LING419: Fitting Syntax and Semantics Together

What we’ve done (I hope)

We set out with this goal:

When a human being knows a language, he/she knows that certain sounds are paired with certain meanings. In your syntax classes, you’ve basically learnt that certain sounds are paired with certain tree structures. The aim of this course is to complete the picture by looking at how those tree structures relate to meanings, and look at why the syntax-centric approach that you have been exposed to has become popular.

We started with categorial grammar which models sound-meaning relations in a particularly simple way:

- What you see is what you get
- Surface word order directly reflects the way the words have been combined
- The filling of “word-order slots” directly mirrors the filling of “semantic slots”

We gradually found reasons to believe that things — unfortunately — probably aren’t that simple:

- When we look at long-distance dependencies across languages, we find that they are pronounced differently yet subject to (some of) the same constraints
- These appear to be constraints on a level of representation that isn’t necessary to get a theory of language off the ground, i.e. syntactic representations (roughly tree-shaped), which surface word order is a poor reflection of
- Looking at adverbs and adjuncts prompted us to get rid of the idea that “meaning slot-filling” mirrors “word-order slot-filling”

The focus has been at least as much on learning how linguists work, and why we think the things you’ve learnt in previous classes is right, as on learning “more of the same sort of stuff”

- Importance of keeping track of where theories are falsifiable (i.e. in the sound-meaning pairs they predict to exist)
- See where theories really diverge, and where theories are merely saying the same thing in different ways; and in turn, distinguish between “big discoveries” and “small discoveries”
- Distinguish between merely re-describing the facts and explaining the facts