

Dear BULA members:

We will be hiring a new Assistant Professor of Linguistics with a specialization in Semantics. The three top candidates will be coming to campus in the next few weeks, and they will be giving presentations – explicitly pitched to students with no more linguistic background than CAS LX 250. See details on the following pages.

The presentations should be engaging and accessible, and you can play a role in selecting a new faculty member. I hope you will consider attending. If you do, the search committee would welcome your feedback right after each candidate has been here; email directed to the search committee can also be sent to [carol@bu.edu](mailto:carol@bu.edu) no later than February 8.

THANKS !!

Very best wishes for the coming semester,

*Carol Neidle*

Carol Neidle, on behalf of the Linguistics Faculty and the Semantics Search Committee

- **Dylan Bumford** <http://dylanbumford.com#about>

Monday, January 23

Meeting with undergraduates and BA/MA students: 11:40 am – 12:10 pm,  
621 Comm. Ave. – Room B02

**Presentation\***: “Split-scope effects in definite descriptions” 5:30 – 6:30 pm, KCB 101

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- **Elizabeth Coppock** <http://eecoppock.info/index.html>

Thursday, February 2

Meeting with undergraduates and BA/MA students: 12:30 - 1 pm,  
621 Comm. Ave. – Room B02

**Presentation\***: “New Channels of Meaning” 5:15 – 6:15 pm, KCB 101

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- **Aron Hirsch** <https://hirsch.mit.edu/>

Monday, February 6

Meeting with undergraduates and BA/MA students: 11:10 – 11:40 pm,  
621 Comm. Ave. – Room B02

**Presentation\***: “Semantics and syntax are tightly linked: conjunction and beyond”  
5:30 – 6:30 pm, KCB 101

**RSVP (ASAP) would be much appreciated** (but is not required) :

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/lxstu>

**Quick and easy anonymous surveys for feedback after the visits:**

- **Dylan Bumford** (reply by **January 25**): <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/stu-Bumford-FB>
- **Liz Coppock** (reply by **February 4**): <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/stu-Coppock-FB>
- **Aron Hirsch** (reply by **February 8**): <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/stu-Hirsch-FB>

**\*Abstracts are provided on the following pages.**

▪ **Dylan Bumford**

<http://dylanbumford.com/#about>

Monday, January 23

**“Split-scope effects in definite descriptions”**    5:30 – 6:30 pm    in KCB 101

Singular definite descriptions like "the mannequin" generally only make sense if the hearer has enough information to figure out which mannequin the speaker intends to refer to. For instance, if you and I walk into an apparel store with a variety of mannequins in a variety of poses, I could not say to you "The mannequin is weird" without looking or pointing at anything in particular, and expect you to know what I mean. But surprisingly, if I told you instead that "I love the hat on the mannequin" (as opposed to the hats on the table), you'd have no trouble understanding me as long as only one of the mannequins was wearing a hat. It seems that even though "the mannequin" does not on its own succeed in referring to anything (given the plenitude of mannequins in the store), it becomes meaningful in the context of the larger description "the hat on the mannequin". This simple pattern poses a challenge to standard theories of semantic compositionality, according to which the meanings of phrases are built up from the meanings of their parts, since in this case, it is the meaning of the part that is derived from the meaning of the phrase that contains it! What we're left with is a kind of vicious semantic cycle, where the hat is defined in terms of the mannequin and the mannequin defined in terms of the hat. In this talk, I will attempt to break out of the loop by decomposing the meaning of "the" into two distinct semantic steps, which I claim are usually but not always executed in immediate succession. In the first step, all potential referents for the description are collected (imagine filtering out everything in the scene except for the mannequins); in the second, they are inspected to make sure that one of them is more salient to the discourse participants than the rest. But mismatches in the timing of these two steps can result in exactly the sorts of tangled descriptions that the mannequin example illustrates. I'll go on to show that this idea sheds light on a familiar ambiguity in the interpretation of superlative adjectives, and suggest that in fact a range of comparative adjectives are susceptible to the effects of this systematic "delay" in the execution of definiteness.

- **Elizabeth Coppock**

<http://eecoppock.info/index.html>

Thursday, February 2

**“New Channels of Meaning”**

5:15 – 6:15 pm in KCB 101

PolitiFact's Truth-O-Meter ranges from "Pants on fire", for the not only false but also ridiculous, up through various grades of truth, all the way to plain true. "Especially in politics, truth is not black and white," PolitiFact writes. Semanticists would point out that one of the reasons that a given statement might be felt to lie in-between true and false is that it conveys a falsehood not directly, through a logical consequence, but indirectly, through for example a presupposition or implicature. The full inventory of these "channels of meaning" as it were is a topic of ongoing research, and this talk addresses recent developments motivated by the study of modified numerals ("more than 2", "at least 3", "up to 5", etc.). As the talk will show, experimental results in this area shed light on the kinds of implicatures at play in the expression "up to 20 million Americans", used once in a misleading statement by Mitt Romney. The pragmatic principle that is violated in this case is one that is so strong that it causes native English speakers to judge true sentences as false around 50% of the time. The moral of the story is that research in semantics and pragmatics can render colorful the grey area between true and false.

▪ **Aron Hirsch**

<https://hirsch.mit.edu>

Monday, February 6

**“Semantics and syntax are tightly linked:  
conjunction and beyond”**

5:30 – 6:30 pm in KCB 101

The conjunction *and* is one of the most frequent words in the English language — but, also one of the most puzzling. In this talk, I will try to figure out what *and* really means. An intuitive hypothesis is that *and* makes the contribution in (1), just like the  $\wedge$  connective familiar from logic, mathematics, and computer programming.

- (1) “A and B” is true if and only if A is true and B is true.

This hypothesis captures the usage in (2-a), where *and* conjoins two clauses and says that both clauses are true. But, *and* has a much broader distribution: it also appears to conjoin expressions that are not intuitively true or false, such as nominals in (2-b). In this case, it looks as though the meaning in (1) cannot be right. After all, it would be meaningless to paraphrase a conjunction of *John* and *Bill* as (3).

- (2) a. I saw John and you saw Bill.  
b. I saw John and Bill.

- (3) # “John and Bill” is true if and only if “John” is true and “Bill” is true

Despite appearances, I argue that the original meaning in (1) is correct. I undertake a close study of the syntax of (2-b), and provide new evidence for “hidden structure”. Where *and* appears to conjoin nominals, it actually conjoins constituents with a clausal meaning, which is not apparent due to non-pronunciation of redundant phonological material. Once the syntax is understood, the semantics is simple. This result illustrates a more general point: to figure out semantics, we cannot study meaning in isolation, but rather must pay close attention to syntax. In the remainder of the talk, I present further case studies demonstrating different ways that syntax can inform semantics.