Prof. Leonard Talmy

Title of course: How Language Structures Concepts

The course will present some of the basic components of the field of cognitive semantics, such as the semantics of grammar, force dynamics, and fictive motion. The main reference will be my two-volume set:

   Volume I: Concept structuring systems.
   Volume II: Typology and process in concept structuring.

Description:

As a fundamental design feature, language has two subsystems, the open-class (lexical) and the closed-class (grammatical). These subsystems perform complementary functions. In the total meaning expressed by any portion of discourse, the open-class forms contribute most of the conceptual content, while the closed-class forms determine most of the conceptual structure. Across languages, further, all closed-class forms are under strong semantic constraints governed by certain general principles. They thus represent only certain concepts, but not others. Closed-class meanings accordingly constitute an approximately closed inventory of concepts that serve a structuring function. This inventory is universally available, and each individual language draws elements in some proportion and distribution from it for its own closed-class representations. The closed-class inventory is further semantically constrained in that the concepts in it fall into certain conceptual categories, but not others, and these categories in turn fall into a certain set of extensive "schematic systems" for structuring conception. Five of these schematic systems are configurational structure, perspective point, distribution of attention, force dynamics, and cognitive state. The closed-class subsystem emerges as perhaps the most fundamental conceptual structuring system of language. The course will lay out this organizational system of language and go into detail for several of the schematic systems.