

Syllabus for Ling 150, Introduction to Sentence Structure, Fall 2024.

The textbook will be in the Files folder on the Canvas site when it exists.

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to the basic concepts of sentence structure in a “pretheoretical” framework, demonstrating that any natural human language must have certain structures and must choose the rest from a restricted universal set.

The textbook, which was written for this course, discusses each set of structures with examples from six languages: English, Spanish, Latin, Biblical Hebrew, Mandarin, and Navajo. The instructor will add languages from among those with which the students are familiar, within the limits of his competence.

This course will help students not only to learn foreign languages, but also to improve their own writing skills, by making the structures that they must use more explicit and intelligible.

Units (to be distributed over class sessions on a Tuesday–Thursday schedule, with adjustments as needed).

A. Introduction.

1. The nature of human language.

Marckwardt’s (English-language) illustration of sentence structure; the universality of sentence structure; human language as a single biological phenomenon with multiple instantiations; the “principles and parameters” viewpoint on human language.

B. Elements of sentence structure.

2. Sentences, clauses, and their verbs.

Sentences and clauses; the verb as the core of a clause; the usefulness of technical terms.

3. Subjects.

“The subject does the verb;” null-subject languages and subject-verb agreement; “dummy” subjects; subjects of imperatives.

4. Noun phrases; number.

Functions and the phrases that fulfill them; noun phrases and their structure; inflection of nouns for number.

5. Pronouns and subject-verb agreement.

Pronouns: person, number, gender, and other categories; subject-verb agreement again.

6. Direct objects; case.

Direct objects and how languages mark them; omission of overt direct objects.

7. Double-object verbs.

Indirect objects, double direct objects, and how languages mark them.

8. “Linking verbs; adjectives.

Be, become, seem, and similar verbs and the structures in which they occur; complications in Spanish, Hebrew, Navajo, Mandarin, and other languages.

9. Personal pronoun systems.

Pronoun systems as systems and the constrained ways in which they can differ.

10. Reflexives and passives.

How languages express these concepts with and without auxiliary verbs and pronouns.

11. Possession.

The (very wide) range of possession constructions in different languages.

12. Gender, concord, and noun classifications.

Gender systems, concord classes, numeral classifiers, and their grammatical consequences.

13. Case systems and adpositions: the Latin system.

Case: relating noun phrases to other elements in the clause.

14. Tense, aspect, and auxiliary verbs: the English verb system.

Overt tense, covert aspect, and the extensive use of auxiliary verbs.

15. Tense, aspect, and mood: the Spanish verb system.

A system like and unlike that of English; the subjunctive mood.

16. The Latin verb system.

The direct ancestor of Spanish: fewer auxiliaries, more tenses.

17. The Hebrew verb system: aspect and derivation.

A language without overt tense and with an extensive system of verb derivation.

18. The Navajo verb system: aspect, tense, mood, and derivation.

“Verbs on steroids”: the most complex and opaque verb system known.

19. The Mandarin verb system: aspect and serial verbs.

A verb system without inflection, but with plenty of complexity.

20. Negation.

Complex variations on a simple theme (some improbable, especially English).

21. Questions.

Variations on two themes (again with extra complications in English).

22. Adjectives and relative clauses.

Two grammatical categories with a single function, each with its own advantages.

23. Articles, demonstratives, and quantifiers.

The logical parts of a noun phrase.

24. Subordinate clauses, infinitives, and verbal nouns.

How to make one sentence out of two (or three, or ...).

25. Participles.

The most versatile grammatical category—yet one which some languages do without.

26. Comparative constructions.

A small but necessary corner of sentence structure.

C. Some other aspects of human languages.

27. The segmental sounds of human languages.

For the monolingual speaker this is the least accessible and most intimidating part of the structure of a foreign language, yet it is actually the easiest part to describe scientifically.

We will spend as much time on this as the class desires.

28. Prosody.

Length, stress, pitch, tone, intonation: the rhythm and melody of speech.

29. Writing systems.

A poor substitute for actual sound recordings, but some writing systems are poorer than others—and once again the crucial point is structure.

30. The lexicon.

This is the least structured part of any human language; to a first approximation, it's a list of idiosyncratic items. But it does have some structure, and the sheer size of languages' lexica differs to a startling degree—without consequences for how people (including even great poets) express themselves.

—If there are other points of interest regarding sentence structure, or other relevant questions, and if we have time toward the end of the course, we can deal with them.