

Language and Cognition

Type of course: BA.AA.SW04
Time: Thursday 10-12 a.m. (10:15 – 11:45)
Venue: Carl-Zeiss-Str. 3, SR 385
Workload: 5 ECTS



Course description

This lecture course is concerned with the cognitive foundations of language and is closely related to some of the seminars that are regularly taught at the FSU Jena in English linguistics. The relationship between language and cognition has been a highly controversial topic in linguistics over the past 60 decades, and a major goal of the lecture course is to outline and explicate this controversy. To this end, we will need to take a closer look at the initial acquisition of language by children and at evidence for the organisation of linguistic knowledge in adults. Finally, we will explore how the cognitive mechanisms unravelled can help to explain processes of diachronic change and provide motivations for language universals.

Requirements and marking system

- participation in in-class exercises, collaborative work and the development of ideas; some reading (selected texts for reviewing particular thematic blocks of the lecture)
- **final exam** (90 minutes, last session of the course = 11 February 2016, 10-12h)
- The course is worth 5 ECTS, and the mark will be based exclusively on the final exam.

The course management system

The course management system of our department, called **WORDWISE** (www.wordwise.uni-jena.de), will be the online platform of this class. It is there that you download materials (slides, handouts, texts). Important information on the organisation of the course (e.g. announcements etc.) will also be distributed via WORDWISE (to your email address). Therefore, please enrol into this course on WORDWISE (the password was announced in class) and stay updated: Make sure your email address on WORDWISE is valid and that you check it regularly!

Course programme (syllabus)

Thematically, the lecture course will not be divided into individual sessions, but rather into coherent blocks that typically stretch over several class meetings.

Block 1: Introduction

- Goals and contents of the lecture, course organisation
- Approaching the mind and brain: Fundamental concepts and terms
- Methods for studying the relationship between language and cognition

Block 2: Language and cognition: The basic controversy

- The cognitive turn in psychology and linguistics
- Basic assumptions of formal-generativist linguistics and the concept of Universal Grammar (UG)
- The 'language-as-instinct' hypothesis: Alleged evidence and counterarguments

Block 3: The emergence of language in ontogenesis

- The item-based nature of (early) child language and usage-based processes of acquisition
- Constructions as emergent units of linguistic representation
- Deconstructing the need for innate linguistic knowledge

Block 4: The nature of adults' linguistic knowledge

- Formulae, low-scope patterns and constructional restrictions
- Prototype- and exemplar representations of linguistic categories
- Frequency effects in language processing and production

Block 5: Cognitive perspectives on language change

- The emergence of grammar by domain-general processes (imagery, inferencing, grammaticalization)
- The change of linguistic structure due to usage frequency (entrenchment, predictability and its effects)

Block 6: Cognitive motivations for language universals

- The nature of linguistic universals
- Cognitive motivations for typological scales, coding asymmetries in categories and paradigms, word-order asymmetries

Block 7: Conclusion

- Summary and wrap-up
- Final exam

Some basic course texts (not a complete overview)

- Bybee, Joan (2003). Cognitive processes in grammaticalization. In: *The New Psychology of Language: Cognitive and Functional Approaches to Language Structure. Vol. II*. Ed. Michael Tomasello. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. 145–167.
- Dąbrowska, Ewa (2004). *Language, Mind and Brain: Some Psychological and Neurological Constraints on Theories of Grammar*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. [selected passages]
- Steinberg, Danny D., Hiroshi Nagata and David P. Aline (2001). *Psycholinguistics: Language, Mind and World*. 2nd ed. London: Longman. [selected passages]
- Taylor, John (1998). Syntactic constructions as prototype categories. In: *The New Psychology of Language: Cognitive and Functional Approaches to Language Structure. Vol. I*. Ed. Michael Tomasello. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. 177–202.
- Tomasello, Michael (1995). Language is not an instinct. *Cognitive Development* 10: 131–156.