Optional small final projects
Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2015
Feb 17

1 Goals

The final project is an optional alternative to the take-home final exam. It involves substantially more work than the final exam, but it could be a valuable first step towards a larger research project.

The final project is required only for Linguistics PhD graduate students and students taking this class to satisfy the Linguistics Writing in the Major requirement. (It's optional for everyone else, including people in the Linguistics PhD minor program.)

My goal is to give you a chance to do research without the creative pressures that come from having to formulate the research question yourself, or the scholarly concerns that you’re saying something that someone else has already said.

There are lots of ways to do research. The options for this project are just below.

2 Options

(1) A short essay (5-7 pages). This could expand on one of the topics we discussed in class, or it could be about a topic in semantics and pragmatics that we didn’t cover. Some concrete suggestions (not an exhaustive list!):

- von Fintel & Matthewson (2008) assess the current state of knowledge surrounding universals in semantics. Pick a major section of their article, summarize its data and conclusions, and then extend the ideas in some way — for example, by assessing them cognitively or philosophically, by arguing for modifications to them, or by discussing them in the context of new data.

- Similar to the above: Barwise & Cooper (1981) propose a lot of universals for NP denotations (many of which turn up also in Keenan 1996). Pick one or a few of their universals and assess it/them against one or a few new languages.

- Look systematically at Pietroski et al. 2009, which uses psycholinguistic experiments to argue for a very specific formulation of the meaning of most. Summarize Pietroski et al.’s findings, and then assess their linguistic, philosophical, or cognitive claims and/or discuss their experimental methods.

- Tonhauser et al. (2013) seek to provide better empirical methods for studying presuppositions, in both psycholinguistic experiments and fieldwork situations. Summarize their central findings, and then extend them in some way — for example, by assessing them cognitively or philosophically, by arguing for modifications to them, or by discussing them in the context of new data.
• Read Büring 1999, summarize its theoretical proposal, and then find some new connections between that proposal and our theory of presuppositions or our theory of conversational implicatures. (Büring makes some connections along these lines; you would need go beyond them.)
• There are a lot of alternative formulations of the conversational maxims. Study up at http://compprag.christopherpotts.net/implicature.html and pick one such formulation, read about it, and assess whether it is an improvement over Grice's formulation.

(2) A pilot-sized experimental design, including the materials, a statement of the hypothesis, and the expected outcome given the hypothesis. Deliverables: The materials and associated prose. (Since we are not studying experimental methods in class, this option is probably feasible only for people who have a background in running human-subjects experiments in the social and behavioral sciences.)

(3) An original corpus with associated documentation and a description of potential applications. Deliverables: the corpus and associated prose. (A corpus is a structured collection of examples — phrases, sentences, texts, documents, etc. — that is useful for doing research on some tasks.)

(4) A computational implementation of one of our grammars, along with a description of the especially useful and interesting properties the implementation has. For example, you could show how it handles presuppositions, how it permits the easy definition of a wide range of quantifiers, how it works compositionally on real syntactic structures, ... (Since we aren't doing any coding in class, this option is probably feasible only for people who have done a lot of programming and taken something an AI or NLP class.)

3 Timeline

All of these requirements have to be met, and met exactly on time.

• Complete the ‘project’ question on assignment 5.
• Complete the ‘project’ question on assignment 6.
• Mar 19: final product due by 6:30 pm, emailed to the course address in PDF.
4 Policy on submitting related final projects to multiple classes

On the one hand, I want to encourage you to pursue unified interdisciplinary projects that weave together themes from multiple classes. On the other hand, I need to ensure that final projects for this course are original and involve a substantial new effort.

To try to meet both these demands, I am adopting the following policy on joint submission: if your final project for this course is related to your final project for another course, you are required to submit both projects to me by the final project due date. If I decide that the projects are too similar, your project will receive a failing grade. To avoid this extreme outcome, I strongly encourage you to stay in close communication with me if your project is related to another you are submitting for credit, so that there are no unhappy surprises at the end of the term. Since there is no single objective standard for what counts as “different enough”, it is better to play it safe by talking with me.

Fundamentally, I am saying that combining projects is not a shortcut. In a sense, I am in the same position as professional conferences and journals, which also need to watch out for multiple submissions.

References


