1. General Overview

The purpose of this course is to serve as a bridge between the introductory graduate semantics courses (610, 620) and the more advanced semantics seminars. Typically, a specific subject is covered in more depth than is done in the intro classes, but the discussion is paced at a level appropriate for second- and third-year students.

The subject of this prosemear will be various issues in the semantics of generic and habitual sentences. In addition to covering the major, long-standing problems and approaches, we will also examine work exploring their cross-linguistic variation, as well as work employing experimental methodologies both with adults and with children.
General Outline of Course Topics

We will definitely cover the first three major sections below. The registered students will decide which of the last three sections we cover, as well as what subsections within them.

1. Introduction
   1.1 Basic Introduction to the Issues
   1.2 Key Technical Background
      1.2.1 Situations and Events
      1.2.2 Plurals and Kinds
      1.2.3 Adverbs and Unselective Binding
   1.3 A Basic Treatment of Generic and Habitual Sentences

2. The Syntax and Semantics and Generic Nominals
   2.1 The Semantics of Bare and Definite NPs in Generic Sentences
   2.2 The Semantics of Indefinite Singulars in Generic Sentences

3. The Truth-Conditions of the GEN-Operator
   3.1 Modal Approaches
   3.2 Probabilistic Approaches
   3.3 Problems for These Approaches

4. On the Reality of the GEN Operator (in the Syntax)

5. Imperfective Aspect vs. Habitual Marking
   5.1 Key Technical Background
      5.1.1 Basic Semantics for Tense
      5.1.2 Basic Semantics for Aspect
   5.2 Unifying the Readings of the Imperfective Aspect
   5.3 The Semantics of Habitual Markers

6. Experimental Investigations of Generics and Habituals
   6.1 Adult Comprehension Studies
      6.1.1 ERP Responses with Generics
      6.1.2 Bare Nominals and Scope
      6.1.3 Experimental Challenges to (Certain) Formal Semantic Analyses
      6.1.4 Generics as ‘Defaults’ in Adults and Children.
   6.2 Child Comprehension Studies
      6.2.1 Truth-Conditions vs. Inferences with Generics in Child Language
      6.2.2 ‘Frequentist’ vs. ‘Essentialist’ Semantics for Children’s Generics
2. Course Requirements

2.1 Short Assignments

As this course is a bridge between the intro courses and the advanced seminars, it is typical for students to receive regular weekly assignments, especially towards the beginning of the term. At first, the purpose of these assignments will simply be to make sure that we’re all ‘on the same page’ regarding the course material. As the course progresses, however, these assignments will become more open-ended and challenging.

Students are permitted (even encouraged) to work with one another on these assignments. However, each student is responsible for writing up their own assignment.

2.2 In Class Presentation of Assigned Reading

Each registered student will be required to present one paper, chosen from among the papers marked as ‘possible student presentation’ papers. Those papers are listed in Section 4 below, and can also be found on the course Moodle. Students must inform me of the readings they will present by the end of week 3 (September 21st).

2.3 Final Paper

Unless they are ‘two-papering’ the course, each student will be required to submit a final paper by December 28th. The only rock-solid requirement on this paper is that it be a semantics paper, and that it be in some way on generics and/or habituals. Ideally, this paper will present a novel analysis of some phenomenon, but it could also be a novel critical discussion (with novel arguments and/or data) of some reading or set of readings from the class.

Students should meet with me as early as possible regarding the topic of their paper, but no later than October 31st. You should also let me know by this date if you intend to two-paper the course.

Major Piece of Advice: MEET WITH US!

Students are strongly, enthusiastically encouraged to meet with Barbara and me as much as possible. Please also feel free to email – or simply chat – with us on anything at all.

Please be sure to seek us out if you are having any difficulty at all with the course material.
3. Various Dates of Interest and Importance

- September 21  Choose Reading for In-Class Presentation
- October 8    No Class (Indigenous Peoples’ Day)
- October 31   Choose Topic for Final Paper
- November 12  No Class (Veterans Day)
- November 19-23 No Class (Thanksgiving Break)
- December 12  Last Day of Class
- December 28  Final Paper Due
- January 2    Final Grades Due (by Noon)

4. More Detailed Overview of Course Content

4.1 An Introduction to the Basic Puzzles and Approaches to Generics and Habituals

Students will be introduced to some of the major, classic puzzles concerning the semantics of generic and habitual sentences. Following this, students will be introduced to the analytic framework for generics/habituals developed by Krifka et al. 1995, which remains a key ‘point of departure’ in the literature on genericity.

This approach, which itself builds upon the preceding 20 years of formal semantic study, views generics and habitals as involving a (phonologically null) unselective quantifier over entities and situations/events. Consequently, before this highly influential work can be presented, students will be given key background in (i) situation and event semantics, (ii) the semantics of plurals and ‘kind’-level NPs, (iii) quantificational adverbs and ‘unselective binding’.


4.2 The Syntax / Semantics of Generic Nominals

One of the most notable and oft-studied features of generic sentences is their use of either (i) definite DPs, (ii) indefinite DPs, and/or (iii) bare NPs. That is, at first glance, the three sentences below each sound roughly comparable in meaning.

(1)  
   a. The lion hunts during the day.  
   b. A lion hunts during the day.  
   c. Lions hunt during the day.

This raises the obvious question of how these three very different types of DPs could end up making what seem to be comparable contributions to the truth-conditions of the sentences in (1). However, an equally puzzling subsequent question is why these three types of DPs are not always felt to be equivalent. That is, in English at least, there seem to be more stringent conditions on the use of singular DPs in generics than bare plurals.

(2)  
   a. Dogs love Alpo.  
   b. A dog loves Alpo. (??, under a generic reading)  
   c. The dog loves Alpo. (??, under a generic reading)

We’ll examine some important recent work on these issues, much of which builds from the highly influential work of Chierchia (1998).


* Possible Student Presentation Paper


* Possible Student Presentation Paper

4.3 The Truth-Conditions of the GEN Operator

As mentioned above, most work on generics and habituals postulates the existence of a phonologically covert ‘generic/habitual operator’, commonly dubbed ‘GEN’. It has long been noted, however, that the exact semantics of this operator are deeply puzzling. Indeed, the deepest, most long-standing problems in the semantics of generics/habituals largely concern the semantics of this hypothetical operator.

In this section, we will review those puzzles, as well as two leading approaches to them. The first such approach views the GEN-operator as being a kind of ‘vague’ circumstantial modal (Greenberg 2007). The second approach views the GEN-operator as having a purely ‘frequentative’ or ‘probabilistic’ meaning (Cohen 1999). Having put forth these competing accounts, we’ll also consider some phenomena that have been claimed to challenge them both.


* Possible Student Presentation Paper


* Possible Student Presentation Paper


* Possible Student Presentation Paper
The three preceding sections will definitely be covered in the seminar. Students will decide collectively, however, which of the following three sections we will cover. Students will also decide how much / which subparts of those sections will be covered.

4.4  On the Reality of the GEN Operator (in the Syntax)

While most work on generics assumes a covert GEN operator, this view has been challenged in the work of Cohen (2004, 2013). Under Cohen’s theory, the GEN operator does not actually exist in the LF-syntax of a generic/habitual sentence, but instead is inserted ‘pragmatically’. This proposal is critically evaluated by Sterken (2016), who also argues against related proposals in some of the more philosophical literature on generics/habituals.


* Possible Student Presentation Paper


* Possible Student Presentation Paper

4.5  Imperfective Aspect and Habitual Markers

In many languages, the verb in a generic or habitual sentence exhibits morphology known as ‘imperfective aspect’. One of the defining features of this ‘imperfective’ marking is that it can also be used to describe currently on-going events. For example, the Tlingit sentence below – which contains an imperfective verb – can receive either a ‘habitual’ or ‘episodic’ reading, the latter of which is equivalent to an English present progressive.

(1)  Tlingit Imperfective

Káaxwei ḥadaná.
coffee 3O.IMPRV.1sgS.drink

I drink coffee. / I am drinking coffee.

This raises the obvious question of how a single morpheme can have such seemingly disparate meanings. Furthermore, given how frequently such ‘imperfective’ markers appear across languages, there must be some kind of unified semantics for these markers, a single meaning from which both the ‘generic/habitual’ and ‘progressive’ construals can somehow be derived. We’ll examine two recent (and related) approaches to this phenomenon, one of which also aims to explain their puzzling interactions with singular indefinites.

Of course, before we can explore these works, students will first be given a general introduction to the semantics of tense and aspect.
In addition to ‘imperfective aspect’, many languages also have a verbal form that appears strictly within generic and habitual sentences. This marking is generally dubbed ‘habitual’, though other names are also very common (e.g., ‘frequentative’, ‘usitative’). Interestingly, in languages that have both imperfective and habitual marking, there seem to be some puzzling contrasts in their meaning. In particular, in many unrelated languages, the habitual marker can only be used if the event in question has actually taken place. For example, while the Tlingit imperfective sentence in (2a) can be true even if the coffee machine hasn’t actually been used yet (like its English translation), the Tlingit habitual sentence in (2b) entails that the machine has actually been used.

(2) **Tlingit Imperfective vs. Tlingit Habitual**

**Scenario:** We just bought a new coffee machine. It’s never before been used. But, this is a great model of coffee machine. Everyone agrees that this model makes great coffee.

a. **Yá yées aa washéen ḱúnáx linúktsi káaxwei al.ukx**  
   this new PART machine very sweet coffee 3O.IMPRV.3S.boil.REP  
   *This new machine boils very sweet coffee.*

b. **?? Yá yées aa washéen ḱúnáx linúktsi káaxwei ool.ukch**  
   this new PART machine very sweet coffee 3O.HAB.PRV.3S.boil

We’ll examine some recent literature that documents these contrasts (among others) and which explores some possible formal semantic analyses.


* Possible Student Presentation Paper
* Possible Student Presentation Paper


4.6 Experimental Investigations of Generics and Habituals

In the last ten years or so, some researchers have begun to employ more experimental methods to investigate the meaning of generics/habituals, in both adult and child language. In this section, we’ll explore some of this work, which has brought forth the following major results:

- Generic sentences seems to trigger an unexpectedly large N400 ERP response, as compared with episodic sentences


- Contrary to judgments offered throughout the theoretical literature, it seems that English speakers *do* generally allow bare plurals to take wide scope, like marked indefinites.


- In a generic sentence of the form “[NP VP]”, the pure frequency of NPs that VP matters less to speakers’ truth-value judgment than whether the VP is associated with some kind of ‘inborn essence’ for the NP. This (allegedly) poses a challenge to purely ‘probabilistic’ theories of generics. A similar effect can also be observed in children over 4.

* Possible Student Presentation Paper (Must be done with Gelman & Bloom 2007)

* Possible Student Presentation Paper (Must be done with Cimpian et al. 2010)

- There is a puzzling disconnect between the conditions under which speakers judge a generic sentence to be true, and the inferences they draw from the generic. In particular, a generic of the form “[NP VP]” will be considered true even if a very low percentage of NPs satisfy the VP. But, when presented with the same sentence and asked to estimate
the frequency of NPs that VP, usually a very high percentage is chosen. This effect does not occur with overtly quantificational sentences, and can also be observed in children over 4.


* Possible Student Presentation Paper (Must be done with Brandone et al. 2015)


* Possible Student Presentation Paper (Must be done with Cimpian et al. 2010)

- A variety of laboratory effects have led some researchers to propose that generic sentences reflect some kind of “cognitive default”, and so have a cognitively privileged status over overtly quantified sentences. However, others have disputed these claims and their alleged evidence, arguing that generics are just as cognitive complex as overtly quantified sentences, if not more so.


* Possible Student Presentation Paper (Must be done with Lazaridou-Chatzigoga et al 2015)


* Possible Student Presentation Paper (Must be done with Leslie et al. 2011)