

Graduate Seminar 615:660 (Special Topics)
Language Acquisition: The Case of Nouns

Instructor: Prof. Kristen Syrett (kristen.syrett@rutgers.edu)
Meetings: Mondays 1:10–4:10 pm, Linguistics Dept. (18 Seminary Place), room 108
Office Hours: Tuesdays 9:30–11:30 am and by appointment (usually Mondays mornings)
Prerequisites: Graduate student status or permission of instructor
Course website on Canvas

Course description

Nouns are among the first words a child comprehends and utters in language development. But what exactly do these first nouns *mean*? These words pick out referents in the world, but which ones, and what are the conceptual and linguistic representations these words map onto? The earliest nouns seem deceptively simply enough to pick out objects like *ball*, *bottle*, and *dog*. But what constitutes an ‘object’ to the infant, and how can these objects be individuated? What do infants know about the object kind or category these objects are members of, what the limits are on what can count as a member, and how does variability in instances and labels help in categorization? And how does the young child know that these objects and their labels are different from substances like *water*, and that words like *stone* could be both count or mass, and that nouns like *furniture* are kind of both at the same time? In a nutshell, then, this class is about **the acquisition of nouns**, but we’ll cover a broad range of issues and take a deep dive into a few that are of interest to linguists, philosophers, and psychologists alike.

Learning goals

In this class you will

- Become acquainted with some of the classic readings on concepts, objects and substances, categories, and the acquisition of nouns
- Apply your prior knowledge of language to these topics
- Critically analyze and evaluate claims and findings reported in the previous literature on these topics
- Engage in discussions about the nature of concepts, the object/substance distinction and count/mass nouns, and what it takes to acquire the meaning of nouns
- Come to appreciate the vast challenges inherent to learning even the simplest of words

Grading and Assessment

There are **4 main components** to your grade:

- 1) **Attendance and participation** **10%**
You must attend every class, and actively participate.
- 2) **Weekly discussion posts** **20%**
Each week, you are required to post on the required readings on our course website. Discussion posts are due no later than Sunday at 9 pm on the night before class.
- 3) **In-class presentation on 1-2 reading(s)** **20%**
Each of you will present once, selecting 1-2 papers within a given topic. All presentations must be done via slides. You will not be allowed to use handouts, unless it is for an in-class activity. You should meet with me the week before you are assigned to present with a rough draft of your slides and notes ready to discuss with me. We will work together on developing your presentation. Everyone who is enrolled/auditing is required to complete this component. No exceptions!
- 4) **Final paper and related components** **50%**
Each of you will write a final paper related to the topic of our class. It could be a proposal for an experiment or set of experiments, something more philosophical, a detailed critique of a line of inquiry—your choice. All students registered for the class or regularly auditing are required to complete this component!

Components for the final paper (all pp. double spaced)

Summary of your idea (1.5-2 pp.)
List of references to be cited (at least 7)
Lightning talk on paper topic (approx. 5 minutes)
Final paper (10-15 pp., including references)

Date due

November 11
November 18
December 9
December 18

Schedule of Topics and Readings

Date	Topic	Readings (read in chronological order)
9/9	1 Word Learning	Bloom (2002), Waxman & Gelman (2009)
9/16	2 Concepts, part I: a Primer	Margolis (1998), Laurence & Margolis (2002) <i>Optional:</i> Fodor (1994)
9/23	3 Concepts, part 2: Prototypes	Lupyan (2015), Kamp & Partee (1995) <i>Optional:</i> Armstrong et al. (1983), Margolis (1994)
9/30	4 Objects in Infancy	Hespos & vanMarle (2012), Spelke (1994), Spelke & Van de Walle (1993) <i>Optional:</i> Spelke (1990)
10/7	5 Objects and Sortals in Infancy	Xu et al. (1999), Xu et al. (2004) <i>Optional:</i> Simon et al. (1995), Xu & Carey (1996)
10/14	6 Objects v. Substances	Imai & Gentner (1997), Soja et al. (1991) <i>Optional:</i> Subrahmanyam & Chen (2006)
10/21	7 Count-Mass, part 1: quantity	Barner & Snedeker (2005), Barner & Snedeker (2006) <i>Optional:</i> Gordon (1985)
10/28	8 Count-Mass, part 2: replications and extensions	Li et al. (2009), Barner et al. (2009) <i>Optional:</i> Srinivasan & Barner (2016)
11/4	<i>Class canceled – Rescheduled for Friday 11/8 from 12:30-2:50 pm</i>	
11/8 (F)	9 Shape and Intention	Landau et al. (1998), Gelman & Ebeling (1998) <i>Optional:</i> Bloom (1996)
11/11	10 Words as Labels, part I: categorization	Fulkerson & Waxman (2007), Waxman (1999) <i>Optional:</i> Edmiston & Lupyan (2015)
11/18	11 Words as Labels, part 2: variability	Gentner & Namy (1999), Waxman & Braun (2005), Xu et al. (2005) <i>Optional:</i> Waxman & Markow (1995), Plunkett et al. (2008), Xu (2002)
11/25	12 Whole and Partial Objects, part 1: counting	Shipley & Shepperson (1990), Srinivasan et al. (2013) <i>Optional:</i> Wagner & Carey (2003)
12/2	13 Whole and Partial Objects, part 2: comparison and quantification	Melgoza et al. (2008), Brooks et al. (2011)
12/9	Lightning presentations on final paper topics	
12/18 (W)	Final papers due	

Other Rutgers resources

Academic Calendar: <https://scheduling.rutgers.edu/scheduling/academic-calendar>

Academic Integrity Policy: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu>

Counseling, Alcohol and Other Drug Assistance Program & Psychiatric Services (CAPS): <http://health.rutgers.edu/medical-counseling-services/counseling/>

Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance: www.vpva.rutgers.edu/