course material**

You are responsible for all material covered in class, assigned readings, and homework assignments. Any of this material may appear in exams, homework assignments, or in-class exercises. If you miss class, it is *your* responsibility to learn about any material or assignments you miss from your classmates. It is not the instructor's responsibility to make up for your absence or to re-teach the material.

### **Late work**

Assignments must be submitted on time—this is at the start of class, unless otherwise specified. *Assignments turned in after the deadline will receive zero points.* There is no partial credit for late work.

Since circumstances sometimes unavoidably prevent the timely, satisfactory completion of homework, each student is allowed to turn in one assignment late by at most one week with no penalty (note, however, that no work will be accepted after the last class meeting). In order to take advantage of this ‘freebie’, you *must* notify the instructor before the assignment was originally due.

Neither the midterm exam nor the final may be postponed, taken early, or retaken.

## **Extraordinary circumstances**

Life is complicated—illnesses and injuries happen. If these or other life events are interfering with your ability to meet course requirements, please *let me know as soon as possible*. Do note, however, that verification—such as a note from the Dean—may be required before any accommodations are made.

## **Accommodations for students with disabilities**

If you have a disability and require some type of accommodation, your coordinator in the Office of Disability Services should provide you with a Letter of Accommodation, describing the accommodations to which you are entitled.

Please bring me your Letter of Accommodation as soon as possible. Don’t wait until you start having problems or just before a test—I want you to have every opportunity to do well in this course, but advance notice may be necessary.

If you have any questions, you can contact me directly, or the Office of Disability Services at (732) 932-2848 or via email at [dsoffice@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:dsoffice@rci.rutgers.edu).

## **Academic integrity**

You are encouraged to form study groups outside of class to help you understand the course material.

You may discuss individual points of the homework assignments with your classmates, but please do not collaborate on entire assignments. Remember that each student must write up and turn in their own assignment, and must provide their own explanations and reasoning in their own words. Collaboration is *not* permitted on exams.

Copying from another source, or misrepresenting ideas as your own constitutes plagiarism—please cite any sources you use.

Violations of this policy will be handled in accordance with the University’s academic integrity policy, which can be found at <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/>.

If you have any questions, please consult the instructor, a dean, or the University’s academic integrity policy.

## **Office hours**

Office hours for this course are Wednesdays from 11:40pm–12:40pm (and by appointment) in room 001 of 18 Seminary Place, on the College Avenue Campus. Attending office hours

is a good way of clarifying any questions you might have, discussing course material you find interesting, or seeking additional help.

Be sure to come prepared—write down any questions you have, and bring the relevant readings or course materials with you. If you attend office hours for help on an assignment, it is important that you attempt the assignment on your own first. Since this advanced course will move quickly, it is a good idea to ask for help or clarification as soon as possible. *Students who come to office hours tend to do better than those who do not.*

## Suggestions and complaints

I welcome suggestions and complaints at any time. The sooner an issue is brought to my attention, the sooner it can be remedied. You may provide anonymous feedback at any time at <http://rci.rutgers.edu/~abraver/feedback.html>.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits me from discussing your course performance with your parents or other family members. If you need to discuss your course performance, please contact me directly.

The Bylaws of the Linguistics Department state that any complaint must first be directed to the instructor. Only if the complaint is not resolved to the satisfaction of all parties will it be referred to the Undergraduate Program Director, followed by the Chair of the department, then the Dean of the school. This procedure does not apply to complaints about specific grades assigned to particular students, about which the instructor is the final arbiter.

## Materials

All readings will be made available on the course Sakai site. Please contact me immediately if you cannot access the Sakai site.

## Additional Resources

The following dictionaries may prove useful to look up examples referenced in readings and throughout the course. Do keep in mind that signed languages, like spoken ones, have regional and dialectal variation, so you may benefit from checking more than one source.

- ASLPro: <http://www.aslpro.com/cgi-bin/aslpro/aslpro.cgi>
- ASL Browser: <http://commtechlab.msu.edu/Sites/aslweb/browser.htm>
- Signing Savvy (ASL): <http://www.signingsavvy.com>
- Auslan Signbank: <http://www.auslan.org.au/dictionary>

## Tentative Schedule

Please note that this schedule is tentative and subject to change. Any changes will be announced in class. This is version 1.2 of the syllabus, accurate as of 10 February, 2011.

## Introduction

### Wednesday, 1/19

What are signed languages?, Signed languages of the world

### Monday, 1/24

History of SL research, What is modality?, Effects of modality, Age of signed languages

Reading: *What is Sign Language* (Perlmutter), *Syntax of ASL* appendices A.1, A.2, A.4

Articles: Kassubek et al. (2004), Pettito et al. (2000)

## Are Signed Languages ‘Real Languages’?

### Wednesday, 1/26

Communication vs. language

Reading: *Language Matters* (Napoli) ch. 5

### Monday, 1/31

Animal Communication, Gesture

Article: *Grammar, Gesture, and Meaning in ASL* ch. 11, Emmorey (1999)

### Wednesday, 2/2

Origins of SLs, Myths about SLs, Gesture vs Language

Reading: *Where did NSL come from?* (Senghas), *A new language arises* (Wade), *Myths about ASL* (Markowicz) pp. 1–3

Articles: Senghas and Coppola (2001), Hickok (1998), Goldin-Meadow (2006), Ekman (1999)

### Monday, 2/7

Deaf Art and Media

## Phonology

Wednesday, 2/9 Phonology review, How can SLs have phonology?, Basic handshapes

Reading: *Contemporary Linguistics* pp. 79–116, *SLLU* pp. 113–119, *Basic Handshapes*

Article: Battison (1980)

### Monday, 2/14

Signed syllables?

Reading: *Linguistics of ASL* pp. 18–21, 24–40, Perlmutter (1992), *SLLU* pp. 216–220

Articles: Liddell and Johnson (1989), Perlmutter (1992)

### Wednesday, 2/16

Natural classes, Features

Reading: *Language Matters* pp. 56–58, *Australian Sign Language* pp. 81–101

Article: Russell et al. (to appear)

**Monday, 2/21**

Non-manual marking

Reading: *SLLU* pp. 60–63

**Wednesday, 2/23**

Phonological data, midterm review

Reading: *Linguistics of ASL* pp. 41–45, 57–61, 70–72

**Monday, 2/28****Deaf culture and Deaf rights**

Reading: *Language Matters* pp. 61–70

**Wednesday, 3/2**

Deaf culture continued

**Monday, 3/7**

Midterm review

**Wednesday, 3/9****MIDTERM EXAM****Monday, 3/14 and Wednesday, 3/16**

No class—Spring Break

**Morphology****Monday, 3/21**

Classifiers, Non-concatenative morphology

Reading: *Australian Sign Language* §6.2.2.2 (pp. 172–173), *Linguistics of ASL* pp. 76–82, *Australian Sign Language* pp. 165–172

**Wednesday, 3/23**

Morphology continued

Article: Aranoff et al. (2005)

**Syntax****Monday, 3/28**

Syntax review, How can SLs have syntax?

Reading: *Contemporary Linguistics* pp. 187–196, 207–210, 216–217 (review as needed), *Linguistics of ASL* pp. 137–144, *SLLU* pp. 304–308

**Wednesday, 3/30**

NMM as a clue to syntactic structure, WH-questions

Reading: *SLLU* pp. 60–63, 432–445, 310–315, *Australian Sign Language* pp. 96–99, 154–156  
Articles: Neidle et al. (1998), *Syntax of ASL* (Neidle et al) ch. 7

### **Monday, 4/4**

Other syntactic phenomena, parallels with spoken language

Reading: *Myths about ASL* pp. 5–6, *SLLU* pp. 472–474

Article: Campbell (1999)

### **Wednesday, 4/6**

**Deaf Culture: Cochlear implants**

Reading: *My bionic quest for Boléro*

## **Semantics**

### **Monday, 4/11**

Semantics vs. semiotics, iconicity

Reading: *General Course in Linguistics* (Saussure) ch 1 §1–2 (pp.65–69), *Myths about ASL* pp. 4–5, *Linguistics of ASL* pp. 6–8, *Australian Sign Language* pp. 232–242

### **Wednesday, 4/13**

Iterativity/aspect, time reference, pronouns/deixis/agreement

Reading: *SLLU* pp. 23–29, 39–42, *Linguistics of ASL* pp. 91–97

Article: *SLLU* ch. 22

## **Acquisition**

### **Monday, 4/18**

Manual babbling, phonological acquisition

Article: Hoffmeister and Wilbur (1980)

### **Wednesday, 4/20**

Signed motherese, typical mistakes

## **Sociolinguistics**

### **Monday, 4/25**

Student presentations

Articles: Woodward (1980), *The Linguistics of BSL* ch. 2 (BSL in its social context)

### **Wednesday, 4/27**

TBD

### **Monday, 5/2**

Wrap-up, reassessment of myths, final review

**Friday, May 6, 4pm–7pm**

**FINAL EXAM**