

## Semantics and Pragmatics in a Justice-Centered Introductory Linguistics Textbook: Reflections from Updating an Open Educational Resource

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Presenting about work done in collaboration with  
**TiLCoP Canada** (Teaching in Linguistics Community of Practice)



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Essentials of  
**Linguistics**  
*Second Edition*

Catherine Anderson  
Bronwyn Bjorkman  
Derek Denis  
Julianne Doner  
Margaret Grant  
Nathan Sanders  
Ai Taniguchi

# Co-authors

Catherine Anderson (PI)	(McMaster University)
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Nathan Sanders	(University of Toronto)

# Essentials of Linguistics, 2nd edition

<http://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/essentialsoflinguistics2>



# Acknowledgements

- Many people to thank (<http://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/essentialsoflinguistics2/front-matter/acknowledgements/>) — but a special shout out to the people who helped me with the semantics/pragmatics chapters
- TilCoP, especially Catherine Anderson for giving me the opportunity to be a collaborator
- eCampusOntario for the grant
- Reviewers: Curt Anderson, Barend Beekhuizen, Jon Henner
- ASL videos: David Wiesblatt
- Feedback and emotional support (lol): Alan Munn
- Student feedback: UTM Winter 2022 LIN205 students
- My many students, past and present (MSU, Carleton, UTM)
- Vera Lee-Schoenfeld and Marcin Morzycki, who taught me semantics/pragmatics in the first place
- Carleton University School of Linguistics and Language Studies
- University of Toronto Mississauga Department of Language Studies

# First Edition



- Accessible multimedia format.
- Special section on teaching Mohawk.
- Easily searchable and editable.
- Freely and widely available.



- Closely tied to commercial textbook.
- Some core sections weak.
- Little attention to signed languages.

(Anderson et al., forthcoming)

## Second Edition



Accessibility enhanced.

Multi-format.

Screenreader-navigable.

FREE.



Subfield specialists.

More coverage of less-studied languages and signed languages.

Reorganized to center justice.

(Anderson et al., forthcoming)

# A justice-centered textbook



## Justice requires accessibility.

FREE

Multi-format

Fonts & Colours

Screenreader-  
navigable

(Anderson et al., forthcoming)

# Justice requires diversity.

- Avoid Anglo-centrism.
- Examples from many spoken languages, especially Indigenous languages.
- Interviews with five Indigenous language experts.
- Examples from many signed languages.
- Modality-neutral.
- Images of diverse humans.
- Diverse names in example sentences.

(Anderson et al., forthcoming)

# Justice requires paying for people's labour.

- Paid project manager + accessibility consultant.
- Paid ASL signer and Indigenous language experts.
- Paid artist for some images, others are CC-licensed.
- Paid chapter reviewers.
- Paid reviewers for whole book:
  - Deaf linguist.
  - Indigenous linguist.

(Anderson et al., forthcoming)

# Justice requires speaking truth to power.

- Acknowledge the colonial history of linguistics.
- Consider the ethics of linguistics research.
- Foreground power and privilege.
- Weave justice issues throughout the text.

(Anderson et al., forthcoming)

# More at the CLA!

vendredi 3 juin | Friday June 3

	Zoom:	Zoom:
	<b>Syntaxe-sémantique   Syntax-Semantics</b>	<b>Sociolinguistique   Sociolinguistics</b>
	présidée par   chair : Ileana Paul	présidée par   chair : Julien Carrier
11:30 – 12:00	Colette <b>Tremblay.</b> (Laval) <i>Sémantique diachronique de l'adverbe «tout le temps» en français écrit</i>	Katie <b>Slemp</b> & Brittney <b>O'Neill.</b> (York) “Gentlemen, start your engines and may the best woman win”: <i>Troubling gender in Drag Race television</i>
12:00 – 12:30	Douglas <b>Wharram.</b> (Memorial) <i>Bound variable subjects in Labrador Inuttut: ‘4th person’ verbal inflection</i>	Brittney <b>O'Neill.</b> (York) <i>Negotiating optimal distinctiveness and social cohesion in unpopular opinion threads</i>
12:30 – 13:00	Alexandra Lilia <b>Ayala.</b> (UBC) <i>Meaningful Dimensions in Dàgáàrè Functors</i>	Catherine <b>Anderson</b> , Bronwyn <b>Bjorkman</b> , Derek <b>Denis</b> , Julianne <b>Doner</b> , Margaret <b>Grant</b> , Martin <b>Kohlberger</b> , Nathan <b>Sanders</b> & Ai <b>Taniguchi.</b> (McMaster, Queen’s, UTM, Toronto, SFU, Saskatchewan) <i>Teaching Introductory Linguistics with Justice: Updating an Open Educational Resource</i>
13:00 – 13:45	Repas de midi   Break	

# Semantics and Pragmatics in EoL2

# Chapters

- |   |                                     |    |                                        |
|---|-------------------------------------|----|----------------------------------------|
| 1 | Human Language and Language Science | 9  | Reclaiming Indigenous Languages        |
| 2 | Language, Power and Privilege       | 10 | Language Variation and Change          |
| 3 | Phonetics                           | 11 | Child Language Acquisition             |
| 4 | Phonology                           | 12 | Adult Language Learning                |
| 5 | Morphology                          | 13 | Psycholinguistics and Neurolinguistics |
| 6 | Syntax                              | 14 | Historical Linguistics                 |
| 7 | <b>Semantics</b>                    | 15 | Language Diversity                     |
| 8 | <b>Pragmatics</b>                   |    |                                        |

# Chapters

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| 1 | Human Language and Language Science                          | 9  | Reclaiming Indigenous Languages        |
| 2 | <b>Language, Power and Privilege</b><br>(under construction) | 10 | Language Variation and Change          |
| 3 | Phonetics                                                    | 11 | Child Language Acquisition             |
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# What makes Sem/Prag in EoL2 special

1. Each section comes with interactive comprehension exercises
2. Chapter comes with practice problems at the end (answer key coming soon)
3. Videos - coming soon!
4. Super accessible language
5. Diverse data
6. “How to analyze meaning like a linguist” sections
7. Why dictionaries are not the authority of meaning
8. Semantics/pragmatics in the legal domain
9. Pragmatics and neurodiversity
10. Literature coverage from Frege to super recent work on slurs
11. Theory rigor
12. Theory plurality
13. Lexical semantics
14. Formal(ish) pragmatics (illocutionary meaning)

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13. **Lexical semantics**
14. **Formal(ish) pragmatics (illocutionary meaning)**

## Chapter 7: Semantics

—

7.1 Linguistic meaning

7.2 Compositionality: Why not just syntax?

7.3 What does this sentence "mean"? Entailments vs. implicatures

7.4 The mental lexicon

7.5 The nature of lexical meaning

7.6 Events and thematic roles

7.7 Countability

7.8 Individual- vs. stage-level predicates

7.9 Degrees

7.10 Why not the dictionary?

7.11 Denotation

7.12 Introduction to set theory

7.13 Negative polarity items

7.14 Summary

7.15 Exercise your linguistics skills

## Chapter 8: Pragmatics

—

8.1 At-issue vs. non-at-issue meaning

8.2 Cross-cultural differences in discourse

8.3 Semantics and pragmatics in the legal domain

8.4 Conversational implicatures

8.5 The Cooperative Principle

8.6 How inferences arise, and neurodiversity in inference making

8.7 Violating vs. flouting a maxim

8.8 More about the Cooperative Principle

8.9 Illocutionary meaning

8.10 Thinking about illocutionary meaning compositionally

8.11 What is a context?

8.12 Assertion

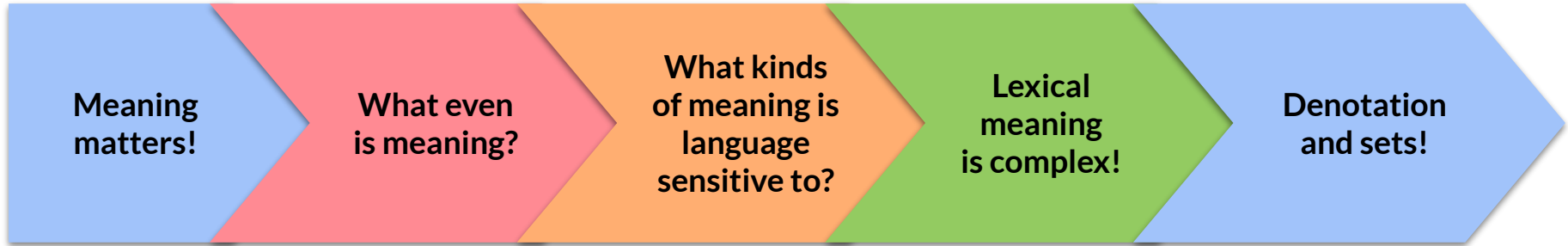
8.13 Question

8.14 Analyzing meaning dynamically

8.15 Summary (and further questions to consider)

8.16 Exercise your linguistics skills

# Chapter 7 narrative





# Chapter 8 narrative





# Considerations

1. What needs to be taught in semantics/pragmatics in intro?
2. How do we bridge between what semantics/pragmatics actually is vs. what the general public typically wants to know about meaning?
3. How do we address some of the pedagogical challenges we have as a subfield?

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# Semantics/pragmatics in intro

- For many (most?) students, intro is their first and only encounter with semantics/pragmatics
- Most instructors only have a week or two for the semantics/pragmatics modules
- What skills and/or knowledge do students need to walk away with?

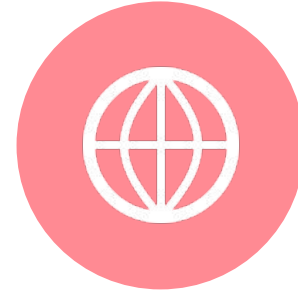
# Semantics/pragmatics in intro



Language and power

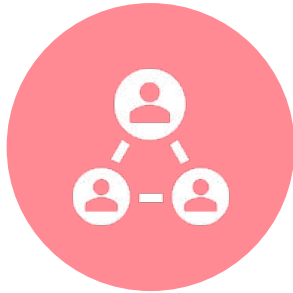


Research and analysis



Interpersonal empathy

# Semantics/pragmatics in intro



## Language and power

- Power dynamics, meaning, and social justice
- Weaponized language: slurs, offense, and derogation (§2.2, 2.3)
- Language and law: State of La. v. Demesme (2017)'s “lawyer dog” case (§8.3)

# Semantics/pragmatics in intro



## Language and power

“A recurring theme of this chapter and of this book is that language is about more than grammar, and **words do more than just refer to literal things in the world**. Slurs provide one example of how language encodes and enacts social relationships: **we can use language to express our status relative to others, and we also use language to enforce other people’s status relative to ourselves**. With your linguistics training in hand, you can use your metalinguistic awareness to examine some of these power relations, and maybe even to **resist or correct the damage that can be wielded through language**.” (Chapter 2)

# Semantics/pragmatics in intro



## Research and analysis

- Thinking about meaning critically
- Diagnostics for types of meaning (§7.3, 8.1)
- “How to be a linguist” boxes throughout the chapters
- Section dedicated to why dictionaries are not the authority of meaning (§7.10)



# Semantics/pragmatics in intro



## Research and analysis

“We have to remember again that human beings are writing dictionaries. It is quite unrealistic to expect a lexicographer, or even a group of lexicographers, to include every single meaning of every single word in a dictionary. It is unrealistic because one word can have many different meanings, varying in use depending on context. **We cannot expect lexicographers to observe, track, and record all possible uses of a word — especially when new uses of existing words emerge all the time.** What we need to remember is the purpose of dictionaries. Dictionaries are meant to be a *reference*: something that gives you the general picture of a word, with enough information to give you an idea as to how it might be used. **One way of thinking about this is that a dictionary is a *partial* record of how language users use their language.** Language users in a language community create new words and attach meaning to them, and lexicographers record some of their use in dictionaries. They can’t include every single meaning of every single word, so they give *enough* information so that people can get an idea of how the word is used.” (Chapter 7)

# Semantics/pragmatics in intro



## Research and analysis

### How to be a linguist: Minimal pairs and testing hypotheses

OK, so dictionaries might be a good *starting point* if you're trying to figure out what a word means, but it's certainly not the whole picture! So how *do* we figure out what a word means? Well, if *people* create meaning, then we have to observe what people do with language! We've been doing this already in this chapter when discussing lexical meaning: we look at what you descriptively can and cannot do with a word (recall the previous "How to be a linguist" boxes from [Section 7.6](#) and [Section 7.7](#)). If you are interested in the meaning of a word, one tactic that may be useful is coming up with a **minimal pair** of sentences. Recall from [Sections 3.8](#) and [4.3](#) that a minimal pair is a pair of things that are the same except for one parameter. (3) and (4) are sentential minimal pairs in Japanese, differing by exactly one word:

(3) (Context: Beth broke a tree branch into two pieces.)

eda-o	otta
branch-ACC	broke
'She broke a branch'	

(4) (Context: Beth dropped a ceramic plate and broke it.)

#sara-o	otta
sara-ACC	broke
'She broke a plate'	

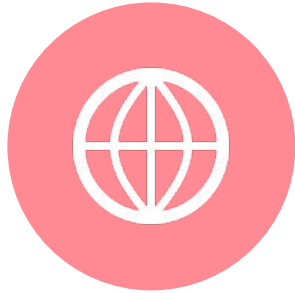
# Semantics/pragmatics in intro



## Interpersonal empathy

- Diversification of data in general
- Explicit calls to stop viewing English (or your first language in general) as the “neutral” language (§8.2, 8.8)
- Acknowledgement of variation in acceptability judgments (§7.4, 8.2, 8.6, 8.7)
- Variation in Cooperative Principle (§8.2, 8.5)
- Pragmatics and neurodiversity (§8.6)

# Semantics/pragmatics in intro

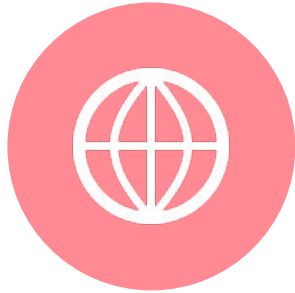


## Interpersonal empathy

“When we study pragmatics, we need to be aware that **there are cultures and conversational norms beyond your own.**

Encountering **unfamiliar discourse rules in a language that you may not have encountered before may give rise to feelings of surprise**, and that’s OK – but **we hope that you will use your linguist mind to prevent this surprise from turning into negative judgments about other cultures and languages.** Remember, all forms of language are valid!” (Chapter 8)

# Semantics/pragmatics in intro



## Interpersonal empathy

“What do we learn from all of this? What inferences can be made from an utterance depends on the context, and “context” includes who is participating in the discourse, too. The quote above points to yet another power dynamic in language (recall Chapter 2): **conversational expectations are often very neurotypical-centric, which is unfair to neurodivergent individuals.** Some people may not get the implied meaning immediately, and even when they think they understand the implicature, they might not feel confident about it. **Following the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network’s advice, we urge you to be patient if miscommunication arises in everyday situations.** If you are organizing an event, you may want to avoid relying on implicatures to communicate important information to participants, because some people might not get it. **Everyone has a different mind, so let’s support these differences rather than suppress them.**” (Chapter 8)

# Considerations

1. What needs to be taught in semantics/pragmatics in intro?
2. How do we bridge between what semantics/pragmatics actually is vs. what the general public typically wants to know about meaning?
3. How do we address some of the pedagogical challenges we have as a subfield?

# What semantics/pragmatics is vs. what people want to know

## Typical sem/prag coverage in intro

- Lexical relations
- Implicatures
- Denotative meaning
- At-issue meaning
- Quantification

# What semantics/pragmatics is vs. what people want to know

## Typical sem/prag coverage in intro

- Lexical relations
- Implicatures
- Denotative meaning
- At-issue meaning
- Quantification

## What people are often interested in

- Lexical semantics
- Non-at-issue meaning
  - Lowkey
  - Lying
  - Intonation
  - “Yeah no”
  - Emojis
- Taboo language
- Autism and language



# What semantics/pragmatics is vs. what people want to know



Lexical semantics



Set theory



Formal(ish) pragmatics

# What semantics/pragmatics is vs. what people want to know



## Lexical semantics

- Coverage of various theories of lexical meaning (§7.5)
- Framing of semantics chapter as “what kinds of meaning does language tend to be sensitive to?”
- Events and thematic roles (§7.6)
- Mass/count nouns (§7.7)
- Individual vs. stage-level predicates (§7.8)
- Degrees and gradability (§7.9)

# What semantics/pragmatics is vs. what people want to know



## Lexical semantics

“Whatever your theory of lexical meaning you side with, what we do know is that **certain pieces of information affect how a word behaves grammatically**. For example, *I drank the chair sounds distinctly odd compared to I drank the tea* — this data suggests that concepts concerning the state of matter of physical objects matter for language. In the sections that follow, we will investigate what other sorts of information language tends to care about across languages. **This will help us answer questions about lexical meaning at a more global level: what categories of meanings are there in language?**” (Chapter 7)

# What semantics/pragmatics is vs. what people want to know



## Set theory

- After sense is introduced, denotation is introduced (§7.11)
- Set theory is introduced (§7.12)
- Negative polarity item licensing (§7.13)
- Set theory strikes again in pragmatics for illocutionary meaning (§8.11)
- Common Ground is the intersection of interlocutors' Commitment sets

# What semantics/pragmatics is vs. what people want to know



## Formal(ish) pragmatics

- Compositional analysis of illocutionary meaning (§8.10-8.14)
- Formal(ish) notions like Common Ground and Question Under Discussion are introduced (§8.10)
- Dynamic semantics lite (akin to Farkas and Bruce's Table framework) is introduced (§8.10-8.14)
- Suggestions on how this kind of framework can be applied to other phenomena (§8.15)

# What semantics/pragmatics is vs. what people want to know



Formal(ish) pragmatics

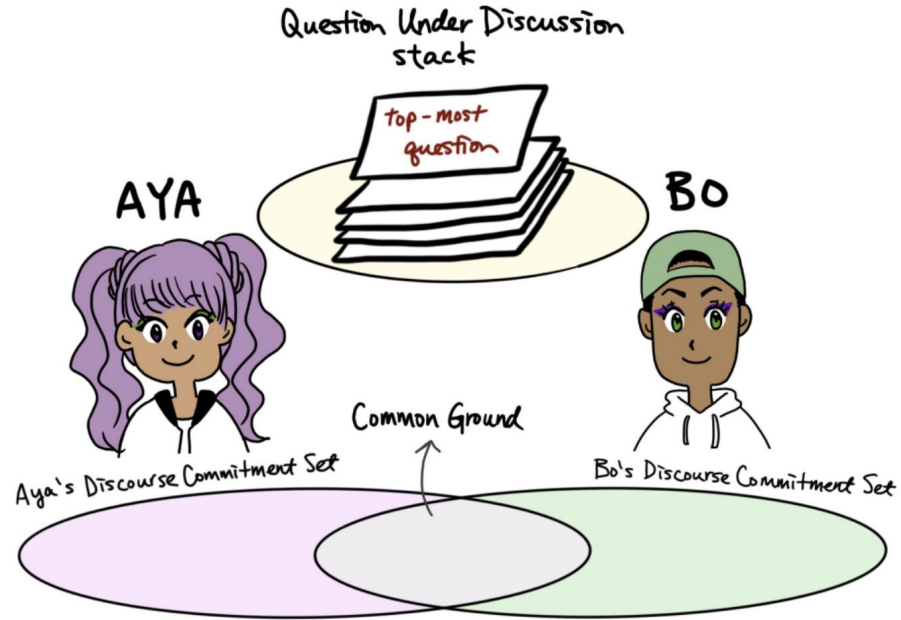


Figure 8.5. A context consisting of the Common Ground, the Question Under Discussion stack, and Discourse Commitment sets.

# Considerations

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# Challenges as a subfield

- Linguistics in general has historically been quite English-centric, but semantics in particular has been pretty bad about this, especially at the introductory level...
  - Enough that SALT is doing a workshop to address the issue this year!
- Gricean pragmatics also originally was based on English data
- Semantics is also generally seen as “the hard class”



# Challenges as a subfield



Data diversity



Gricean pragmatics



Accessibility

# Challenges as a subfield



Data diversity

- Attempt to diversify data without exceptionalist framing
- Some signed language data (§7.4, 7.9, 8.7)
- Not just a “catalog of semantic facts” – meaningful introduction of data for the theory

# Challenges as a subfield



Data diversity

(4)



PIETRO<sub>a</sub>



IX<sub>a</sub>



TALL<sub>S</sub>-deg<sub>d</sub>

# Challenges as a subfield



## Gricean pragmatics

- Cooperative Principle in other languages: what counts as “cooperative” might be different (§8.5)
- Inference calculation and autism (§8.6)
- Clarifying common misconceptions about Grice and the Cooperative Principle (§8.8)

# Challenges as a subfield



## Gricean pragmatics

“As a language philosopher, Grice’s objective in developing the Cooperative Principle was not to give extensive empirical observations about human discourse. Rather, his goal was to give a more general sketch of how conversational logic might work. **There are places in his writing where things are intentionally vague, as many of his thoughts were meant to be introspections rather than a fully developed system.** His musings were based largely on English, and unsurprisingly, he was never really clear about whether his maxims were meant to apply to non-English conversations. **In this textbook we have taken the interpretation that there is cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variability in the Cooperative Principle,** but **we also do not deny the fact that Gricean theories of pragmatics have contributed to the perception that (educated, white) English is somehow the “norm” and somehow culturally “neutral” (Ameka & Terkourafi 2019).** We echo Ameka & Terkourafi (2019)’s call for more inclusive research practices in pragmatics.” (Chapter 8)

# Challenges as a subfield



## Accessibility

- I tried super hard to make the writing accessible
- Preliminary student feedback said “easy to understand” 👍
- Formalism only introduced where it made sense (e.g., Davidsonian-style event semantics introduced to show compositionality, to connect to thematic roles introduced in syntax chapter (§7.6))
- Videos will be added soon!
- Images come with alt-text
- High contrast colors in images
- I did some of the drawings myself!

# Challenges as a subfield



Accessibility

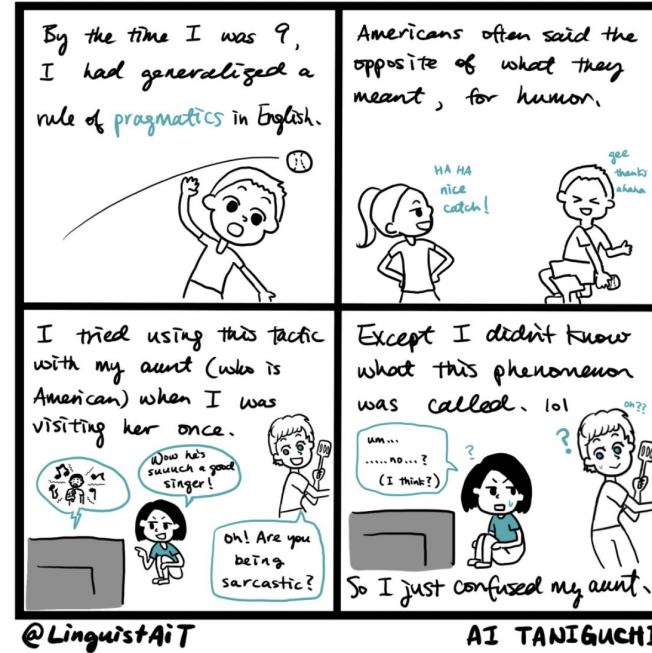


Figure 8.1. A comic about a Japanese child learning about sarcasm in American English.

## Concluding remarks



# Teaching semantics/pragmatics

- Advocating for a more inclusive linguistics pedagogy (Charity Hudley et al., 2020a, 2020b)
- Diversifying semantics/pragmatics in intro in a meaningful and accessible way is a balancing act

# Opportunities for growth

- How do we make trees screenreader-friendly?
- I still feel like the pragmatics chapter is “(spoken) English-centric with sprinkles of other languages”
- Need more signed language examples
- More formalism? Less formalism?
- Original draft had more about conventional implicatures
- Student feedback said “more pictures!” “more charts!”
- Chapter obviously comes with author bias

# An invitation

- Advantage of e-textbook: easily editable!
- Feedback is appreciated! What do *you* want to see in it?
- How do *you* teach semantics in intro?
- What are some challenges *you* have faced in teaching semantics/pragmatics in intro?
- What do *you* do to make semantics/pragmatics inclusive and accessible?
- What do we need to work on as a subfield?
- Please consider adopting the textbook for Fall 2022!
  - EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-927565-50-6

# More at the CLA!

vendredi 3 juin | Friday June 3

	Zoom:	Zoom:
	<b>Syntaxe-sémantique   Syntax-Semantics</b>	<b>Sociolinguistique   Sociolinguistics</b>
	présidée par   chair : Ileana Paul	présidée par   chair : Julien Carrier
11:30 – 12:00	Colette <b>Tremblay.</b> (Laval) <i>Sémantique diachronique de l'adverbe «tout le temps» en français écrit</i>	Katie <b>Slomp</b> & Brittney <b>O'Neill.</b> (York) <i>“Gentlemen, start your engines and may the best woman win”: Troubling gender in Drag Race television</i>
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13:00 – 13:45	Repas de midi   Break	

# SALTED (June 9, 2022)

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## The SALTED Workshop at SALT 32

### (Prestige) English as an Object and Meta-Language

(Prestige) English has traditionally served both as the object of study and medium of study for formal semantics worldwide. This workshop aims to discuss what issues may arise from this virtual hegemony and explore some alternative approaches. Led by a panel of experts, we will discuss questions such as the following: What impact has the focus on English had on scholars outside of the Anglophone world? What can be done to increase the representation of non-English languages and non-prestige dialects in semantic research, pedagogy, and scholarly publication?

### Workshop panelists

- [Enoch Aboh](#)
  - [Donka Farkas](#)
  - [Carol Rose Little](#)
  - [Andrés Saab](#)
-

**Thank you!**



<http://www.tilcop.ca>

# References

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