Guidance on final projects

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2024

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1 Goals

The final project is an optional alternative to the regular path through Assignments 5, 6, and 7. It involves substantially more work than those assignments, but it could be a valuable first step towards a larger research project.

The final project is required only for students enrolled in 230a and students taking this class to satisfy the Linguistics Writing in the Major requirement. It's optional for everyone else.

If you choose to do the project and decide it isn't working out, you can switch to the final exam (unless the project is a requirement for you).

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. Some 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.

- 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`
> pick one such formulation, read about it, and assess whether it is an improvement over Grice's formulation.

- Read Liang & Potts 2015 and begin to explore the topic of *semantic parsing*, which combines semantic grammars like ours with machine learning. This could be combined with a project along the lines of (4) below.

- Extensions of the Rational Speech Acts model (Bergen & Goodman 2014; Bergen et al. 2016; Kao et al. 2014; Potts et al. 2016). It could be especially interesting to extend our RSA code [link] so that it implements your chosen extension. The paper would then motivation the RSA extension with illustrations using the code.

(2)   A pilot-sized experimental design, including the materials, a statement of the hypothesis, and the expected outcome given the hypothesis. Our in-class experiments are good examples in terms of scope and motivation, and they even raise specific questions that could be pursued. *Deliverables*: The materials and associated prose. (If you are new to experimental methods, this option is likely to require a lot of consultation with the teaching team. We're happy to help!)

(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.) Two examples from me:

   a.   The indirect question–answer pairs corpus:
        `http://compprag.christopherpotts.net/iqap.html`
   b.   Wait a minute! What kind of discourse strategy is this?
        `http://www.christopherpotts.net/ling/data/waitaminute/`

(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   Representative titles from previous years

- *When flouting Grice's maxims is funny (and when is it not): the case of stand-up comedy*
- *The pragmatics of "tbh"*
- *The socio-pragmatics of "some"*
- *Tweet it like you mean it: exploring expressive lengthening in Tweets*
- *An account of temporal presupposition projection*

- *An exploration into seemingly-subitizing quantifier phrases*
- *A study of the directness of requests in Chinese*
- *Contrastive focus reduplication in English NPs*
- *A theory of gradability and presupposition in color adjectives*
- *Modeling pre-schoolers' expectation-based language processing under noise using an integration of the rational speech acts model and the noisy channel model*
- *How pragmatic norms shape the meanings of loanwords*
- *Interrogative semantics*
- *Presuppositions as conversational implicatures*
- *A brief study proposal for projection judgments by wild English speakers*
- *Using BERT to Examine Intransitive Subjecthood*
- *The Outsiders: 'the' as a marker of speaker non-membership*
- *Listen all of y'all, it's a sabotage: plural formation in the Texas English dialect*
- *The language of financial headlines*
- *Green Go-Away: The semantics and pragmatics of gringo*
- *Speaking slurs sans semantics: two accounts of slurring and where they fail*
- *The McMaverick, Hope, and Change: an analysis of political linguistic cooption in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign*
- *The Pragmatics of Exaggeration: Exploring Speaker Signaling in Word-Based Hyperbole*
- *'How bipartisan is that?': an experimental investigation into the conceptual space of adjectival 'bipartisan'*

4   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.
- Complete the 'project' question on assignment 7.
- Mar 23: final product due by 6:30 pm, uploaded to Canvas.

5   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 for it. 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

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