Classroom Observation Report

Instructor evaluated __Nate Koser__

Observer(s) __Simon Charlow__

Number of students present __21__ Course __Linguistics 615:201:03__

Date __10/11/2018__

Instructions. Several days prior to the classroom visit, the instructor should provide the observer(s) with a copy of the course syllabus containing course objectives, content, and organization.

Procedure. The observer(s) should meet with the instructor several days **in advance** of the visit to learn the instructor's classroom objectives as well as the teaching methods to be used. Within several days **after** the visit, the observer(s) should meet with the instructor to discuss observations and conclusions.

1. Describe the instructor's content mastery, breadth, and depth.

It's good. I note a few cases below in which practice examples could have been better chosen, but I didn't see any reason to worry about Nate's command of the material. In particular, he hewed closely to our "official" theory of syntax, and seemed comfortable doing so and successfully addressing students' questions. At no point did he seem 'stumped'.

One *minor* issue: at one point a student asked if recursion was a property shared by all natural languages. Nate said he thought so. But…the issue is complex, and in a way that some students may have heard about, due to the coverage of Piraha in the popular press. The best answer here would have been that recursion is available *in principle* to any natural language, but that this does not entail that every natural language will make use of it in practice.

2. Describe the method(s) of instruction.

Nate began by briefly clarifying a couple points on phrase structure rules (e.g., emphasizing the importance of linear order on the RHS of each rule, expanding on what complementizers are). Using the slides from Tuesday's lecture, he briefly reviewed the major constituency tests (replacement, fragment, movement).

This was followed by practice drawing trees, which began with "Juliet says that Romeo lies to his parents a lot". Nate led the discussion from the board, soliciting input from the class as he went. The strategy was largely bottom-up, but not entirely: Nate projected the two VPs almost immediately, rather than building up the first, using that to build up the embedded sentence, and only then building the larger VP. I think it might have been better to more systematically go bottom-up, rather than mixing bottom-up and top-down strategies. The other thing I'd note about this example was the problematic status of "a lot". Nate quickly realized that the only way to treat it within our theory, as a lexical Adv, was unintuitive, but he didn't have much to say beyond that, and I think some of the students found that confusing. I'd either avoid examples like this, or have something teed up about idioms. The issue recurred later in another practice problem with "googly eyes" (in this case, the non-idiomatic analysis was allowed by our phrase structure rules).

I also thought this example was a *bit* closer to a homework question than is optimal: one of our problems asks students to analyze "Sally said that Harry read Middlemarch yesterday". Aside from the

obvious issue, the choice of example stifled discussion a little bit: when a student asked how to think about ambiguity in Nate's example, he had to demur (so as not to completely give away the answer to the homework problem). But of course it would be preferable to choose an example that allows us to fully explore the space of available analyses.

Nate discussed the two analyses generated by "John ate and bought a flower". This is an example we came up with in our weekly TA meeting. I think it's a very effective way to illustrate lexical and phrasal conjunction, and another kind of ambiguity students may not have seen before (and it has a nice resonance with one of our homework problems this week). Nate's presentation of the two trees was effective, and students seemed to grasp what was going on.

After a nice review of recursion, Nate helped the students construct a syntactic analysis of Defaka in the remaining 10 minutes (a useful dataset we inherited from Will Bennett *apud* Adam and Paul). Nate put a few simple phrase structure rules on the board, along with a small lexicon, and asked students to use them to produce translations of the Defaka sentences "we cook soup" and "the man saw the dog" (the latter was a bit tricky since according to the data set, Defaka puts PAST in T, but Nate handled it well), and to judge whether an impossible tree was, indeed, not possible, and to justify their answer.

3. How clear and well organized is the presentation?

It was good overall. Nate had a battery of topics prepared, and they seemed basically well chosen to me. He'd also written the phrase structure rules on the board before class, which streamlined presentation and discussion. I thought that the slides on constituency seemed a bit misplaced, and for that reason jarring in context.

4. Describe the form and extent of student participation.

It was consistent, which was good to see. There were a few cases I noted where Nate seemed to slightly misconstrue a student's question. In one instance, it seemed to me that a student was asking why some of Nate's subtrees had connecting lines, and others had lines which pointed at the same phrasal node label, but didn't quite connect (hope this is clear, but let me know if not). It was just a question about formatting, I think, and could have been an opportunity to discuss that these aren't substantively different ways to draw trees.

There were a couple instances where a student's question suggested that the student was making a mistake in reasoning about how the theory works, or experiencing difficulty applying it. For example, a student asked whether the tree for the 'normal' reading of "Mary saw the elk with the binoculars" represented the elk-with-binoculars reading. Nate correctly said it didn't, but did not so much probe *why* the student had made that mistake, which would have been instructive for her, potentially the rest of the class, Nate, and indeed myself. This is the approach I try to take in general: instead of motivating the rightness of the right answer, I think it's useful to try to understand where the wrong answers come from.

Sort of related to this last point: when a student asked whether the ConjP rule allowed NP conj VP, Nate said it didn't – that only like phrases could be connected by a conj -- and left it there. This was an opportunity to get the student *herself* to figure out the right answer, to convince herself *why* it's the right one, and to understand more deeply that we aren't imposing this theory on them and asking them to learn it – rather, the theory is modeling something she already knows (so in general, when questions like that arise, there's an intuition-oriented methodology for finding the answers). This is a point I emphasize in my lectures, and it would be nice to see this motif in recitation too.

In general, there seemed to be a subset of students who consistently participated, and a substantial subset of students who did not. I'd suggest that Nate find ways to engage the "silent majority" and to get a better sense of what they're following and what they're not. Of course, it's

5. What specific suggestions would you make to improve this instructor's teaching?

This is a minor point since it only took up a bit of class-time, but when reviewing concepts introduced in lecture, I would try not to simply re-hash the slides from lecture. Of course, you can use my slides, but expand on them, present the material from a slightly different vantage point, do something so that it's doesn't end up being the students seeing the same thing they saw on Tuesday, a second time.

One of the issues I mentioned above is easy to address: the practice constructions could be chosen a bit more carefully. A few examples had irrelevant complications arising from idiomatic phrases; another was too close to a homework problem.

It might be good to make a bit more use of group-work in recitation, but I believe one of Nate's students is particularly averse to that.

(Was there a sign-in sheet? If so, I didn't notice – please be certain you have some way of fairly and systematically assessing attendance and participation.)