

**Teaching:** one lecture, Tuesday 11-12, and one backup class per week.

**Assessment:**

**BA students:**

A one-hour test in the first week of the third term (25% of final grade)

One essay of approximately 3,000 words, due Monday, 24 April 2006 (75% of final grade)

**MA students:**

One essay of approximately 5,000 words, due Monday, 24 April 2006.

**Brief overview of course:**

**1. Cognition:**

Human beings are capable of a vast range of mental activities. We are constantly processing visual, auditory and other sensory phenomena and so perceiving objects and sounds. We coordinate our perceptions and our actions in reaching for objects and in moving about the world. In any one day we produce and comprehend a great many utterances, spoken or written. Our memories are engaged, both in recognizing people and objects around us and in recalling (or trying to recall) past actions and states of affairs. In order to fulfil our goals we have to solve an array of problems, from the relatively mundane ones, such as those involved in preparing breakfast, to the often more complex ones raised by the jobs we do and the relationships we are involved in, problems that often require careful planning and imaginative thinking.

The *first main theme* of this course is **the way the mind is structured**: to what extent it is a homogeneous whole employing general all-purpose computational strategies and to what extent it is a constellation of special-purpose processors with quite idiosyncratic computational properties. Naturally, this question raises a host of sub-questions. If some, at least, of the mental activities noted above are the result of special-purpose processors, how fine-grained are they? For instance, within visual perception are there distinct systems for colour perception and shape perception, are there distinct systems for perceiving tables, cats and human faces? If the adult human mind is structured, is it effectively so from birth or does it acquire its specialist skills through its interaction with the environment? What do considerations about the evolution of human cognitive capacities suggest about the way the mind is likely to be structured?

These are questions about our **cognitive architecture** (or, the 'boxology' of the mind), about the constraints on our functioning that are a result of the way our minds are constructed as opposed to constraints that arise from habit, learning or features of our individual experience.

**2. Communication:**

It is widely (though not universally) held that the human language faculty is a specialised subsystem of the mind (a module), distinct from general intelligence and problem-solving capacities, and that its internal organisation is also modular. However, it is less common for the pragmatic processes involved in **utterance understanding** to be thought of in this way; they are usually assumed to be a function of a general central intelligence system responsible for forming beliefs about the world by integrating information from a range of sources (including language, perception and memory).

The *second main theme* of the course is **the nature of the pragmatic processes** involved in the comprehension of utterances (and ostensive stimuli more generally) and whether they constitute a dedicated system or are simply one application of more general interpretive processes. In pursuing this question, we will focus, in particular, on the relation of the (relevance-based) comprehension system to the wider human capacity for attributing mental states, in particular intentions, to others (that is, our **'theory of mind'** capacity).

Such pragmatic tasks as disambiguation, reference assignment, enrichment of various kinds and implicature derivation are inferential processes which work on a particular linguistic input and require the accessing of particular contextual assumptions. So, in addition to the question of the place of the utterance comprehension system in the overall structure of the mind, there is the further question of the internal structure of the system itself: is it a single system which uses the same principles for all these tasks or is it made up of subsystems each with its own principles (for instance, one sort of system for disambiguation, a different sort of system for implicature derivation, etc)?

### **Preliminary Bibliography:**

( \* indicates that the reference is available from the departmental file)

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