

Pinning Down Reference: The Syntax of Nominal Expressions

Elective course, Year 3 | Linguistics

Course Description

When we say *the cat*, *a cat*, *this cat*, *cats*, or *ȚiȚi*, we do far more than name an animal. We select a particular individual, a kind, or an arbitrary member of a set, and we signal to our interlocutor how to find it in the shared conversational space. This course asks how language achieves that feat, and what the structure of the noun phrase reveals about the way grammar and meaning are wired together.

We begin with a question that looks simple: what is a noun phrase, and where does its structure come from? Starting from the DP hypothesis, we examine why **determiners** are treated as heads that project their own structure, how this analysis extends across languages with and without overt **articles**, and what happens when articles are absent, postposed, or attached to the noun as suffixes.

From there we move through the layers of the nominal domain: **number**, **gender**, and other **agreement** features; the role of **classifiers** and **mass/count** distinctions; **possessors** and genitive constructions; and the position of **adjectives**, **demonstratives**, and **quantifiers**. Throughout, we ask which of these properties are syntactic, which are semantic, and which sit at the interface with pragmatics, where definiteness, specificity, and referentiality turn out to be related but not interchangeable notions.

The second half of the course turns to **reference** proper. We look at how nominal expressions are anchored to discourse through familiarity, uniqueness, and salience; how **proper names** behave syntactically (why *the Ana I met yesterday* is possible while *the Ana* is often not); and how **bare nominals**, **generics**, and **indefinites** with different scopal behavior fit into the picture. We also consider borderline cases, such as role-names, titles, kinship terms, and vocatives, that behave like descriptions in some contexts and like names in others.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- analyze the internal structure of nominal expressions using tree diagrams and the standard diagnostics of the field;
- distinguish syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic contributions to reference, and explain where the boundaries are contested;
- compare the encoding of definiteness, number, and gender across several languages;
- read and critically evaluate current research articles on the nominal domain;
- formulate an original research question and support it with data.