

# Languages of the World

Linguistics 23900/33900, Winter 2003

Mondays and Wednesdays 12:00-1:20pm in Wieboldt 130

**Instructor** Jason Merchant  
Email: merchant@uchicago.edu  
Webpage: <http://home.uchicago.edu/~merchant>  
Office: Classics 305  
Office phone: (773) 702-8523  
Office hours: Fridays 12:30-1:30 pm

## Course description

This course aims to equip you with some basic and not-so-basic facts about the world's languages, a fundamental prerequisite to understanding the nature of human language. We will be looking at the diversity of languages across space and time, their fundamental similarities, and other puzzles. We will address a range of questions about language through an exploration of the following areas: language families and historical relationships, linguistic typology and language universals, sound and structural features of the world's languages, and writing systems, among others.

## Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites to enrollment in this course; this course presupposes no background in linguistics. I will strive to keep the discussion nontechnical, though familiarity with traditional grammatical terms (e.g., transitive verb, high vowel, declensional class, genitive case, inanimate subject, etc.) will be helpful.

## Course requirements

- Attendance and participation in the class
- Assignments (homeworks) and short in-class quizzes
- Final quiz
- Final project

The final grade will be an average of all grades received on assignments and quizzes plus participation (worth one assignment) and the final project (worth three assignments); regardless of average, however, anyone who fails the final quiz or receives an F on the final project will receive an F as their course grade.

## Important additional information

*Final project:* The final project consists of an 8-12 page typological and/or (semi-)formal description of (some aspects of) an 'exotic' language (i.e., a non-Indo-European one not described in Comrie's book *The World's Major Languages*). Detailed project guidelines will be handed out in the fifth week. All projects must be approved by me no later than the end of the seventh week of the quarter.

The final project must be submitted to me as pdf file or Microsoft Word document by email to merchant@uchicago.edu no later than 5pm Wednesday March 19th.

## Schedule

Readings should be completed before the start of the week indicated, with the exception of week 1, whose readings should be done during the week.

### Week 1 [Jan 6,8]:

What is (a) language?

Natural vs. artificial languages. Typological vs. historical (genetic) relatedness. Linguistic diversity and language death. Genetic relationship and language families. Some basic facts about language(s). Parts of language competence: linguistic subsystems, writing systems.

Reading: Comrie 1990, *Introduction* (pp. 1-29); Lyovin chs. 1 and 2; Krauss 1992

Homework 1, due Monday 1/13:

1. Exercise II on p. 42 in Lyovin ch. 2 (classifying scripts).
2. Make a map of Europe showing approximate location of all the languages mentioned on Monday. Exclude the regions east of the Urals and southeast of the Bosphorus (i.e., don't map the Indo-Iranian languages yet).

### Week 2 [Jan 13, 15]:

Languages of Europe. Reading: Lyovin ch. 3; Comrie 1990 ch. 1, and an additional chapter of your choice, chosen from chs. 2-25

Homework 2, due Monday 1/20:

1. Exercise 3 on p. 104 in Lyovin ch. 3 (Turkish vowel harmony)
2. Map of the Caucasus

### Week 3 [Jan 20, 22]:

Languages of Europe, continued, and of Asia Minor and the Caucasus. Reading:

Comrie 1990 ch. 30 [Turkish]

Wednesday 1/22: guest lecture by Prof. Victor Friedman on Caucasian languages and Lak.

**Quiz 1** (1/20)

Homework 3, due Mon 1/27:

1. Exercise 3 on p. 173 of Lyovin ch. 4 (Altaic typological traits)
2. Map of Asia; 3. Map of Afghanistan

### Week 4 [Jan 27, 29]:

Languages of Asia. Reading: Lyovin ch. 4; Comrie 1990 ch. 43 [Japanese], 26 [Pashto]

Homework 4, due Mon 2/3:

1. Exercise 6 on p. 176 of Lyovin ch.4 (Japanese translation)
2. Map of Africa: Use different colors for the four language families, and a fifth color for Bantu languages; include at least six languages from each group, and indicate roughly where the following languages are spoken: Arabic, Hausa, Amharic, Maasai, Swahili, Zulu, !Kung

### Week 5 [Feb 3, 5]:

**Quiz 2.1** (2/3)

Languages of Africa. Reading: Lyovin ch. 5; Comrie 1990 ch. 48 [Niger-Kordofanian languages]

Homework 5, due Wed 2/12:

1. Exercises 1 and 2 (Swahili text and !Xu) on pp. 236-240 of Lyovin ch. 5.
2. Map of Oceania, including Australia

### Week 6 [Feb 10, 12]: No class 2/10: Undergraduate break

**Quiz 2.2** (2/12)

Languages of Oceania. Reading: Lyovin ch. 6; Comrie 1990 chs. 45, 47 [Tagalog]

Homework 6, due Mon 2/17:

1. Exercise 2 (Tagalog) on p. 302 on Lyovin ch. 6
2. Chamorro exercise on relative clauses (handout)
3. Map of the Americas
4. Map of your home state

Week 7 [Feb 17, 19]:

**Quiz 3** (2/17)

Languages of the Americas. Reading: Lyovin ch. 7; Pullum 1991; Mithun 1999, chapters 3.8 [time] and 3.9 [modality].

Monday 2/17: guest lecture by Prof. Jerrold Sadock on West Greenlandic Eskimo.

Wednesday 2/19: guest lecture by Prof. Amy Dahlstrom on Meskwakie.

Homework 7, due Mon 2/24:

1. Exercises 2 and 3 on pp. 395-396 of Lyovin ch. 7.

For exercise 2, do the following: give a morpheme-by-morpheme breakdown for the words given, and gloss all the pieces (like on the Swahili handout, for example). In doing so, you should also be able to answer the following questions:

- a. What is the word order of the language?
- b. How are grammatical relations (subject, object, possessor, etc) signaled?
- c. How does the verb inflect? Does it show subject agreement? Object agreement? Tense information?

Week 8 [Feb 24, 26]:

Pidgin, Creole, and signed languages. Reading: Lyovin ch. 8; (optional: DeGraff 2000); Mufwene 2001; Jackendoff 1994, chapter 7 [ASL]

Monday 2/24: guest lecture by Prof. Salikoko Mufwene on creoles and pidgins

Week 9 [Mar 3, 5]:

Typology and universals. Reading: Greenberg 1966, Dryer 1992

**Final quiz** (3/5)

Week 10 [Mar 10, 12]:

There is *no class* this week. Work on the final project.

## Readings

We will be reading and discussing a number of texts throughout this course, drawn from two required books and numerous articles and chapters. The two books are available at the Seminary Coop for purchase. The university's copies of these required texts are on reserve at Regenstein. The articles and chapters are on e-reserve.

### *Required texts*

Lyovin, Anatole. 1997. *An introduction to the languages of the world*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Comrie, Bernard (editor). 1990. *The world's major languages*. Oxford University Press: Oxford. (A great reference work combining the results of many scholars' work. This will be valuable to you long after this course is over, for answering many different kinds of the most frequent questions asked about the world's major languages.)

### *Articles and chapters on e-reserve:*

DeGraff, Michel. 2000. Morphology in Creole genesis: Linguistics and ideology. In Michael Kenstowicz (ed.), *Ken Hale: A life in language*, 53-121. MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass.

Dryer, Matthew. 1992. The Greenbergian word order correlations. *Language* 68:81-138.

- Greenberg, Joseph. 1963. Some universals of grammar with particular reference to the order of meaningful elements. In Joseph Greenberg (ed.), *Universals of language*, 2nd edition, 73-113. MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass.
- Jackendoff, Ray. 1994. *Patterns in the mind*. Basic Books: New York. Chapter 7 [American Sign Language] (pp. 83-98).
- Krauss, Michael. 1992. The world's languages in crisis. *Language* 68: 4-10.
- Mithun, Marianne. 1999. *The languages of native North America*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. Chapters 3.8 [Time] and 3.9 [Modality] (pp. 152-186).
- Mufwene, Salikoko. 2001. Pidgin and creole languages. In the *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences*, 11441-11445. Elsevier: Amsterdam.
- Pullum, Geoffrey. 1991. The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. Chapter 19 [The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax] (pp. 159-171).

*Other texts you may find useful*

(To be read at your leisure as necessary. These are available at the Regenstein and the Seminary Co-op.)

- Bloomfield, Leonard. 1933. *Language*. This is still a classic introductory overview of many aspects of language(s), by one of the greatest thinkers in the field, once a faculty member here at Chicago.
- Ruhlen, Merritt. 1991. *A Guide to the World's Languages*. A complete survey of known languages; some of the genetic classifications are controversial, however.