Language and the Human
Humanities (HUMA) 17000

Fall 2019
Sections: Thursdays 11-12:20pm; LECTURES: TUESDAYS, 11:00-12:20, KENT 107

Professors

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Course Overview
Language is at the center of what it means to be human and is instrumental in all humanistic pursuits. With it, we understand others, persuade, argue, reason, and think. This course aims to provoke critical examination of common assumptions that determine our understanding of language, texts, and the ways language is used and understood.

Course structure
Tuesdays: Lecture (all sections meet in one lecture hall): Kent 107
Thursdays: Discussion sections (each section meets individually in its own classroom)
Course requirements and grading

Papers
Students will write three papers, and they will turn in drafts of each first, on which they will receive comments but no grade, and a final version, which is graded. Thus each paper has two due dates. Each paper is worth 25% of your final grade (75% total for all three papers.)

Each paper should be between 1,000 and 1,500 words (check with the instructor if you wish to go outside those limits). Comments on the papers will come from both the professor and the writing intern, and the precise way that is done will be explained by your professor.

The themes of the papers must be selected from themes given by the lecturers. These themes will be posted on the Chalk website (chalk.uchicago.edu) after the discussion sections on Thursdays (generally by the end of the day Friday). The papers must deal with themes covered in the course since the first draft of the previous paper was due (except for the first paper, of course). Students in each section will be given specific instructions as to how the paper should be handed in (hard copy and/or electronic version).

A draft of the first paper is due to the Writing Intern on Monday of Week 4 and the revised version of the paper is due to the Instructor on Thursday of Week 5. The second paper’s draft is due on Monday of Week 7 and the revised version is due on Thursday of Week 8. The third paper’s draft is due on Monday of Week 10 and the revised version is due on the Thursday of Exam Week. Each paper is worth 25% of your final grade (75% total for all three papers.) The mechanics of delivering the papers will be announced in your section. Drafts are mandatory; see also Writing Seminars below.

Writing seminars. There will be three writing seminars organized by the Writing Intern during the quarter. Writing seminars are a separate course, and attendance is mandatory. You will be assigned a separate grade (P/F) for this course by the instructor in consultation with the Writing Intern. You must pass this part of the course separately in order to satisfy the College Core requirement; you cannot graduate from the College without satisfying this requirement. You cannot take these writing seminars separately from the Core course; you must pass it each quarter, or you will have to retake the entire Core course.

Preparation: Readings for the week will be posted by the end of Friday before the Tuesday lecture in which they are discussed; you should read them before the lecture (with the exception of the first week). By Wednesday at noon (or, as your instructor decides), each student should post to the discussion board on their section’s chalk site a brief response to the readings that consists of three things: (1) an idea you found compelling, (2) an idea you did not find compelling, and (3) a question for the author of one of the readings. The entire response may consist of just a few sentences: you do not need to write an entire page essay. The comments are used to broaden or deepen the in-class discussion.

Discussion leaders: Each student will be expected to take partial responsibility for leading one of the discussion sections each week during the quarter (except the first week). Small groups of two to three students will organize and lead a discussion session based on the lecture and readings, and the responses posted by the other students in the section.

In class participation: Each student is expected to be well prepared to participate in discussions in section, and, where appropriate, in lecture. Participation, including leading of the discussion and responses, together counts for 25% of the course grade.

Texts
All texts will be available through the Canvas website (All sections) for this course. Changes, if there are any, will be announced in class, on the Canvas “All sections” site, or by email.
In class screen policy:
No computers or cell phones or tablets or the like may be used during lecture. Please mute your phones. During sections, laptops may be used for presentation. Students are strongly encouraged restrict the use of laptops and tablets in TH class to the minimum.

Schedule

Week 1. October 1.
Anastasia Giannakidou. Foundational questions about language

In this first lecture, we discuss fundamental questions about the nature of language as a grammatical system, as a body of knowledge, and as a systematic way to assign meaning and express thought. What does it mean to know a language? What is the nature of a linguistic sign? How essential is the relation between the sign and the concept it signifies? Is there a correct way to say things? What are language norms? Does language change over time, or is it static? Are there language authorities, and what is their function?

Readings

Week 2. October 8.
Jerrold Sadock. What we say and what we convey

Human beings are evolutionarily developed to communicate in a way unmatched by any other beings on our planet. We are language masters. Mastering a language includes learning a large, but finite vocabulary of basic signs and learning a grammar, a system for combining the signs according to principles that are learned, and that conform to natural “rules” common to all languages. The signs and principles of combination all have meanings and the meanings of our utterances are a function of them. But what we convey using language goes far beyond the conventional meaning of what is said. This week we will look at various factors that play a role in allowing us to convey both more and sometimes less than what we actually say.

Readings
Week 3. October 15.
Diane Brentari. Language creation; language change.

In this lecture we will delineate the conditions for language evolution, language emergence, and language change. These are three ways that linguistic systems come into being or undergo modifications over time. We will address issues of naturalness (iconicity) and conventionalism (arbitrariness) in language and how they are shaped by a range of factors including communities, culture and the linguistic system itself. The focus will be on the emergence of sign languages as these are the only natural languages that we can directly observe as they are created.

Readings


Week 4. October 22.
Patrick Munoz. Language and thought.

It’s a cliché that language and thought are linked, but it’s controversial just what their relationship is – are they separable, and how does one influence the other? We approach this topic by having a look at the so-called “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,” according to which the language that one speaks substantively determines the way in which one thinks, or can think. Linguists, psychologists, philosophers, and literary critics have all historically flirted with the idea that particular languages carve out ‘distinct ways’ of seeing the world, but it’s difficult to pin down just what it means, and what empirical evidence can be attested for or against it. We consider: (1) the conceptual question, of the different ways that language could influence thought, (2) the empirical question, of which ways language actually does influence thought, according to the psychological literature, and (3) the foundational question, of whether we can make sense of the notion of distinct individuals having distinct ‘world views’ or ‘conceptual schemes’ based on linguistic differences.

Readings:


**Week 5. October 29.**

**Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee. Code Switching and Diglossia: Internal Language Variation.**

Every language has internal variations, meaning there are different ways speakers speak their language. The use of different “language registers” can be caused by geographical variations (dialects) or by certain social factors. For example, you most likely speak in a different way with your family and friends than you do in class or in a job interview. In writing, you might use yet another variant. Changing from one variety to another is called “code switching”. When code switching is institutionalized and pervades the majority of a society, we speak of “diglossia”. More specifically, diglossia describes a cross-linguistically widespread phenomenon in which a single language or two different languages develop a prestige variant used for specific literary and formal functions. Diglossia can develop in situations characterized by strong political or other ideological factors, and thus reflects one possible sociolinguistic output of factors such as language and identity, language and politics, etc. We look at various examples of diglossia/code switching and at the reasons underlying the development of prestigious versus non-prestigious language registers.

**Readings**

**Week 6. November 5.**

**Adam Singerman. Language endangerment**

In this, the first of two interrelated lectures, we discuss the phenomenon of language endangerment. Scholars estimate that between fifty and ninety percent of the world's languages will cease to be spoken or signed by the end of the 21st century. This startling statistic leads to a wide range of challenging questions. What are the factors — socioeconomic, cultural, historical — that lead to language endangerment? What do speakers gain or lose when they shift from one language to another? What are the consequences of endangerment, shift, and death for the scientific study of language? What actions can be taken to document or revitalize endangered languages?

**Readings**
1. Evans, Nicholas. 2009. Dying words: endangered languages and what they have to tell us. Wiley- Blackwell. (chapter 3)


Additional, optional readings TBD
Week 7. November 12.
Adam Singerman. Critically examining language endangerment

In the second of our two lectures, we critically examine (a) the metaphors used to make sense of language endangerment; (b) the motivation behind language preservation and documentation projects; and (c) the sometimes uneasy relationship between academic researchers' priorities, on the one hand, and the interests of local communities where endangered languages are spoken/signed, on the other. We will special attention to the discourse connecting language endangerment to biological endangerment and extinction.

Readings


Rebecca Hasselbach. Invented Languages

Speakers of languages create new words and change how they speak constantly, ultimately changing a language over time so much that it might become a completely new language that a speaker of a previous stage would not be able to understand. But these are slow processes. We do not usually create a new language from scratch or in the spur of the moment when we speak naturally, despite our inherent "linguistic creativity". There have been and still are people, however, who indeed invent completely new languages. In fact, the creation of artificial or con-languages has been quite popular in recent years. There are various motivations to do so that reach from the idealism to create a "universal" language that might promote better understanding between different peoples, the idea of creating a “perfect” or “logical” language, to pure aesthetics in the sense of creating a new language as a form of art. We will look at these different motivations, their products, and also ask: how do we create a new language? And can artificially created languages ever be successful?

Readings


Week 9. November 26 [No class on Thursday, Thanksgiving]
[Because of Thanksgiving, we will have section discussion of week 9’s lecture and readings on Tuesday, Dec. 3, locations to announced]

Amy Dahlstrom. Names and naming.

This week’s topic touches upon many of the other issues discussed in earlier lectures, such as identity, the relation between language and thought, variation and change over time. Patterns of names and naming, not surprisingly, vary greatly across cultures. In many parts of Africa, traditional names given to children may actually be messages directed at other members of the family (see the Suzman article). What messages are name-givers sending in our culture, and to whom? What factors influence parents’ choice of a first name for a child? (assimilation? uniqueness? ethnic pride? religious beliefs? obsession with Game of Thrones? ...) The article by Anderson Smith attempts to explain to a social worker audience why some African-Americans value unique first names.

Some other countries strictly regulate the pool of possible personal names, while U.S. states generally do not. The optional reading surveys U.S. naming laws, considering whether some restrictions are needed and legally feasible. We’ll also look at family names, particularly the question of whether women who marry take their husband’s last name, retain their ’maiden’ name, or combine or hyphenate the two. Read the essay by Kass and Kass for a conservative view on names.

Readings


Skim this article just looking at the examples:


Optional

Week 10. December 3.
This week is the last week of the quarter, and Thur and Fri are reading period (no undergraduate classes). Therefore, we will meet only on Tuesday, but we will meet with our sections, not as a whole. The room assignments for Tuesday are to be announced soon.