The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages
First Term, 2026-27

Course Code: BMBL 2003 **Title in English: Sign Linguistics III: Syntax, Semantics and Pragmatics** **Title in Chinese: 手語語言學（三）：句法學、語義學與語用學**
Course Description: This course introduces students to basic aspects of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in Sign Linguistics. Through this course, students will be invited to appreciate similarities and differences between sign languages and spoken languages, especially in the three aforementioned linguistic components. Meanwhile, students will be encouraged to develop their own research topic(s) of interest and utilise this course as a point of departure for a further (related) pursuit, such as sign language acquisition or deaf education. Upon completing this course, students should achieve a better understanding of why sign languages should be considered as full-fledged, natural human languages and develop a better sense of how data from sign languages could contribute to the development of general linguistics.

Course Syllabus

Topic	Contents/fundamental concepts
Syntax	• Sentence types • Lexical categories • Word order • Argument structure and null arguments • Complex sentences
Semantics	• Lexical aspect: Telicity • Iconicity • Use of sign space • Referentiality • The meaning of sentences
Pragmatics	• Information structure • Doubling • Topic and focus • Discourse • Reporting and role shift

Learning outcomes

When they complete this course, students will achieve a basic understanding of:
1. How linguistic theory can be applied both to sign and spoken languages;
2. How to interpret modality-specific characteristics of sign languages against existing frameworks;
3. The principles of meaning in sign languages, including referentiality and construction of meaning;
4. The application of pragmatic theories to understand how context influences meaning and interpretation in sign language interactions;
5. How pragmatics can influence syntax and semantics and vice versa; and
6. Analytic methods of natural sign language data: identifying and discussing syntax, semantics, and pragmatic elements in actual language usage.

Course components (Teaching modes and Learning activities)

Teaching Modes and Learning Activities	
On-site face-to-face	**Time**
Lectures	17 hours
Paper- presentation-based tutorial	6 hours
In-class exercises	3 hours
Hands-on activities	6 hours
	Total: 32 hours
Out-of-classroom	
Readings	50 hours
Presentation Preparation	4 hours

Final quiz preparation	10 hours
	Total: 64 hours
	Grand total: 96 hours

Learning activities

Lecture (hr) in class	Interactive tutorial (hr) in class	In-class exercices (hr) in class	Hands-on actibities (hr) in class	Final quiz preparation (hr) Out class	Reading (hr) Out class	Presentation preparation (hr) Out class
17	6	3	6	10	50	4
M	M	M	M	M	M	M

M: Mandatory activity in the course
O: Optional activity
NA: Not applicable

Assessment scheme

Assessment types	Description	Percentage
Class participation	Students are expected to actively attend class activities and contribute to discussions. Punctuality (10%): • Definition of being punctual: No later than 10 minutes (0% deduction) • Late between 10 & 15 minutes (50% deduction) • Late >15 minutes (100% deduction) Bonus (no more than 10% in total to encourage active participation and contribution to class discussions)	10% (Individual) (No use of AI)
Paper presentation	Groups of students (2 -3 students normally) take turns introducing a selected tutorial paper to the class. Group PPT (32 slides max, including a front slide for the title and a slide for work organisation purposes, such as a summary of who is responsible for which slides). Assessment scheme (A) Group PPT (Total: 15%) PPT-related: (i) Contents: summary of the paper (5%) and critical analysis (5%) (ii) Presentation (5%) (B) Q and A session (Total: 5%) Answer questions from the audience (5%) Please upload the PPT to Blackboard after the presentation for sharing with other students.	20% (Group-performance-based) (No use of AI for generating the main contents of the PPT slides; AI use is allowed to facilitate understanding of the research papers)
Workshop reports	2 workshops will be conducted to cover topics related to syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in sign languages. Sign language data (mainly on HKSL) will be analysed using ELAN software. Each student should write, in class, a short (max 300 words) report summarising their findings based on the data analysed.	30% (i.e., 2 x 15%) (Individual) (No use of AI)
On-site final exam	(To be announced)	40% (Individual) (No use of AI)

Late submission policy

Timeline for making requests:	Students with valid reasons for submitting an assignment late must submit a formal request, including supporting documentation, to the course teacher no later than the very day of the workshop.
Supporting documents:	Extension requests, accompanied by valid and official supporting documents, must be submitted to the course teacher by email for approval.
Penalty:	Unless an official extension is approved and properly documented, late assignment submissions may incur a penalty. Specifically, late submissions will result in **a 5% deduction from the marks awarded per day, with no marks given for delays** beyond 5 calendar days. For extension requests supported by appropriate documentation, a make-up data analysis session will be arranged and must be completed on a working day within the following 7 days (calculated from the date of the workshop under discussion). Submit the report on the same day as the make-up session. Only unforeseen or exceptional circumstances beyond a student's control will be considered.
Remarks:	Requests submitted late or without valid reasons and supporting documents will not be accepted.

Make-up Test Arrangements

Timeline for making requests:	Students seeking permission to be absent from an assessment and requesting a make-up arrangement must submit a written application to the relevant course teacher **on or before the scheduled test date**, accompanied by appropriate supporting documentation.
Supporting documents:	1. **<u>For medical and/or other health reasons</u>**: Students must submit their request together with a valid medical certificate, issued and signed by a registered medical practitioner, explicitly recommending **sick leave** for the exact date or period of the relevant assessment. Attendance certificates will NOT be accepted. 2. **<u>For other compelling reasons/events</u>**: Students must provide official documentation, such as invitation letters from competition organisers, interview invitation letters or emails from employers, or external examination schedules, clearly stating that the event **cannot be rescheduled**. These documents will serve as supporting evidence for consideration by the course teacher.
Timeline for conducting make-up tests:	All approved make-up arrangements must be completed within a specified timeframe, i.e., 5 working days or 7 calendar days following the date of the originally scheduled examination for the entire class.
Number of attempts:	Upon approval of a student's absence application, only one make-up test will be scheduled according to the timeline specified above for each assessment.
Penalty:	A penalty of a **10% deduction** from the full mark of the test will be applied, **regardless of the reason** for the absence. Only **one make-up test** will be scheduled for the entire class, to be held within **5 working days** or **7 calendar days** after the originally scheduled examination date.
Remarks:	1. Late submissions or requests that do not include valid supporting documents will NOT be considered. 2. Students who are absent from any examination without prior approval will receive a failing grade for that examination.

Feedback for evaluation

- Students are encouraged to give timely comments and feedback directly to the course instructor.
- In addition to University course evaluation, there will also be a midterm evaluation to collect students' opinions.

Grade Descriptors

A	Outstanding	➢ Outstanding performance in all learning outcomes; ➢ Competent in theorization, generalization, hypothesization, and reflection upon issues; ➢ Skilled in creating, hypotheses and generating proposals to tackle issues with unanticipated extension.
A-	Excellent	➢ Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes; ➢ Skilled in comparing and contrasting arguments, explaining causes, analyzing and relating concepts to general theories; and ➢ Good at applying issues to relevant social contexts and predicting logically related outcomes
B	Good	➢ Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, or high performance on some learning outcomes which compensate for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance; ➢ Able to enumerate, describe, list, and clarify concepts and topics; and ➢ Capable of examining a topic from multiple perspectives.
C	Fair	➢ Satisfactory performance on a majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses; and ➢ Able to state, recognize, recall, and tell single points of topics of discussion.
D	Inadequate	➢ Barely satisfactory performance on quite a number of learning outcomes; and ➢ Barely able to recognize and state arguments in topics of discussion.
F	Fail	➢ Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, or failure to meet the specified assessment requirements; ➢ Missing the points.

* The final grade attained will be adjusted downward for each unexpected absence or tardiness in submitting assignments.
* Students are encouraged to be punctual, and there is a 15-minute allowance beyond which time the attendance is counted as zero.

Course schedule

Class	Date	Topic	Lecture readings (Readings preceded with * are compulsory)	Papers for tutorials
1.	10 Sept	**Preamble**	*Valli et al (2011). Unit 1. Defining language. *Valli et al (2011). Unit 2. Defining linguistics. *Johnston, T. and Schembri, A. 2007. Signed languages and linguistics. In Johnston, T. and Schembri, A. (authors), *Australian Sign Language (Auslan): An introduction to sign language linguistics*. Cambridge University Press. (Chapter 1). (pp. 1-26). Baker, A.(2016). Sign languages as natural languages. In Baker et al (eds.) Chapter 1, 1.1-1.6.	(Extended lecture) (Identify your group members for the tutorial paper presentation (ddl: 15 Sept)

2.	17 Sept	**Syntax 1**: Sentence types	*Valli et al. (2011, 5th edition) . Unit 15. Basic sentence types. Donati, C., Barberà, G., Branchini, C., Cecchetto, C., Geraci, C., & Quer, J. 2017. Searching for imperatives in European sign languages. In Olmen, Daniël Van, and Simone Heinold (eds.), *Imperatives and directive strategies*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, (pp. 156-180). Cecchetto. (2012). Sentence types. In Pfau et al (eds.), 2012, Unit 14.	(Extended lecture) (Confirming grouping information and deciding on paper distribution among groups)
3.	24 Sept	**Syntax 2**: Lexical categories	*Baker, A., and Pfau, R. 2016. Constituents and word classes. In Baker et al (2016). Chapter 5. *Valli et al. (2011, 5th edition). Unit 16. Lexical categories. Schwager, W., and Zeshan, U. 2008. Word classes in sign languages. *Studies in Language* 32:3, 509–545. Doi 10.1075/sl.32.3.03sch Kimmelman and Borstell. (2023). Word classes in sign languages. In Lier, Eva Hlena van (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of word classes*. (First edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.	(Extended lecture)
4.	8 Oct	**Syntax 3**: Word order (1) : sentencial level	*Sze, F. (2003). Word order of Hong Kong Sign Language. In A. Baker, B. van den Bogaerde, and O. Crasborn (eds.), *Cross-linguistic Perspectives in Sign Language Research: Selected Chapters from TISLR 2000*, pp. 163-191. Hamburg: Signum Press. * Pfau, R. Complex sentences. In Baker et al (2016). Chapter 7. Sze, F. (2022). Effects of the semantic and morphological factors on word order in simple transitive clauses in three Asian sign languages. In Fumiya, S. and Ritsuko, K. (eds.), Minpaku Sign Language Studiies 2, *Senri Ethnological Studiies* 107: 5-41. (https://doi.org/10.15021/00009867) Leeson, L., and Saeed, J. (2012). Word order. In Pfau et al (eds.). Unit 12.	*Johnston, T. and Schembri, A. 2007. Signed languages and linguistics. In Johnston, T. and Schembri, A. (authors), *Australian Sign Language (Auslan): An introduction to sign language linguistics*. Cambridge University Press. (Chapter 1). (pp. 1-26).
5.	15 Oct	**Syntax 4**: Word order (2): nominal phrasal level	*Tang, G., and Sze, F. 2002. Nominal expressions in Hong Kong Sign Language: Does modality make a difference? In R. P. Meier, K. Cormier & D. Quinto-Pozos (eds.), *Modality and structure in signed and spoken languages* (pp. 296-321). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Li, J.-Q. and Tang, G. (2020). Nominal-internal word order in Hong Kong Sign Language and Cantonese: A comparative study. *FEAST* 3: 43-55. Neidle, C., and Nash, J. (2012). The noun phrase. In Pfau et al (eds.), Unit 13. Coons, C. (2022). Nominal word order typology in	*Baker, A., and Pfau, R. 2016. Constituents and word classes. In Baker et al (2016). Chapter 5.

			signed languages. *Front. Commun.* 6 :802596. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2021.802596 Abner (2021) Determiner phrases. In Quer et al (eds.), chapter 10.	
6.	22 Oct	**Workshop 1**	Analysing HKSL data focusing on phenomena related to syntax (Students should bring a computer to the classroom with **ELAN** installed for data analysis)	(Submit your first research report based on your observations, alongside the Veriguide receipt at the end of the day) (AI use if disallowed)
7.	29 Oct	**Semantics 1**: Lexical semantics	*Valli et al. (2011). Unit 21. Meanng of individual signs. *Wilbur, R. (2003) Representation of telicity in ASL. CLS 39 April 12, 2003 Crose, D. (2012). Lexical semantics: Semantic fields and lexical aspect. In Pfau et al (eds.), Unit 20. Grose, D. 2021. Person, number and location: A feature geometric approach to sign language pronouns. In Sano Fumiya and Kikusawa Ritsuko (eds.), *Minpaku Sign Language Studies 2, Senri Ethnological Studies* 107: 65-86. Wilbur, R. (2010). The semantics-phonology interface. In Brentari (ed.) Chapter 16.	*Sze, F. (2003). Word order of Hong Kong Sign Language. In A. Baker, B. van den Bogaerde, and O. Crasborn (eds.), *Cross-linguistic Perspectives in Sign Language Research: Selected Chapters from TISLR 2000*, pp. 163-191. Hamburg: Signum Press.
8.	5 Nov	**Semantics 2**: Sentential semantics	*Valli et al. (2011). Unit 22. The meaning of sentences. Schlenker, P. (2018). Sign language semantics: Problems and prospects. *Theoretical Linguistics* 44 (3-4), 295-353. Meir, I. (2010). The emergence of argument structure in two new sign languages. In Rappaport Hovav et al (eds.), *Lexical semantics, syntax, and event structure*.pp.120-123. Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press.	*Tang, G., and Sze, F. 2002. Nominal expressions in Hong Kong Sign Language: Does modality make a difference? In R. P. Meier, K. Cormier & D. Quinto-Pozos (eds.), *Modality and structure in signed and spoken languages* (pp. 296-321). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
9.	12 Nov	**Pragmatics 1**: Information structure	*Hoza, Jack. 2011. The discourse and politeness functions of HEY and WELL in American Sign Language. In Cynthia B. Roy (ed.), *Discourse in Signed Languages*, Gallaudet University Press. (pp. 69-95). Wilbur, R. (2012). Information structure. In Pfau et al (eds.). Unit 2. Kimmelman, V., and Pfau, R. Information structure. In Quer et al (2021) Chapter 26 Koenders, E. 2024. Doubling in Hong Kong Sign Languages. *Sign Language & Linguistics.*	*Wilbur, R. (2003) Representation of telicity in ASL. CLS 39 April 12, 2003.
10	19 Nov	**Pragmatics 2**: Utterance reports and	*Cormier, Kearsy, Sandra Smith, and Zed Sevcikova Sehyr. 2015. Rethinking constructed action. *Sign Language & Linguistics* 18(2): 167-204. doi	*Hoza, Jack. 2011. The discourse and politeness functions of

		role shift	10.1075/sll.18.2.01cor Steinbach, M. (2021). Role shift. In Quer et al. (eds.) Chapter 16. Quer, J. (2018). On categorizing types of role shift in sign languages Quer, J. (2013). Attitude ascriptions in sign languages and role shift. Lillo-Martin, D. (2012). Utterance reports and constructed action. In Pfau et al (eds.) Unit 17.	HEY and WELL in American Sign Language. In Cynthia B. Roy (ed.), *Discourse in Signed Languages*, Gallaudet University Press. (pp. 69-95).
11	26 Nov	Workshop 2	HKSL data analysis focusing on semantics and pragmatics (Students should bring a computer to the classroom with ELAN installed for data analysis)	(Submit your second research report based on your observations, alongside the Veriguide receipt at the end of the day) (AI use if disallowed)
12	3 Dec	Tie up loose ends		
13.	**(TBC)**	***Final exam***	*(On-site, paper-and-pencil mode)*	

Main books referred to for this course:

[1] Baker, A., van den Bogaerde, Pfau, R., and Schermer, T. (2016). *The linguistics of sign languages: An introduction*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
[2] Brentari, D. (2010). *Sign Languages*. Cambridge University Press.
[3] Lier, Evan van. (2023). *The Oxford handbook of word classes*. First edition. Oxford: Oxford University.
[4] Pfau, R., Steinbach, M., and Woll, B. (2012). *Sign Language: An international handbook*. De Gruyter Mouton.
[5] Quer, J., Pfau, R., Herrmann, A. (2021). *The Routledge handbook of theoretical and experimental sign language*. Routledge.
[6] Schembri, Fenlon, Cormier, and Johnston. (2026). *Sign language linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.
[7] Johnston, T. and Schembri, A. 2007. *Australian Sign Language (Auslan): An introduction to sign language linguistics*. Cambridge University Press
[8] Valli, C., Lucas, C., Mulrooney, K. J., and Rankin, M.N.P. (2011). *Linguistics of American Sign Language: An Introduction*. Fifth edition. Gallaudet University Press. Washington, D.C.

Contact details for teacher(s) or TA(s)

Instructor:	
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Lecture time and venue:	

Lecture & tutorial Time:	Thursday 10:30 pm- 12:15 pm
Teaching Venue:	Y.C. Liang Hall G04

Details of course website

Key point: Information concerning the course is provided in Blackboard platform hosted by the University.

Academic honesty and plagiarism

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/.

With each assignment, students will be required to submit a signed declaration that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures.

- In the case of group projects, all members of the group should be asked to sign the declaration, each of whom is responsible and liable to disciplinary actions, irrespective of whether he/she has signed the declaration and whether he/she has contributed, directly or indirectly, to the problematic contents.
- For assignments in the form of a computer-generated document that is principally text-based and submitted via VeriGuide, the statement, in the form of a receipt, will be issued by the system upon students' uploading of the soft copy of the assignment.
- Students are fully aware that their work may be investigated by AI content detection software to determine originality.
- Students are fully aware of the AI approach(es) adopted in the course. In the case where some AI tools are allowed, students have made proper acknowledgment and citations as suggested by the course teacher.

Assignments without a properly signed declaration will not be graded by teachers.

Only the final version of the assignment should be submitted via VeriGuide.

The submission of a piece of work, or a part of a piece of work, for more than one purpose (e.g. to satisfy the requirements in two different courses) without declaration to this effect shall be regarded as having committed undeclared multiple submissions. It is common and acceptable to reuse a turn of phrase or a sentence or two from one's own work; but wholesale reuse is problematic. In any case, agreement from the course teacher(s) concerned should be obtained prior to the submission of the piece of work.

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Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools in Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

Use of generative AI tools

Approach 2 – Use only with prior permission

Permission is given to students to use AI-driven software to facilitate:

a. reading comprehension of journal papers
b. Grammar checks on writing outputs in the writing of research papers

Using AI-driven software to compose reports and essays is DISALLOWED.

a. For the research paper, students need to pass their research paper to the TA of this course to check the AI writing index first. Only AI index within an acceptable range (threshold: 30%; no higher than 10% no deduction to the final grades; 10%~30%, 5% deduction to the final grades) is eligible to be submitted for grading.
b. For both in-class exercises and the final quiz, access to AI-driven software is not allowed. Students should complete these two components of assessment individually and independently.
c. Regarding the paper presentation, students should prepare PPT slides themselves after carefully reading the assigned paper, rather than asking AI to generate PPTs for them.

Students who have used AI to check grammar in their writings should submit both an all-track before-AI version and an after-AI version.

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