

**SALT(ED)**  
**May 6, 2021**

# **African American English in Core Linguistics?**

**Lisa Green**  
**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

# Focus

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**(Why) Should data from African American English (AAE) be presented in semantics courses?**

# **Motivation for including AAE in courses**

*What is the motivation?*

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion



**Temporary  
interest in  
AAE**

**AAE system**



**Undergraduate and graduate education  
(e.g., graduate TAs)**

# Some guiding questions

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**AAE is not understudied, so why is it underrepresented?**

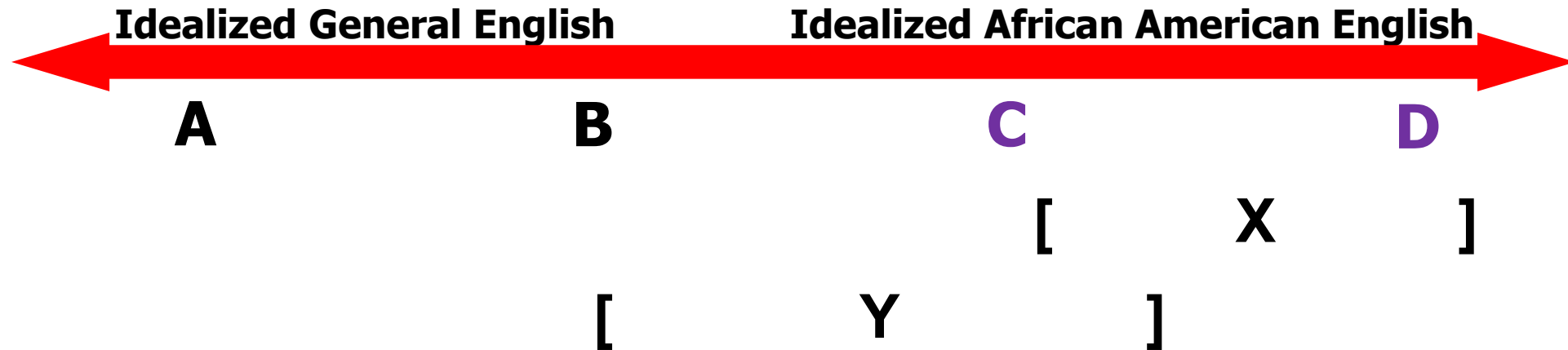
**What type of AAE-related data might be presented in semantics (semantic contexts)?**



# Quick introduction to AAE

## Patterns & Systems

Variety that has set syntactic, morphological, phonological, semantic, pragmatic, and lexical patterns that are intertwined with structures of general English



# **State of AAE in linguistics courses**

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**General education**

**Introductory texts**

**Sociolinguistics**

**Some computation  
(Twitter, CORAAL)**

# No clear pathway to “core” linguistics

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Akmajian et al.  
(1995)

Black English. See Inner-city English. pp. 259, 268, 277, 278

Language styles and dialects

*logical and sophisticated, “is every bit as rule-governed and as logical as SAE”*

- You makin’ sense, but you don’t be makin’ sense!  
(from Dillard 1972)

Inner-city English and the verb *Be*

*“...deletion of the verb be (and other auxiliary verbs) is a feature of all American dialects, not just Inner-city English”*

Akmajian, A., R. A. Demers, A. K. Farmer, R. M. Harnish. 1995.. *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication* 4<sup>th</sup> edition. MIT Press.

# No clear pathway to “core” linguistics

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Fromkin et al.  
(2007)

African American English, pp. 15, 423-427, 439, 452

Social dialect

- Against inferior genetic intelligence and cultural deprivation
- Differences between AAE and MAE: phonology, syntax
- History of AAE: African slaves: Southern dialects, “It is apparent that AAE is closer to Southern dialects of American English than to other dialects.”

Fromkin, V., R. Rodman, and N. Hyams. 2007. *An Introduction to Language* 8<sup>th</sup> edition. Thomson Wadsworth.



# No clear pathway to “core” linguistics

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**Finegan, E. (2008)**

**Ethnic Varieties of American English  
African American English pp. 366-369, 384ex**

- All language universals described in Chapter 7 apply to African American English and Chicano English
- Not only African Americans speak it
- Unclear history
- Phonological and grammatical features

**African Americans in cities are not participating in Northern Cities shift indication that AAE and standard English are diverging**

**Grammatical patterns in AAE are not well-formed in standard English, but that has no bearing on their grammaticality in AAE.**

Finegan, E., 2008. *Language: Its Structure and Use* 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Bedford St. Martins.

# No clear pathway to “core” linguistics

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**O’Grady et al.  
(2010)**

**Language in social contexts—The case of Urban African American English pp. 499-500**

- **Development as result of social isolation, Great Migration**

**Ethnicity: The case of African American English pp.508 – 511**

- **Against “lazy articulation or cultural deprivation”**
- **Features (also shared with other varieties) phonological, morphosyntactic, aspectual**

**Contemporary AAE continues to provide avenues of research for sociolinguists (e.g., regional diversity, teaching materials)**

O’Grady, W., J. Archibald, M. Aronoff, and J. Rees-Miller. 2010. *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction* 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Bedford St. Martins.

# No clear pathway to “core” linguistics

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**Denham and  
Lobeck (2013)**

**Ethnic dialects (African American English, pp. 418-420):  
Link to West African languages, reference to relation  
between AAE and southern English owing to “black  
nannies” and white children’s having “black children of  
slaves” as playmates.**

**Features related to West African languages (aspect,  
phonology, lexicon)**

**Decreolization**

**The Ann Arbor Trial**

Denham, K. and Anne Lobeck. 2013. *Linguistics for Everyone: An Introduction* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.  
Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

# No clear pathway to “core” linguistics

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**Fromkin et al.  
(2000)**

“...introductory courses in linguistic theory for undergraduate linguistics majors or first-year graduate students”

**African American English p. 118 (Chapter 3 Syntax 1: Argument Structure and Phrase Structure)**

**“Even in English, sentences with the verb *be* omitted are perfectly understandable, and in fact are fully grammatical in some dialects (including some varieties of vernacular African American English).”**

**(40) You crazy. (AAE)  
‘You are crazy’**

Fromkin, V. (ed.). S. Curtiss, B. P. Hayes, N. Hyams, P. A. Keating, H. Koopman, P. Munro, D. Sportiche, E. P. Stabler, D. Steriade, T. Stowell, A. Szabolsci. 2000. *Linguistics: An Introduction to Linguistic Theory*. Blackwell.

# Semantics unit in Fromkin et al. 2000

## Semantics II: Scope

- Negative polarity items

(cf. AAE)

- a. I didn't say Bruce was eating no apple.
- b. I didn't think Sue was going nowhere.
- c. I can't ride my bike with no training wheels.
- d. I can't ride my bike without no training wheels.
- e. I can ride my bike without no training wheels.

## Acquisition of meaning (aspectual distinctions)

- Stative vs. Active: Another semantic primitive

“Another semantic property that emerges early in language acquisition is the distinction between active and stative. In English, this distinction is marked on verbs by whether or not they take the ending /-ing/.

- a. Brutus is betraying Caesar.
- b. \*Brutus is weighing 200 pounds.

(cf. Brutus be weighing 200 pounds. ✓AAE)

**Opportunities for discussion of AAE**

# Grammaticalized Tense-Aspect Markers

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Marker	Description	Example
be	habitual, generic	His books be about plantations and ghosts. 'His books are generally about plantations and ghosts'
dən	resultant state (perfect)	They mailman dən passed. 'The mailman has already passed'
had	perfective	That's the test I had failed. 'That's the test I failed'
bin	anterior	I bin had this watch thirteen, fourteen years. 'I have had this watch for thirteen or fourteen years'
BIN	remote past	This conference BIN taking place. 'For a long time, it has been the case that this conference has been being held'

# Tense-Aspect Markers: Typology

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## Distinctions in past

Type of past	Markers and verb form	Meaning
Simple past	V(-ed) ( <i>opened, open</i> )	Event culminates before now TENSE
Preverbal <i>had</i>	<i>had</i> V(-ed) ( <i>had unlocked, had unlock</i> )	Event culminates before now TENSE-ASPECT
Remote past <i>BIN</i>	<i>BIN</i> V(-ed, -ing) ( <i>BIN left, BIN leaving</i> )	State has held for a long time TENSE-ASPECT

# ***BIN*** types

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**BIN**<sub>state</sub>

**BIN**<sub>complete</sub>

**BIN**<sub>habitual</sub>

**BIN**<sub>modal</sub>

*been*

Mona BIN at that school.  
Mona *been* at that school.





# **Tense-Aspect Markers: Typology**

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**Pragmatics (remote past *B/N*)**

- 1. What counts as the far past?**
- 2. What are possible *B/N* contexts?**

# Tense-Aspect Markers: Typology

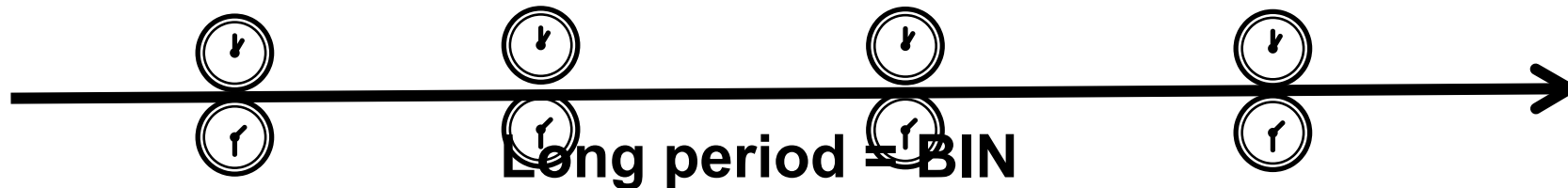
## Adverbs and Modification (*BIN* and adverbs)

1. \*He *BIN* running for thirty minutes. *BIN*<sub>state continuous</sub>



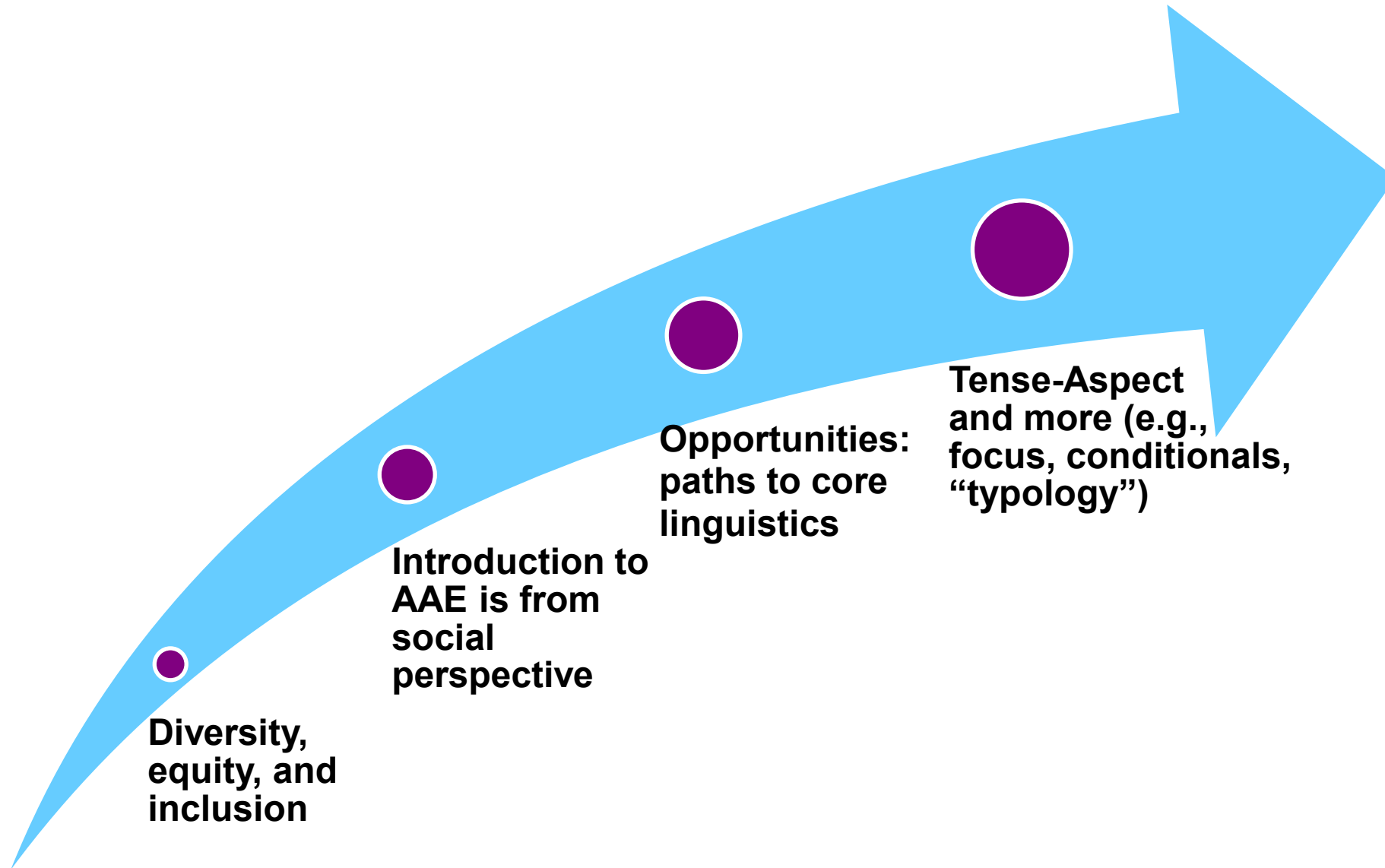
\*Long period = 30 minutes (*BIN*)

2. He *BIN* running for thirty minutes. *BIN*<sub>state habitual</sub>



# Highlights

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Get the slides & other materials at:  
[bit.ly/skillsbasedgrading](https://bit.ly/skillsbasedgrading)

# Skills-Based Grading:

An alternative approach to evaluation

Maura O'Leary, UCLA – [mauraoleary@ucla.edu](mailto:mauraoleary@ucla.edu), [mauraoleary.org](https://mauraoleary.org)

Based on work with:

Richard Stockwell (Christ Church, Oxford)



Douglas Ezra Morrison (UCLA)



# Our discussion today

- “Skills-Based Grading” – a system of evaluation which offers
  - self-paced learning
  - lowered student stress
  - more effective studying
  - more equitable evaluation
- Purpose: to open dialogue
  - What do our students need to learn and when do they *really* need to learn it by?
  - How well do they need to learn material before that skill can be checked-off as “learned?”
  - Where can leniency be built into the grading system?
  - Where can we cut down on student stress without sacrificing learning?

# Traditional Grading

- A series of *assessments*: assignments, quizzes, midterm, final
- Each exercise on these assessments contributes a proportion of the final grade for the course
- Generally, lost points cannot be recovered
  - forces progress along a uniform timeline -
  - students must learn material in the week it is taught in order to keep up with assessments
- Perhaps to compensate for this inflexibility, many instructors award *partial credit*
  - $\approx$  credit for partial understanding

# Skills-Based Grading (SBG)

- No one exercise or assessment is required
- Instead, each exercise provides an *opportunity* to demonstrate proficiency in a **skill**
- The course is broken down into a **skills list**
  - skills = what the student should know/know how to do by the end of the course
- Opportunities to demonstrate each skill are offered in the week they are taught and then recur on future assessments throughout the course
  - if students don't learn a skill in the week it is taught, there is no lasting negative impact on their grade



# Skills-Based Grading (SBG)

- Each attempt at demonstrating proficiency in a skill is marked as
  - “not yet proficient”,
  - “approaching proficiency”
  - “proficient”
- only fully correct answers are marked “proficient” – no partial credit
- only “proficient” answers counts towards the grade – incorrect answers do not affect grades

# Traditional vs. Skills-Based Grading

	Traditional Grading	SBG	
Course composition:	Assignments	Skills	
Progress:	Uniform timeline	Multiple opportunities	← SBG more generous
Understanding:	Partial credit	Full proficiency	← SBG more rigorous

## Other Uses of SBG

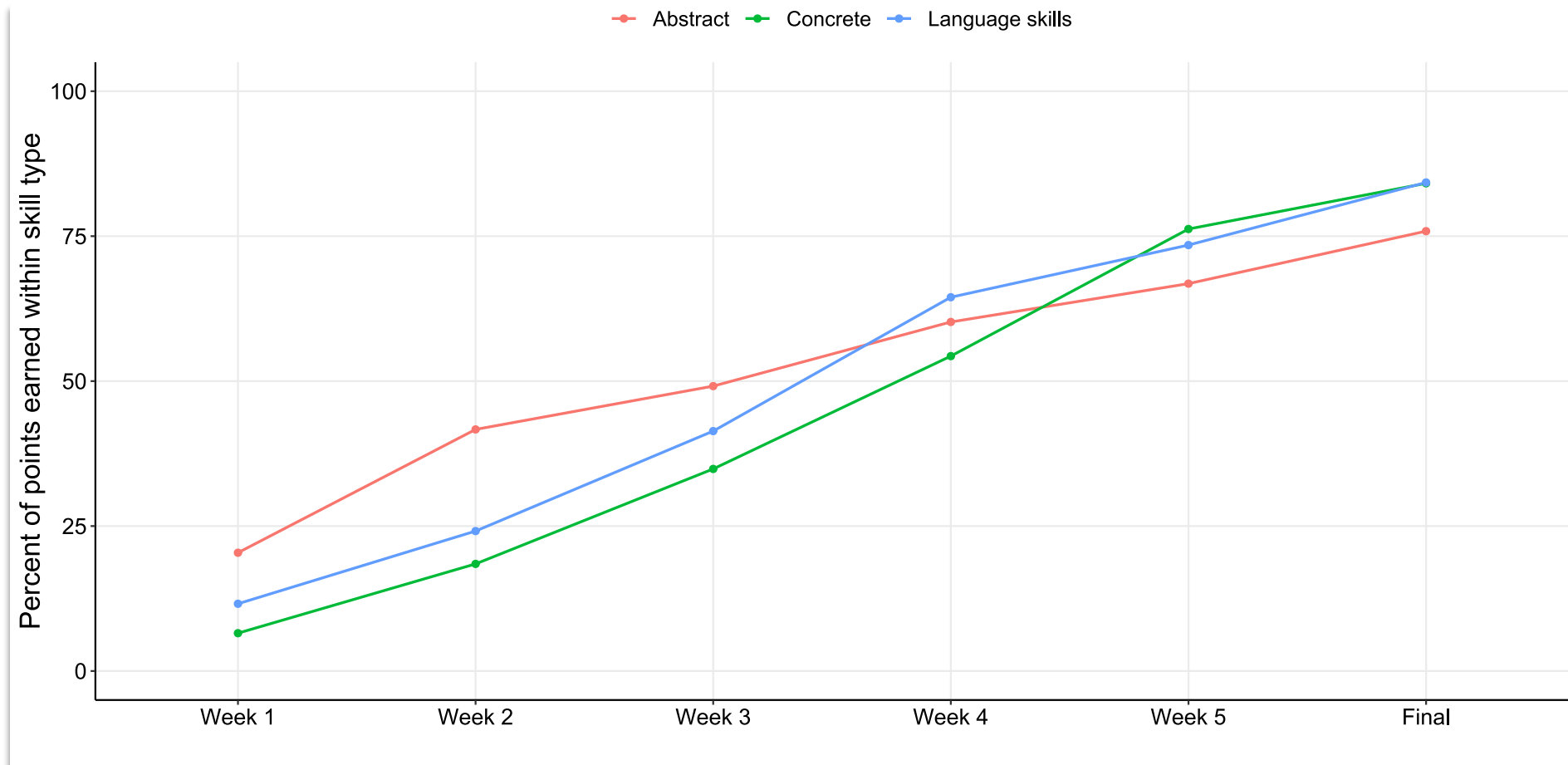
- SBG(-like) systems have been used in secondary and higher education settings:
  - standards-based grading (Schimmer 2016), mastery-based grading (Armcost & Pet-Armacost 2003, Brackett & Reuning 1999), specifications grading (Nilson 2015)
- In linguistics: phonetics and phonology (Zuraw et al. 2019)
  - most skills are algorithmic, with a 'right' answer

# Application to Semantics

- Application to an introductory semantics course involved
  - **concrete**, mathematical skills with a single correct answer  
(e.g. *propositional logic, set theory, predicate logic*)
  - more **abstract**, philosophical skills with infinite possible answers  
(e.g. *possible worlds, vagueness, definitions; pragmatics*)
  - skills requiring knowledge as a **language** user  
(e.g. *creating original examples; identifying contradictions, ambiguities*)

# Points earned over time within skill type

- We did not find any differences in evaluating students across different question types

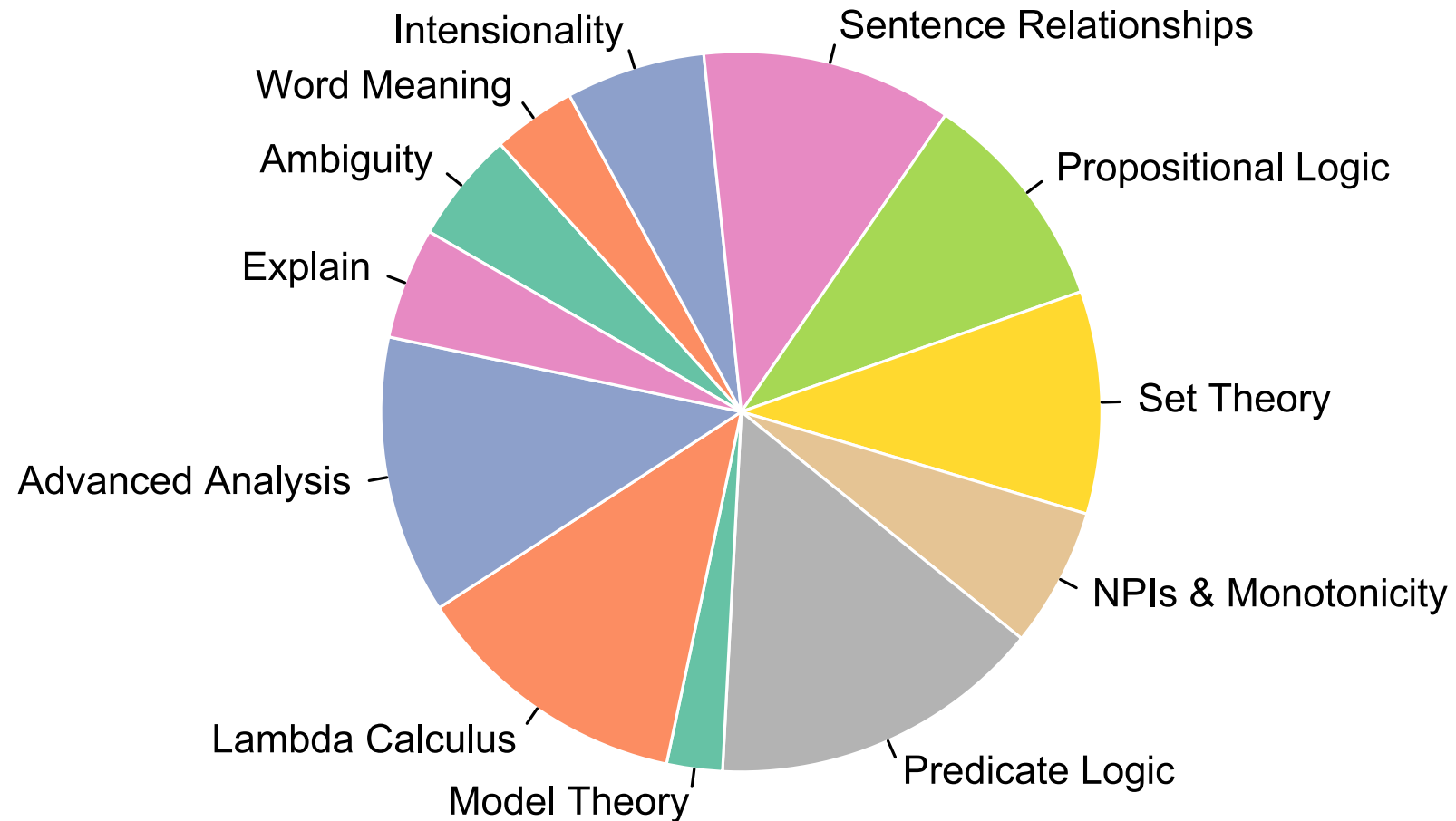


# The skills in our course

- Our course was composed of 47 skills
  - some skills required multiple demonstrations
  - for the most part, one demonstration = one percent of final grade earned
- We offered 3x as many opportunities as were needed
  - *a skill that needed to be demonstrated once was offered three times collectively, a skill that needed to be demonstrated twice was offered six times collectively, etc.*

# 47 skills broken into 12 skill groups

Relative weights  
in final grade:



## Example: Sentence Relationships

Sentence Relationship Skills	# of demonstrations required
4.1 Identify implicature & maxim	4
4.2 Test for asymmetric entailment	1
4.3 Test for mutual entailment	1
4.4 Test for presupposition	1
4.5 Test for contradiction	1



## Example: Sentence Relationships

1. Identify an implicature that A might interpret from B's utterance in the conversation below. Then state which maxim was flouted to communicate this implicature.

A: *Would you recommend Hanna for this tenure-track professor position?*

B: *She has excellent handwriting.*

**Skill 4.1: Identify implicature & maxim**

- ☐ not yet proficient
- ☐ approaching proficiency
- ☐ proficient

# Example: Sentence Relationships

1. Identify an implicature that A might interpret from B's utterance in the conversation below. Then state which maxim was flouted to communicate this implicature.

A: *Would you recommend Hanna for this tenure-track professor position?*

B: *She has excellent handwriting.*

## Skill 4.1: Identify implicature & maxim

- ☐ not yet proficient
- ☐ approaching proficiency
- ☐ proficient

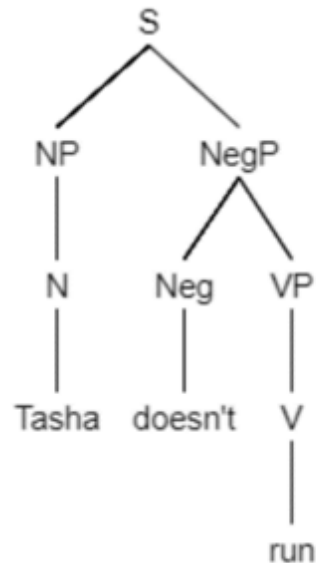
- Students know which skills they are learning and applying
- Grading is quick

# Another Example: Lambda Calculus

Lambda Calculus Skills	# of demonstrations required
I0.1 Calculate semantic type	3
I0.2 Give denotation (simple: proper name or predicate)	1
I0.3 Give denotation (complex)	3
I0.4 Derivation (simple: only proper names and predicates)	1
I0.5 Derivation (complex)	2

# Example: Lambda Calculus

2. In class, we saw how sentence-external negation might be formalized. Your task here is to figure out the semantic type of sentence internal negation (“doesn’t”) using the tree below.



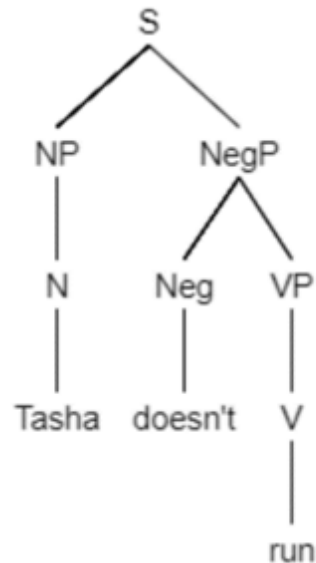
## Skill 10.1: Calculate semantic type

- ☐ not yet proficient
- ☐ approaching proficiency
- ☐ proficient

The semantic type of sentential “doesn’t” is \_\_\_\_\_

# Example: Lambda Calculus

2. In class, we saw how sentence-external negation might be formalized. Your task here is to figure out the semantic type of sentence internal negation (“doesn’t”) using the tree below.



## Skill 10.1: Calculate semantic type

- ☐ not yet proficient
- ☐ approaching proficiency
- ☐ proficient

The semantic type of sentential “doesn’t” is \_\_\_\_\_

Students can skip questions skills which they have already demonstrated proficiency in

# Advanced Analysis

- Some advanced questions required for an A grade – “*advanced analysis*” skill group
- Critical thinking and creative problem solving
  - more difficult version of another skill, combining skills, or something new
- Wide variety of answers are allowed
  - exercise is still graded ‘all or nothing’
  - lots of opportunities
- Advantageous for students who don’t always ‘get’ creative problem-solving questions
  - students can choose which questions to attempt, so they can find the ones that make the most sense to them
  - only need to get 1/3 of the offered questions correct for max points
  - an excellent example of the benefits of SBG: no consequence for wrong answers – just try again later

# Advanced Analysis

- An example: *discovering that Boolean “or” is inclusive, which doesn’t match the exclusive reading brought on by scalar implicature*

3. *Context: Your airline ticket includes a single drink.*  
*‘The flight attendant will give you tea or he will give you coffee.’*

- (a) What does the V operator predict for this sentence when both ‘he will give you tea’ and ‘he will give you coffee’ are true?
- (b) Given the context, do you think that it is possible that both disjuncts are true?
- (c) Answer one of the following prompts.
  - How can you reconcile this difference, based on what we have learned in class?
  - Provide a formula in propositional logic, using the operators we have learned, that matches your intuitions about what is true in this context. (That is, the entire truth table for that formula should match your intuitions.)

## Skill 11.1: Advanced Analysis

- ☐ not yet proficient
- ☐ approaching proficiency
- ☐ proficient

# Evaluation of SBG

- Quantitative and qualitative data:<sup>1</sup>
  - Numerical data from weekly **grade** updates
  - Student responses from **surveys** at the midpoint and end of the course:

“This is the **most transparent grading scheme** that I've experienced!”

“It was really great! **I wish all my classes did this.**”

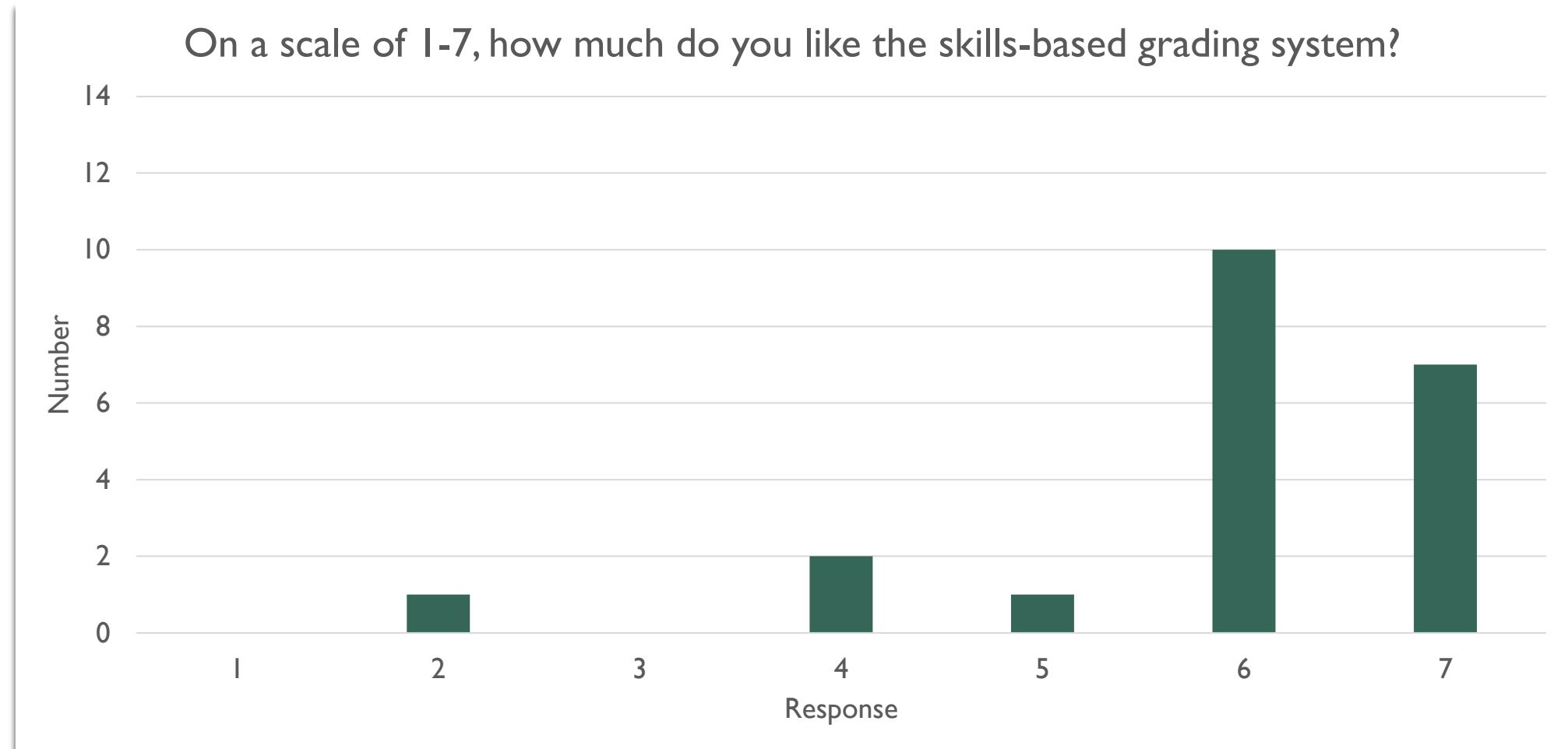
“...**an effective and accurate way to assess knowledge**”

“I think a student who succeeds academically in courses with traditional grading methods won't have any trouble succeeding in a course with skills-based grading, and **someone who struggles with traditional grading may find skills-based grading easier.**”

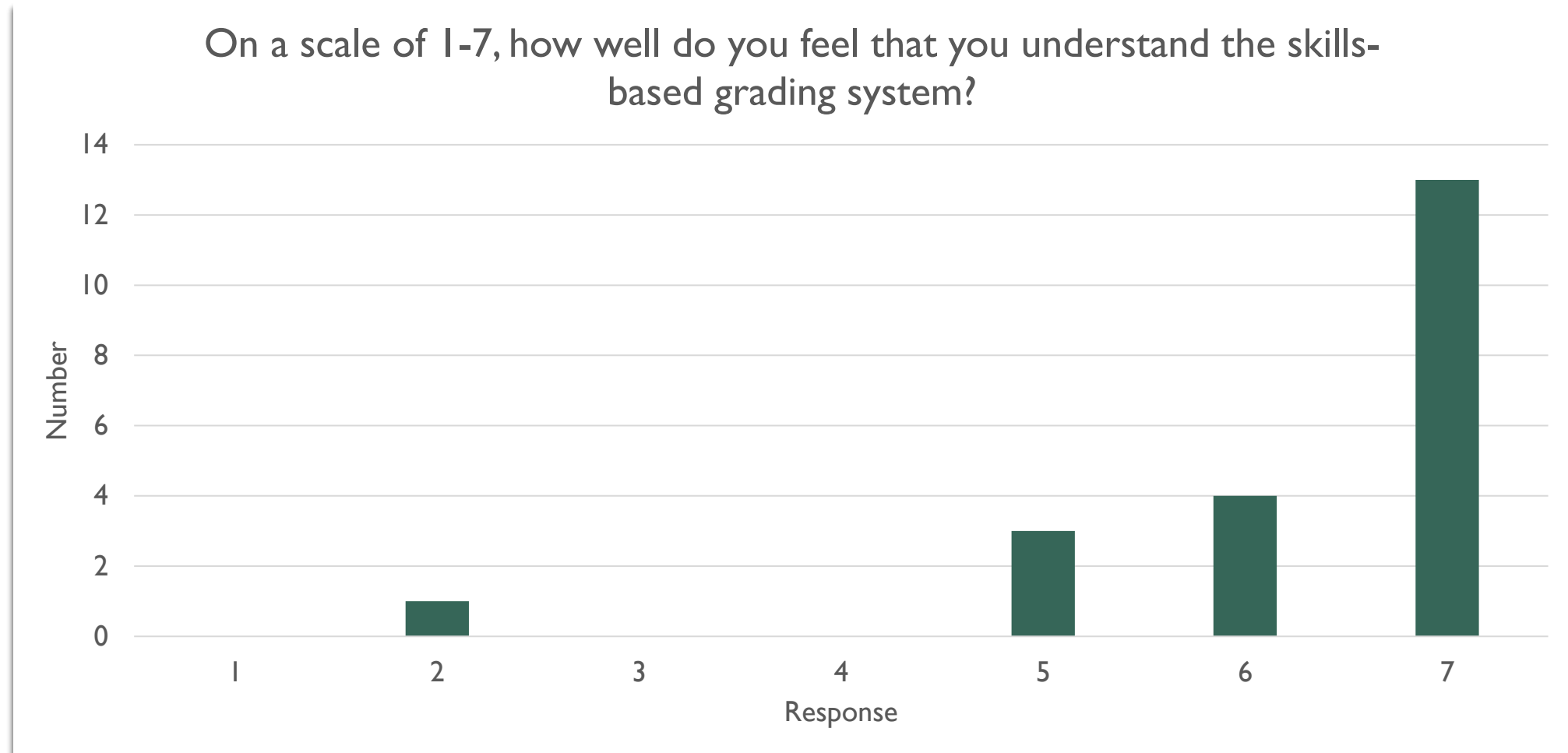
<sup>1</sup> For both grades and surveys: UCLA IRB #20-001297. Students were awarded up to 2% extra credit for completing the two surveys. Many thanks to Doug Ezra Morrison for help with handling and presenting the quantitative data.



# Liking of SBG



# Understanding of SBG



# Lenience

- Many things may prevent students from performing at their best at any given time
- Universal: illness, grief, global pandemics, etc.
- Particular: fairer to students facing structural and institutional disadvantages
  - more likely to experience external stressors which lead to missed classes/assignments
  - at UCLA, 32% of undergraduate students are first-generation,<sup>2</sup> 36% are transfers, 26% learned English as a second language<sup>3</sup>, and 35% are Pell grant recipients<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://firsttogo.ucla.edu/About/Campus-Demographics> (2016-17)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.apb.ucla.edu/Portals/90/Documents/Campus%20Stats/UGProfile18-19.pdf> (2018-19)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ucla.edu/about/facts-and-figures> (2020-21). Pell Grants are federal grants available to low-income undergraduates in the US. The number of Pell Grant recipients at a university is often considered to be the most accurate measure of economic diversity (<https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities/economic-diversity>).

# Lenience

- With SBG, there is no penalty for temporary setbacks
- All opportunities are repeated → no particular assignment is required → missing an assignment does not permanently affect the grade

What are some of aspects of the grading system that have worked well for you?

“Receiving **second chances** at receiving points when **outside circumstances may have hindered my current week's grades**”

“I really like that my grade couldn't go down, especially with everything going on and the class being remote **it was very comforting to know nothing could harm me**, whether it was missing an assignment or a question.”

# Lenience

- Compare to traditional grading, where one missed homework can severely impact a final grade
  - some instructors mitigate this issue by dropping the lowest quiz or homework score
  - SBG has this leniency built in and can additionally offer lenience to those who experience setbacks across multiple weeks and to late bloomers
- *Bonus:*
  - all students receive the same leniency, rather than privileging those who feel comfortable asking for extensions
  - no need for instructors to make judgment calls about what justifies extensions

# Less Time Pressure = Less Stress

- Helpful to students for whom time pressure is worst, for instance:
  - those with need for accommodations
  - those in different time zones
  - those who do not have easy access to good study spaces on a regular basis
- One student noted:

“Very clear expectations on what students get out of the class; easy to see strengths and weaknesses; **less exam-induced stress for students in poorer living conditions and students in different timezones.**”

# More Opportunities = Lower Stress

- Until the final, there is always another chance to demonstrate a skill

“...there was some **relief of stress** that came with the mention of multiple (and without penalty) attempts of questions on homework assignments.”

“**The fact that I would not be penalized** for not demonstrating a skill proficiently **alleviates stress and encourages me to try again**, which is very helpful to build resilience and motivation.”

# Equity

- Beneficial to students who may not enter the class with the same background
  - incentivizes re-attempting skills that were initially failed

“It encourages growth and a better mindset about ‘failing’ and **turns ‘no’s to ‘not yet’s.’**”

**“No cost for trying”**

- no demoralizing subtractive grading

“Being able to skip questions you don't understand at the moment and then return to them on another assignment once you understand them more **as opposed to being penalized for being wrong. Once you lose points for a certain thing in traditional grading you can never recover them** even if you learn the material later.”



# Effective and Efficient Studying

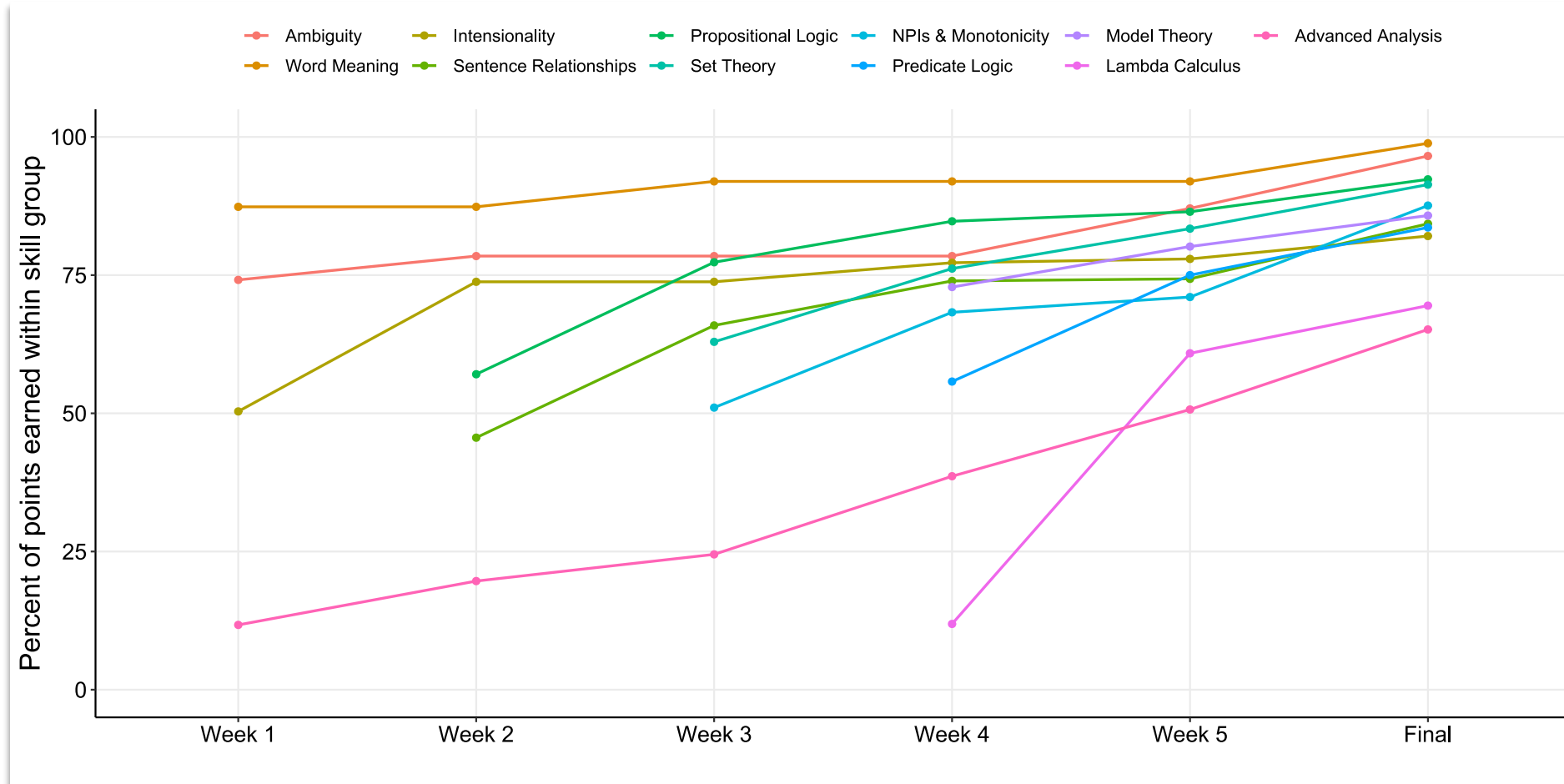
- Students can focus their efforts to make the best use of their time
- Once proficient, no need to demonstrate a skill again
- Helps students focus their efforts

**“I can focus on things I need more practice on** rather than things I already mastered.”

“I like how the system shows what you do/don't understand so you can **allocate more time into working on the parts you have troubles with.**”

# Points earned over time within skill group

- Some skill groups needed more opportunities than others



## A final benefit: clear labeling

- Students found the delineation of skills helpful

“I think there's a lot of value in this grading system and I appreciate **how it makes you think more about each individual constituent skill** that comprises understanding the course (as well as understanding semantics), and I think **my understanding of the material ... is better** than what my understanding of the material of a different given course would be ...”

# Summary of benefits

- Self-paced study and evaluation

“**Self-paced** learning and **not losing points** for not mastering a skill at one point in time”

- Effective study – clearly labels content/skills to be learned & allows students to “move on” from mastered skills

“it is quite **clear of what is expected** from the beginning.”

- Lower stress – no way for students to permanently hurt their grade

“It allows me to track my progress in the class, to see what skills I need to strengthen, and it **causes less stress** (from fear of missing points or getting a lower grade)”

- Works well for a wide variety of content

## To return to our questions:

- What do our students need to learn and when do they really need to learn it by?
- How well do they need to learn material before that skill can be checked-off as “learned?”
- Where can leniency be built into the grading system?
- Where can we cut down on stress without sacrificing learning?



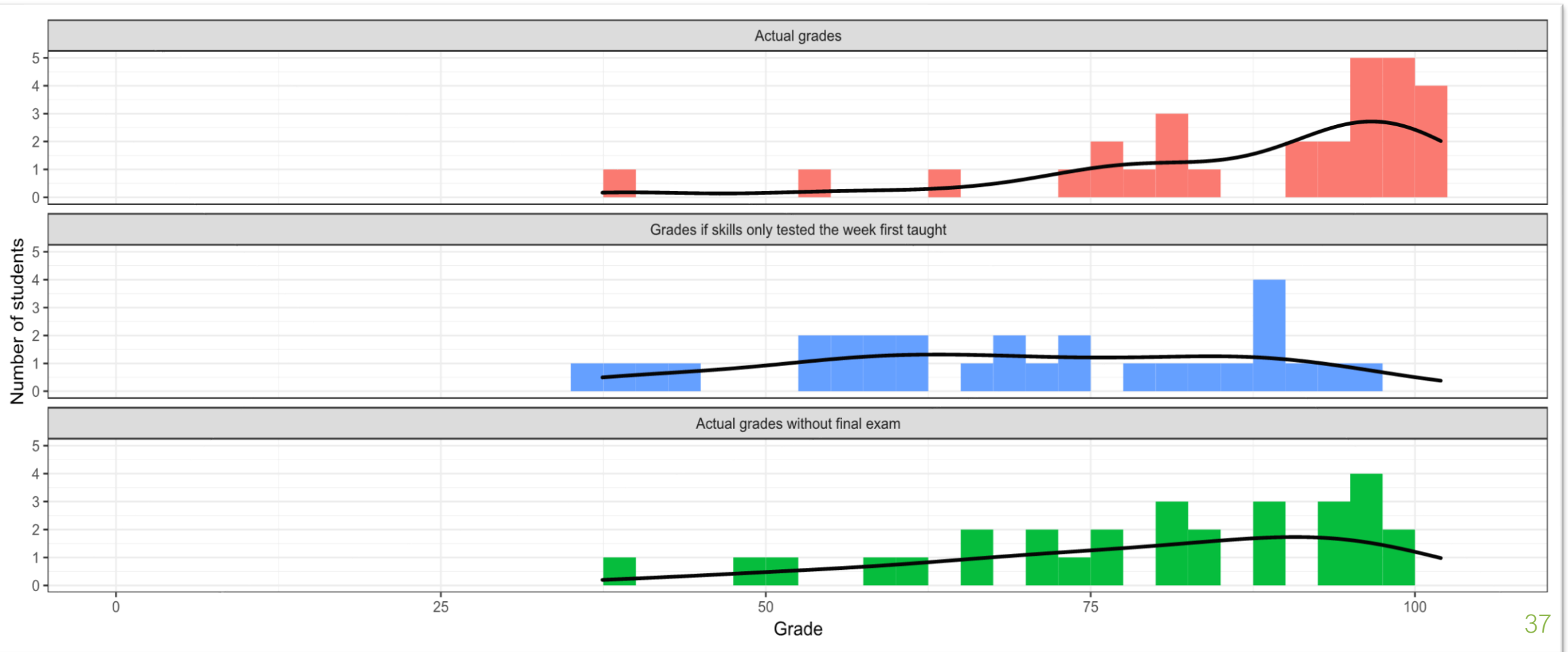
# THANK YOU!

Get the slides & other materials at:  
[bit.ly/skillsbasedgrading](https://bit.ly/skillsbasedgrading)

# References

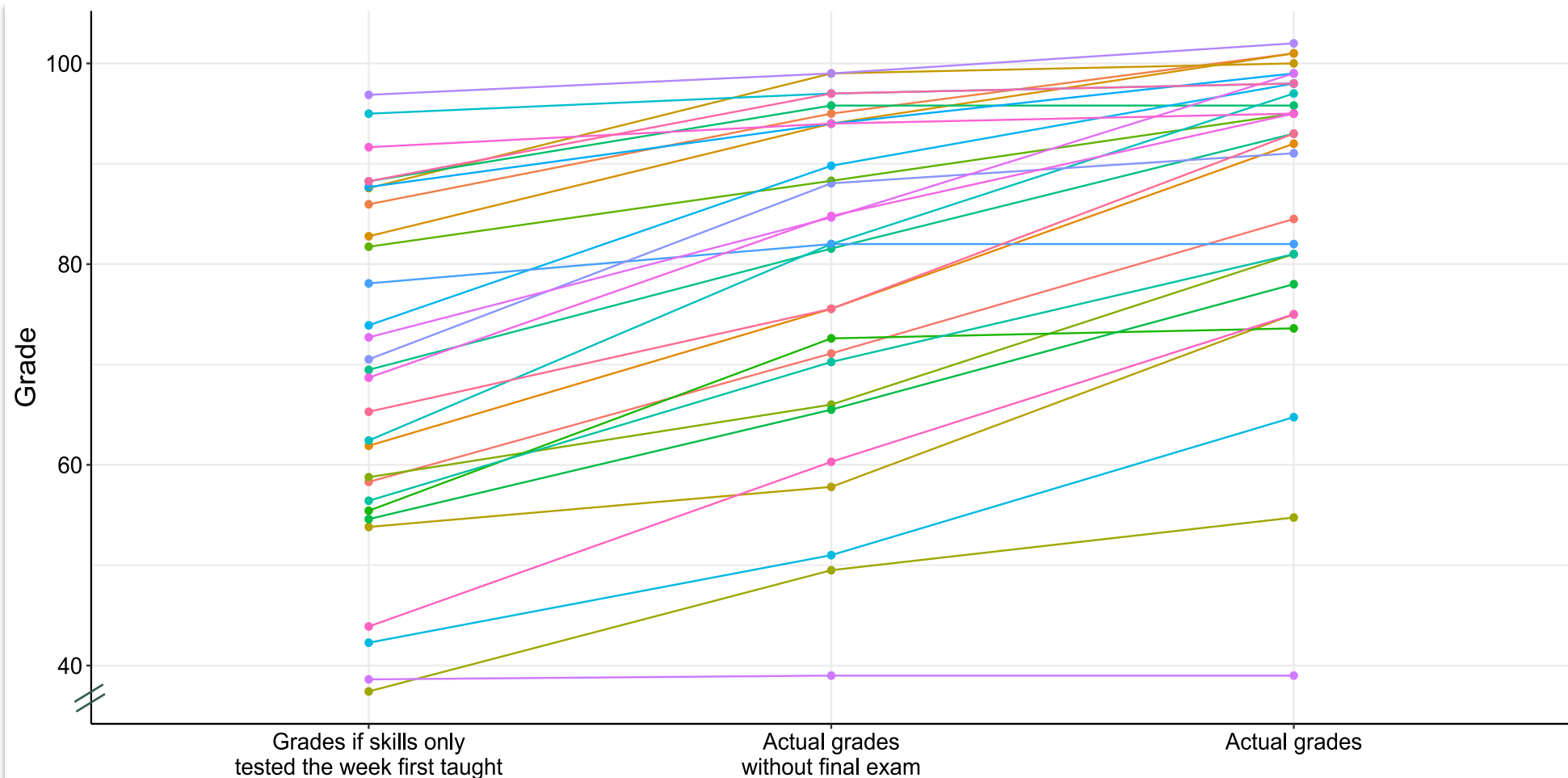
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- Zuraw, K., Aly, A. M., Lin, I., & Royer, A. J. (2019). Gotta catch'em all: Skills grading in undergraduate linguistics. *Language*, 95(4), e406-e427.

## Appendix A: Hypothetical “traditional” grades vs. SBG grades



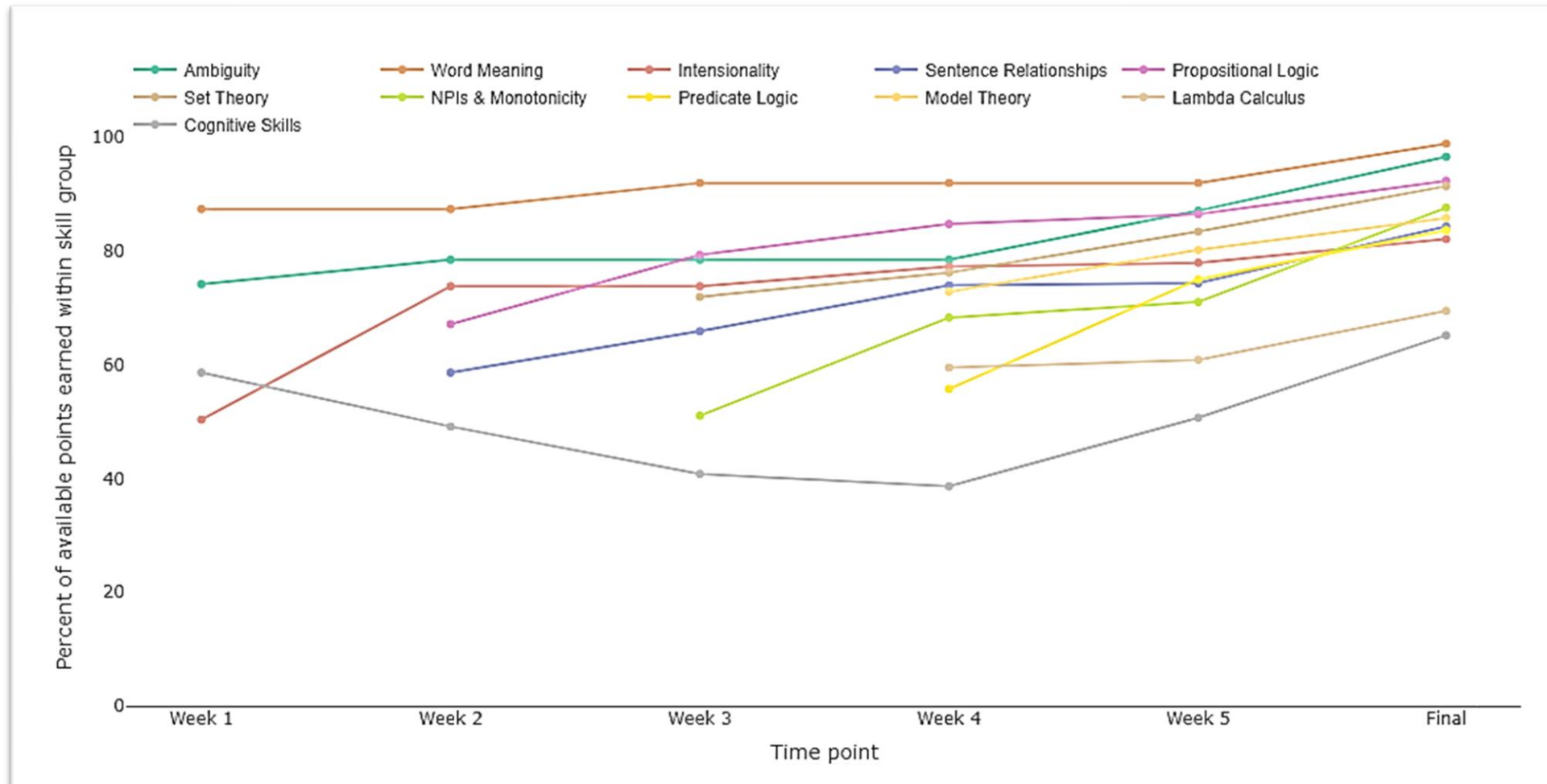


## Appendix A: Hypothetical “traditional” grades vs. SBG grades



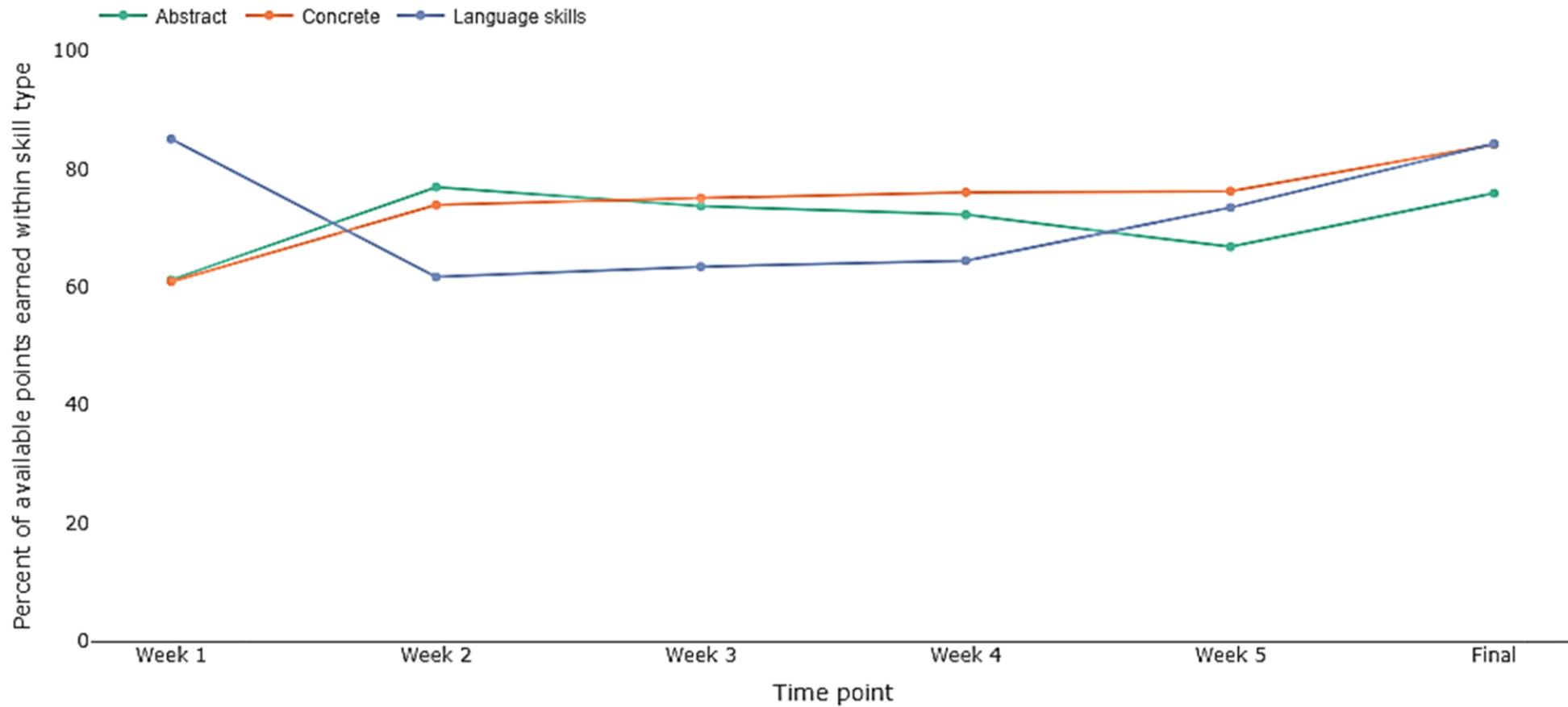
## Appendix B:

# Percent of **available** points earned over time by skill group



## Appendix C:

### Percent of **available** points earned over time within skill type



## Appendix D: Textbooks

- Main text:

*Meaning: A Slim Guide to Semantics* by Paul Elbourne

- With additional assigned readings from:

*Speaking of Crime: The Language of Criminal Justice* by Lawrence M. Solan and Peter M. Tiersma

*Logic in Linguistics* by Jens Allwood, Lars-Gunner Anderson and Östen Dahl

- And optional readings from:

*Semantics in Generative Grammar* by Irene Heim and Angelika Kratzer

*Semantics* by Kate Kearns

## Appendix E:

### For next time

- Offering more opportunities lowers stress,

**“More homework opportunities to demonstrate skills!”**

...but some time pressure is useful

- value each opportunity
  - disincentivize guessing
- Difficult to make repeated instances of simple skills adequately different, which sometimes meant that the exercises got harder over time

**“I noticed that each subsequent time a skill was offered on the homework, the problem seemed harder to me...it struck me as not very equitable towards those who struggled to understand or master a skill when the application of the skill was easier before.”**

## Appendix E: For next time

- Label skills on lecture slides/handouts as they are taught

“matching a skill with the lecture notes/slides”

- Something cumulative and mandatory to build to – a final paper or exam

“I think **the final should be mandatory**. It would be a good indicator of whether or not I have really understood the course content.”

## Appendix E: For next time

- Some students were concerned about the number of opportunities they would get:

“If I haven't mastered a skill, it's a little bit **stressful wondering how many opportunities I'll have left** to demonstrate it.”

“it would be **better if we can know how many chances** that we can have for fulfilling a skill”

- Note—from the syllabus: *“There will be more than one opportunity to demonstrate a skill that needs to be demonstrated once, more than two opportunities to demonstrate a skill that needs to be demonstrated twice, etc.”*



### FOR THE FUTURE:

- Regularly remind students of how many attempts they will get.
- If possible, specify exactly which skills will (minimally) appear on each assessment.

## Appendix F: Grades and Progress

- Some students were concerned about being able to delay earning points:

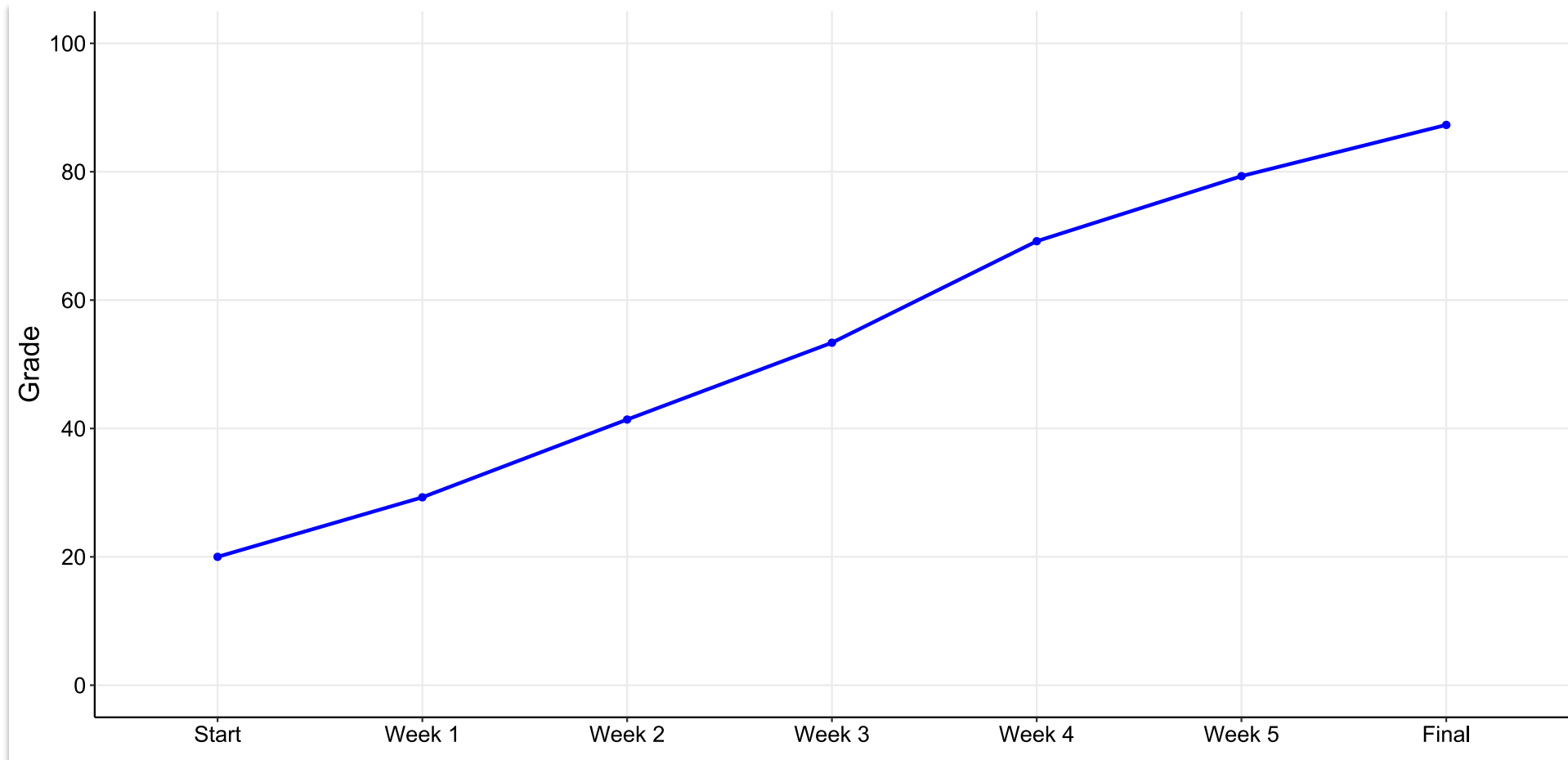
“Knowing that you will have other opportunities to demonstrate a skill has made it incredibly difficult to stay on track and motivated with the class. Instead of taking the time to get it right now, **I put it off**, I don't go to office hours, and I leave it up to the future to figure out the skills I haven't gotten yet. This grading system promotes laziness, for me at least.”

“**I feared getting complacent** and telling myself "oh I can master the skills/get the points later", which I feel would have caused an insurmountable amount of work towards the end of the course.”



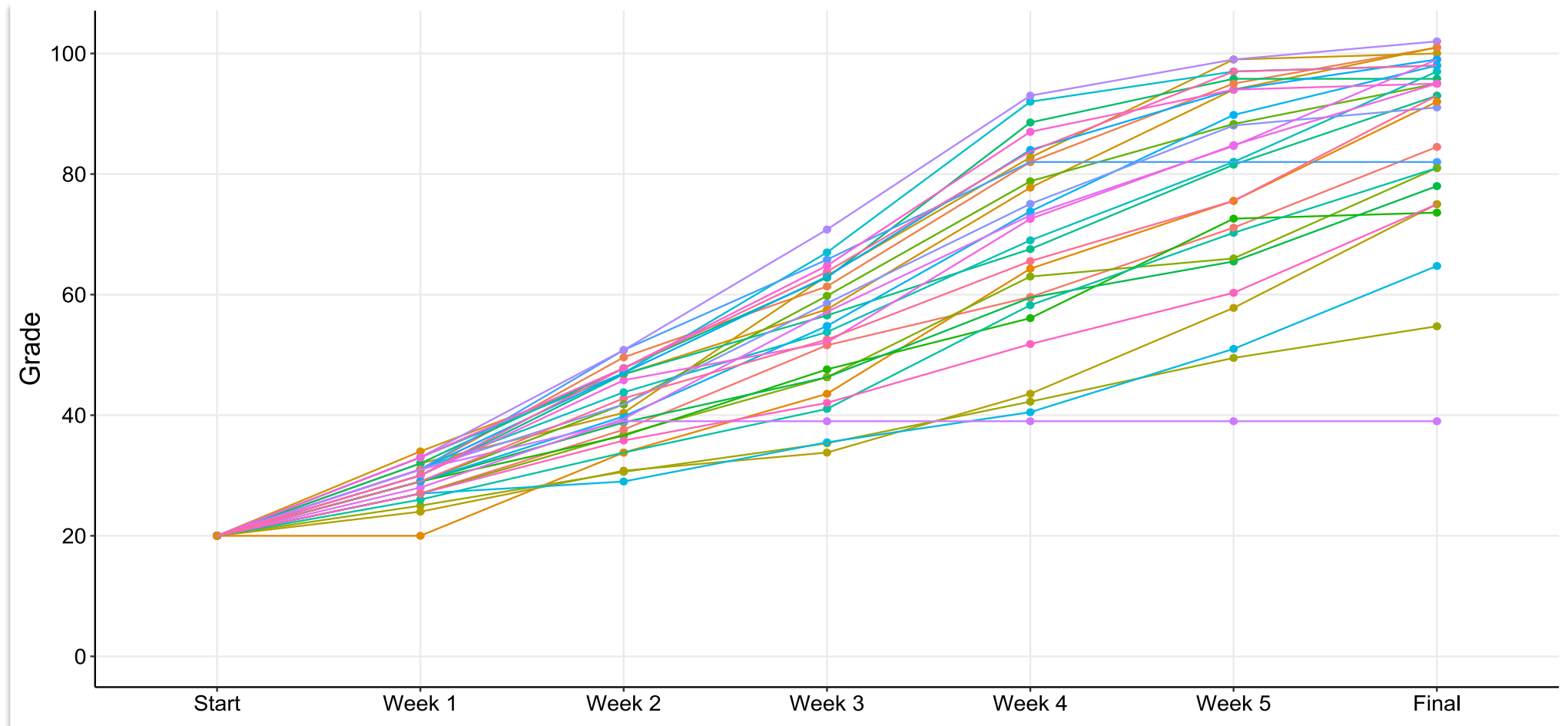
## Appendix F: Grades and Progress

- But grades increased very evenly through the course; on average...



## Appendix F: Grades and Progress

■ ... and by student



## Appendix F: Grades and Progress

- The additive nature of SBG grades perturbed some students:

“your total grade for that whole time is shown as a part of the total points possible for the whole class. Therefore, **near the beginning of the class it will report you will have a terrible grade**”

“Although my grade so far is listed, I feel as though there is still **some confusion** about where it will be eventually.”

“trying to **guess** what my **end grade** would be was difficult”



### FOR THE FUTURE:

Including the previous graphs in the syllabus might allay such fears.

# Notes on teaching formal semantics: a view from Queen Mary

Hazel Pearson

Queen Mary University of London

[h.pearson@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:h.pearson@qmul.ac.uk)

SALTED Workshop, May 6<sup>th</sup> 2021

# Today

- Who we teach
- What we teach
- Goals, challenges and outcomes

# Who we teach

- More than 90% of QM undergraduates attended state schools (= US public schools)
- 51% are first into higher education
- >30% are from households with income less than £15,000
- ~75% are students of colour

# What we teach

2<sup>nd</sup> year:

- Introduction to Semantics
- Semantics of African American English

3<sup>rd</sup> year:

- Meaning in the Real World
- Puzzles in Semantics (taught by Luisa Marti)

# What we teach

2<sup>nd</sup> year:

- Introduction to Semantics
- Semantics of African American English

3<sup>rd</sup> year:

- Meaning in the Real World
- Puzzles in Semantics (taught by Luisa Marti)



# Meaning in the Real World

- Real-world applications of semantics and pragmatics
- Law, clinical settings, politics, popular culture...
- Overarching question: can semantics and pragmatics help us make sense of our experience of the world we live in?

# The Real World in 2020

- Black Lives Matters protests in London
- Statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol toppled and thrown into harbour.



# MITRW: Topics in 2020

- ‘Black Lives Matter’ (Degen, Leigh, Waldon & Mengesha 2020)
  - Implicature, Questions under Discussion
- Stereotyping language, ‘Chinese eat bats’
  - Generics

# MITRW: Assignments

Problem set + real world ‘case studies’  
discovered by the students

Eg:

- Tweet by David Kurten, Heritage Party candidate for London Mayor, promising ‘beautiful British [New Year] fireworks’.
- #menaretrash and ‘Not all men’.

# Goals

- Provoke discussions that are anchored to students' experiences.
- Tell a different story about what semantics is and why we do it, emphasising:  
(i) data; (ii) real world applications.

# A different story about semantics

- A student who had been focusing on sociolinguistics develops an interest in semantics.
- A student who is planning to study law writes a senior thesis on de re/de dicto ambiguities with mental state adverbs in legal statutes.

# Challenges and worries

- ‘Smuggling in’ topics like implicature & QUDs by appeal to real world events that are so much bigger than we are?
- Discussing topics on which I’m far from an authority: ‘but Hazel, you have white privilege!’

# Conclusion

- Some modest successes – plenty more to do and for me to learn.



# Thanks!

Thanks to my Queen Mary colleagues, especially Luisa Marti and the sociolinguists (who are well ahead of us), and to Lisa Green and Tom Roeper.

In developing these courses I've been inspired by the work of semanticists including Liz Coppock, Judith Degen, Robert Henderson, Elin McCready and Andrew McKenzie.

Thanks to our wonderful students!

# Teaching semantics from a JEDI perspective: Some considerations

Nathan Sanders (he/him)

University of Toronto

6 May 2021

SALT(ED) Workshop on Inclusive Teaching in Semantics  
SALT 31, Brown University

# Roadmap

- 1** JEDI and linguistics
- 2** Decentralizing English
- 3** The Diverse Names Database
- 4** Social meaning in formal semantics
- 5** Conclusion

# JEDI and linguistics

# JEDI and linguistics

**Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI)** are important considerations in linguistics that we cannot morally ignore.

Language-based biases pervade society in many harmful ways, especially in education (Fletcher 1983, Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2011, Kohli and Solórzano 2012, Lippi-Green 2012, Flores and Rosa 2015, Blundon 2016, Bucholtz 2016, Russell et al. 2018, Cochran 2019, McMaster 2020, etc.).

As members of society who are also experts on language, linguists are thus uniquely positioned to help address these biases (especially in the classroom), and **it is our responsibility to do so** (as explicitly noted in various calls to action targeting linguists, such as Rickford and King 2016, Leonard 2018, Conrod 2019, Charity Hudley 2020 and Sanders et al. 2020).

# Decentralizing English

# Decentralizing English: Problems

Many subfields of linguistics have historically focused on a small handful of major spoken languages, especially English (Linell 1982, Bender 2011, Woll 2013, Levisen 2019).

This can be particularly true in the semantics classroom, where the linguistic variety of instruction (e.g. standardized English) also often serves as the object language and metalanguage, as well as directly inspiring the notation used in the formal language.

# Decentralizing English: Problems

This already sets students up for **possible confusion**, because it often relies on subtle typographic distinctions for important concepts (and sometimes, there is no obvious distinction between object language and metalanguage, except when embedded):

Alice, Bob, run, see	object lg and metalanguage
----------------------	----------------------------

<i>Alice, Bob, run, see</i>	OL when mentioned in ML
-----------------------------	-------------------------

ALICE, BOB, {ALICE}, {⟨BOB, ALICE⟩}	formal language
-------------------------------------	-----------------

or: Alice', Bob', run', see'

or: *a, b, R, S*



# Decentralizing English: Problems

But aside from this potential for confusion of the subject matter, this practice is also **exclusionary** to students who have less direct knowledge of the linguistic variety of instruction, putting them at a disadvantage

They may be users of a non-standardized dialect, they may be L2 learners, they may be users of an oppressed minoritized language (which can be especially problematic/traumatic in a classroom where the language of their oppressors is given more value and power), they may be Deaf/HOH (signed languages are historically minimized in linguistics courses), etc.

# Decentralizing English: Problems

Focusing on a single language can also create **false implicatures about universals or defaults**.

It is easy for students to believe that the choice to use the language of instruction means that it is representative of what languages generally do, so that other patterns are implicitly treated as abnormal or outright impossible. It gets positioned as the default by which all other languages are compared (and thus, are implicitly Othered).

# Decentralizing English: Problems

Worse, it implicitly **reinforces the social power of the language of instruction**, so that, for example, students come away with the impression that in order to understand semantics, they are expected to understand standardized English.

# Decentralizing English: Solutions

We need to **diversify object languages and phenomena upfront**, from the very beginning, and throughout the course, from the first day to the last day.

# Decentralizing English: Solutions

In particular, we should focus on and fully integrate underrepresented and historically oppressed languages, such as non-standardized varieties, signed languages, Indigenous languages, minoritized languages, etc.

**Important:** We should not only highlight underrepresented languages, but also their speakers, signers, and scholars.

# Decentralizing English: Solutions

**Caveat:** Discussing dialect variation of the language of instruction can be confusing and exclusionary for L2 users, so tread with caution!

# Decentralizing English: Solutions

Shifting away from a focus on the language of instruction allows us to **highlight phenomena that are widespread but not easily observable in the language of instruction.**

# Decentralizing English: Solutions

This might be as straightforward as greater crosslinguistic attention to phenomena like evidentiality, aspect, politeness and honourifics, lexical semantics (e.g. different verbs for *eat* or *stand/lie*), and noun classes that go beyond social gender.



# Decentralizing English: Solutions

But we should also consider phenomena not often included in a typical introductory semantics course, like iconicity in signed languages or phenomena outside neurotypical and adult language, such as how children have a different understanding of *promise* (Astington 1988a,b).

# Decentralizing English: Solutions

One tried and true strategy is to **find out what languages our students use**. Then we can bring those into the classroom.

This requires extra work on the instructor's part, especially for languages we aren't familiar with, but over time, an instructor will be more prepared with an increasingly diverse range of examples!

**Caveat:** Be sure to check in with your students about their comfort level with you using their language! Take care not to exploit them, exoticize them, and force them to be on display.

# Decentralizing English: Solutions

Another solution is to **abstract away from specific languages** by using scenarios set up with storyboards, dolls/toys, etc.

Constructed languages (conlangs) can be used for this purpose as well. Many linguists have had great success using conlangs for teaching a variety topics in linguistics (Punske et al. 2020), though rarely for semantics.

I have used conlangs for semantic drift (Sanders 2016). but I have not yet experimented with it for formal semantics, so suggestions are welcome!

# The Diverse Names Database

# The Diverse Names Database

It's well-established that linguistic examples often reflect and reinforce unjust hierarchies and stereotypes, such as those concerning gender and culture, especially when it comes to the choice of names (Macaulay and Brice 1997, Pabst et al. 2018, Richy and Burnett 2019, Kotek et al. 2020, 2021).

# The Diverse Names Database

As part of a larger project on JEDI pedagogy in linguistics, Lex Konnelly has been the driving force in constructing the **Diverse Names Database**, which is designed to help linguists replace their usual limited selection of names (*John, Mary*, etc.) with names that are more linguistically diverse and more gender inclusive.

We first previewed an early version of the database last year at the annual meeting of the Canadian Linguistic Association (Sanders et al. 2020), and we will be presenting a nearly finalized version next month again at the CLA (Konnelly et al. 2021).

But today, you get a sneak peak!

# The Diverse Names Database

78 names across three gender classifications, representing 30+ language families and 110+ countries:

<i>all-gender</i>		<i>feminine</i>		<i>masculine</i>	
Amal	Arabic	Anahera	Māori	Aimo	Finnish
Bounmy	Lao	Boróka	Hungarian	Baber	Urdu
Cahyo	Javanese	Chana	Hebrew	Carlu	Corsican
Deniz	Turkish	Danai	Shona	Digai	Slavey
Eryl	Welsh	Eteri	Georgian	Edmao	Limburgan
:	:	:	:	:	:
Xquenda	Zapotec	Xulia	Galician	Xuan	Asturian
Yunuen	Purépecha	Yolotl	Nahuatl	Yama	Pashto
Zhyrgal	Kirghiz	Zuriñe	Basque	Zaharia	Romanian

# The Diverse Names Database

The full database will be available soon on the **Linguistics Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Repository (LEDIR)**, where we are also hosting all of the other materials we have developed in our larger project.

`http://ledir.ling.utoronto.ca`

LEDIR itself is currently live, though still in early development. Please check it out and give us suggestions!



# Social meaning in formal semantics

# Social meaning in formal semantics

From sociolinguistics, we know that **linguistic variants index all sorts of social meaning**: age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, geography, place identity, stance, persona, community of practice, etc.

**Students love this stuff!**

See also slurs, taboo vocabulary, and expressive content, but tread carefully, because some of this meaning bypasses the use-mention distinction (which is itself an interesting phenomenon to discuss).

# Social meaning in formal semantics

I'm a bit out of my depth here, and maybe this is already happening more than I'm aware of, but we should think about how to better **incorporate social meaning into our semantics courses** and **make more direct connections with results from sociolinguistics**.

Rather than setting social meaning aside as a complication, we should engage with it directly and explicitly. Show the students how formal semantics can account for it and/or work through how it problematizes formal semantics.

# Social meaning in formal semantics

In particular, it can be really instructive to show how social meaning can differ between instructor and student (e.g. the evolving distribution of singular *they*).

This can be a great opportunity to let the students teach you. Some of my most fun and engaging experiences in the classroom are having students explain (what they think is) new slang: meanings, distribution, felicity conditions, etc.

**Empower the students as language experts!** Show them that their linguistic varieties are valid, informative, and just as meaningful and structured as standardized language varieties.

# Social meaning in formal semantics

This is not just important for teaching them semantics, but also for helping them become **good citizens of the world**.

There are huge important debates going on outside the classroom, and many of them involve language in some way (e.g. pronouns and gender inclusivity, cultural appropriation of slang, prescriptivism as a proxy for racism, etc.).

# Social meaning in formal semantics

We need to educate our students to be equipped to contribute to those debates, as well as to recognize misleading linguistic practices to keep themselves properly informed (e.g. framing and role assignment in media reporting, such as “woman assaulted” and “man killed in police-involved shooting”).

**We should help our students reach a point where they cannot unsee linguistic injustice.**

# Conclusion

# Conclusion

Just because formal semantics is mathy doesn't mean we get a free pass to ignore the social component of language.

Languages are not separate from the people who use them.

Utterances are never made without context.

There is no default language user.

We need to erase these concepts from our teaching.



# Conclusion

Some people do not have the privilege of being able to have their identities ignored, because “default” and “contextless” are really usually code for white, affluent, educated, male, cisgender, etc.

So when we set up “idealized” scenarios that ignore/minimize identity, **we are excluding some of our students from the conversation.**

And those students we exclude are already excluded by society at large, so when we attempt to idealize language by separating it from humans, **we are reinforcing unjust social structures.**

# Conclusion

Language is often used as a tool of discrimination, so the study of language is necessarily linked to discrimination, whether we like it or not, and we need to deal with that.

# Conclusion

Language is often used as a tool of discrimination, so the study of language is necessarily linked to discrimination, whether we like it or not, and we need to deal with that.

**If we do not actively work to combat linguistic discrimination, we are helping to perpetuate it.**

# Thank you!

Thanks to Lex Konnelly, Pocholo Umbal, and Angelika Kiss for their help in formulating and organizing many of the ideas in this presentation. Additional thanks to Lex for their tireless work on the Diverse Names Database. Special thanks to Anne Charity Hudley for various conversations that helped inspire and shape my thinking on these issues.

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