## SPEAKING OF EVENTS

Instructor: Hana Filip  
Time: W 8 - 10  
Place: Keene - Flint Hall 0111  
Office: 365 Dauer  
Office hours: M 8 & by appointment  
E-mail: hana.filip@gmail.com  
Website: http://plaza.ufl.edu/hfilip  
Office Phone: 392 - 2101

**Course Description:** We speak of events - things that happen like walking, smoking of a cigarette, jumping, rain - with the same ease we speak of people like you, your cat and various objects like the paper on which this syllabus is printed. In the last five decades (at least since the work of Donald Davidson), events, what they are, what role they play in human language and thought, have been the focus of many debates among philosophers, linguists, psycholinguists, and the results of these debates have also been applied in first and second language acquisition studies, for example.

This interdisciplinary course explores some of the most influential work done on events in the tradition of Davidson. The course has two main goals: It outlines the basic features of Davidson’s account of the logical form of action sentences, and gives an overview of the main approaches within Davidsonian event semantics in recent philosophical and linguistic literature. The course also examines the link between events and language by focusing on applications of the concept of ‘event’ in semantics and linguistic analysis.

There is now considerable agreement that ordinary discourse involves implicit reference to or quantification over events, and that semantic analyses of a wide range of natural language phenomena are facilitated by (and, according to some, are only possible), if we use logical representations in which predicates introduce an extra position for events (and states), thus admitting reference to or quantification over events. Among them are: Adverbial modification, tense and aspect, anaphora, and plurality.

Apart from English, linguistic data will be mainly drawn from Slavic languages, German and Romance languages, all of which have received much attention in linguistic studies that have recently exploited the concept of ‘event.’ However, all readings are in English. No knowledge of languages other than English is required.

**Note:** Specific topics will also be determined by students’ background and interests – so do not hesitate to give me your suggestions! This also means that the course syllabus is subject to change and you need check for updates. Some of the readings given on the syllabus will only be discussed cursorily; in each given Wednesday session, we will focus on one or two items on the list, others will serve as reference background material. More precise reading instructions will be given in class.

**Course Requirements**
- **Participation in class discussions,** based on the assigned readings and questions/discussion points submitted by students: 2 questions/discussion points are to be submitted each Wednesday in class. If you are absent from class, you can e-mail me your questions/discussion points before Wednesday. Therefore, the assigned readings must be read before the class period in which they will be discussed.
- **Graduate students are also required to make one presentation in class. Presentations should be 30 - 40 minutes with a 30-minute question&answer period. Students can choose any of the articles or chapters on the course syllabus.**
- **One research paper** at the end of the semester. You should consult with me regarding the topic by the end of the seventh week. The paper will be submitted in two drafts. The first draft is due on December 5; the second at the end of the final examination period.
- **4 short essays or squibs:** each about 5 pages long (including references), the topics will be directly related to the assigned readings and may be determined by me, if you prefer it.

**Grading**
- 20% class participation  
- 80% one research paper or 4 short essays or squibs (each 20%)

**Required Tests**
- All required texts will be available electronically.
Week 1: August 29
Introduction

Week 2: September 5
Background: Davidson (1967)
The point of departure for many contemporary discussions of events in linguistics, philosophy and closely related disciplines is the work of Davidson, and his idea that action sentences are descriptions of events and represented with an event argument. We will start with a review of certain aspects of Davidson’s (1967) foundational paper.

To read:

Week 3: September 12
Events in semantics: Parsons arguments for the Davidsonian theory
In order to account for a wider range of phenomena than Davidson (1967) did, Terence Parsons (1980, 1985)—building on a suggestion of Hector-Neri Castañeda (1967)—and others advocate an analysis in which the original arguments of a verb, event participants in the described events, are separated into separate conjuncts and treated as predicates of the event argument. This approach is known as a Neo-Davidsonian framework for event-based semantics.

To read:

Week 4: September 19
The nature of events
Philosophers are concerned with the question whether events are universals or particulars. An early debate of this question starts with Chisholm and Davidson; Kim and Lewis advocate the particularist view.

To read:

Week 5: September 26
Events and plurality
To read:
Week 6: October 3

Events and Thematic Roles

Many contemporary event-based semantic frameworks are enriched with thematic roles like Agent, Theme, Experiencer, etc. Although most linguists agree that these are useful concepts for capturing a variety of generalizations about natural languages, their nature is rather elusive. What are these roles? Are they universal across languages?

To read:


Week 7: October 10

Referring to events and propositions

Gerunds (e.g., Reading this book is easy) are used in English to make explicit reference to events and propositions. That-clauses are also standardly taken to refer to propositions. Neither assumption is uncontroversial.

To read:


Week 8: October 17

The semantics of causatives

Does ‘John killed Bill’ mean something like ‘John did something that caused Bill to die’? Is causation built into the lexical semantics of verbs we use? Does the analysis of causatives require reference to events?

To read:


Week 9: October 24

The semantics of the progressive aspect: English

What is the relation between the meanings of ‘Mary was crossing the street’ and ‘Mary crossed the street’? How come ‘Mary was crossing the street’ can be true, and felicitiously uttered, even if Mary never actually managed to cross the street? In contrast, the same puzzle does not arise for ‘Mary was running’ and ‘Mary ran.’

Such data point to two levels in the descriptions of events: (1) the essential Aristotelian distinction between (descriptions of) events that have some inherent limit or end (e.g., cross the street, die, TELIC verbal
predicates) and those that lack it (e.g., run, an ATELIC verb); and (2) distinctions in perspectives (or viewpoints) on events: for instance, we describe events as ‘ongoing’ or not, a choice that in English is enforced by the choice between a PROGRESSIVE verb form (John was dying) vs. NON-PROGRESSIVE one (John died).

To read:

Week 10: October 31

**The perfective and imperfective aspect: Slavic Languages**

While in English, we are forced to describe events as ‘ongoing’ or not by the choice between a PROGRESSIVE verb form (John was dying) vs. NON-PROGRESSIVE one (John died), a choice between a PERFECTIVE vs. an IMPERFECTIVE verb form, as in Slavic or Romance languages, enforces a choice between describing events as ‘completed’, ‘in their entirety’ or not.

Virtually all contemporary studies on events and verb semantics in linguistics cite Slavic languages to illustrate what a paradigmatic example of the aspect category in natural languages looks like. However, in fact, it belongs to one of the most enigmatic ones. It poses many problems, and some intractable, to the state-of-the-art semantic (and also syntactic) theories, mainly developed on the basis of English data.

To read:


Week 12: November 14
Event-Semantics enriched with lattice structures II: interactions and mutual constraints between verbs and nouns in the encoding of events

The encoding of events in natural languages is rather complex and often distributed over various parts of their grammars. Often, it is the nominal argument of a verb that carries the crucial information about the type of event described in a sentence: cp. *drink wine* vs. *drink a bottle of wine*. In contrast, in languages with a rich verb morphology (e.g., Slavic languages, some native American Indian languages), it is the verb that often carries virtually all the information about the type of the described event and also whether it is presented as completed or in progress, and it is also the verb that influences the interpretation of its nominal arguments.

To read:

Week 13: November 21
TBA

Week 14: November 28
Events: Cross-linguistic view
“... the true difference between languages is not in what mayor may not be expressed but in what must or must not be conveyed by the speakers.” (Roman Jakobson, 1959)

To read:

Week 15: December 5
Students’ presentations: Final papers

Additional references to the relevant primary and secondary material will be provided during the semester, depending on students’ interests.

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