Language and the Human II
Humanities (HUMA) 17100

Winter 2020
Lectures: Tuesdays, 11:00am-12:20pm. Location: Kent 107
Individual sections: Thursdays 11am-12:20pm:

Instructors

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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 us to critically examine 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 instructor and the writing intern, and the precise way that is done will be explained by your instructor.

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; these writing seminars constitute a separate course. Attendance at these is also 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 other than 1984 will be available through the Canvas website for this course. Changes, if there are any, will be announced in class, on the Canvas “All sections” site, or by email. Orwell’s 1984 is available for purchase at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore.
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 Thursday class to the minimum.

Week 1. January 7. Adam Singerman. What it means (and what it doesn’t mean) for languages to be related

Multiple lectures and readings from the fall quarter mentioned specific languages as being historically related to one another; at certain points, students were even exposed to trees of language families. In this lecture we discuss what it means for languages to be related. Students will learn about the Comparative Method and will come to understand how this method makes it possible to rigorously confirm the validity of language families such as Indo-European, Semitic, Dravidian, Mayan, and Uralic. We then ask what kind of other conclusions are warranted in light of proven linguistic relatedness. Do speakers of historically related languages necessarily share religious, cultural, ethnic, or "racial" attributes? Or can linguistic relatedness be in principle orthogonal to these other dimensions of difference?

Readings:


English vowels have been changing constantly over its recorded thousand year history, and we have a fairly good idea of what these changes were, based on a variety of sources. These changes are the result of many factors, including in various measure the isolation of speakers of different dialects, the desire to speak in a way that reflects one’s social identity, and speakers’ needs to communicate. We will look at one big change that was completed around the time of Shakespeare, called the Great Vowel Shift, and then another one that is only now emerging, one that Chicago and the cities to our east, through the state of New York, are participating in, the Northern Cities Shift. Like other social norms, these changes in the sounds of English occur with our participation, sometimes conscious but often only partly conscious: we will try to become aware of these linguistic trends that are happening within and without us.

Readings:
2. What are the vowels of modern American English? Here is link to a good website; explore the sounds: [http://www.utexas.edu/courses/linguistics/resources/phonetics/vowelmap/vowelmap.html](http://www.utexas.edu/courses/linguistics/resources/phonetics/vowelmap/vowelmap.html)
Here is another website with easy access to sound files for several dialects:
American vowels: [http://www.fonetiks.org/engsou2am.htm](http://www.fonetiks.org/engsou2am.htm)
British vowels: [http://www.fonetiks.org/engsou2.html](http://www.fonetiks.org/engsou2.html)
Week 3. January 21. Adam Singerman. Writing as a linguistic system and as a socio-historical object

This lecture explores writing. We will look at different ways to classify writing systems, such as their historical origin and structural properties. Where did writing first develop, and under what circumstances? Why do certain kinds of scripts (such as syllabaries) work quite well for certain kinds of languages but less well for others? We will also ask what kind of non-linguistic or extra-linguistic factors influence the selection and development of a writing system. How can the use of a particular kind of script signal religious, ethnic or political identity? How can it index a group’s historical affiliations and future aspirations?

Readings:

Optionally, students may also read chapters one, two, and three from:

Language, truth, and persuasion.

Language is a powerful tool for communicating messages and convincing others. Messages are communicated through various channels, including mass and social media, advertisements, political discourse, and propaganda. Often, language is employed to *persuade*, and persuasive language prioritizes the message over truth. In this lecture, we study how this prioritizing impacts the quality of the message by losing or manipulating meaning, and address the broad relation between language, truth, and deceit.

Readings:
1. Excerpts from Plato, *Gorgias*.

Optional


Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* portrays a society completely under the control of a central government, with pervasive surveillance powers and the desire and ability to change the very language of society. *Newspeak*, the language envisioned by the totalitarian regime, will eliminate *thoughtcrime* by making it impossible to think illicit or incorrect thoughts. Though modeled on the communist dictatorships of the 20th century, aspects of Orwell’s nightmare are easy to find today as well. But does language equal thought in the way 1984 envisions? Would eliminating certain words and phrases really eliminate nonconforming thoughts? Can political projects of social or religious engineering succeed by punishing older, blasphemous, or nonconformist usages? How do the impulses behind such projects relate to
political correctness, blasphemy laws, freedom of expression, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom of thought?


**Week 6. February 11. Jason Riggle. Good language/Bad language.**

Language has power; there are good uses, like when words are used to apologize, to make promises, or to show deference, and there are bad uses, like when words are used to threaten or to demean with slurs. This week, we will look at the ways that language is used to create and shape social contracts as well as the myriad subtle ways that language is used expressively to assert our attitudes and beliefs.

_Readings_
1. Jane Hill - The Everyday Language of White Racism
2. Chi Luu - The Linguistics of Mass Persuasion

**Week 7. February 18. Patrick Munoz. The Language of Fiction**

Truth is central to linguistic communication, and the classical view, epitomized in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, has it that to speak truth is to say what’s so. Yet in talking about fiction, we speak truly of what isn’t so: though Sherlock Holes doesn’t exist, it’s true that he’s a detective, and false that he’s a family man. We discuss the human linguistic ability to discuss what isn’t there, examining (1) what the conditions are for statements about fiction to be true or false; (2) what it means to entertain, and speak about, alternate possibilities, or ‘other worlds;’ (3) what the status of the existence of fictional entities is, and how they relate to non-fictional facts about storytelling; and (4) what the conditions are for two people telling the ‘same’ story, and the role of authors, cultural backgrounds, and translators in determining this.

_Readings_


What does it mean to have learned language? Human children acquire language with incredible robustness and speed during the first several years of life, and the outcome of this acquisition process is a highly sophisticated capacity to use the linguistic system, making it possible to transmit complex information and ideas, and to interact with society in nuanced ways. In recent years, the use of machine learning for natural language processing in artificial intelligence has yielded impressive advances, even to the point of "superhuman performance" on certain tests intended to evaluate language understanding.
However, further exploration suggests that these systems still fall far short of the human language capacity, leaving a substantial gap between the outcome of human language acquisition and the outcomes of language learning seen in AI. We will explore these notions of language learning in human children and in machines, comparing the processes and results, considering what it means to "know" and to "understand" language, and discussing how one can effectively evaluate whether an entity—either human or machine—has successfully acquired language.

Readings:
2. (Additional readings TBA)

Putting together 18 weeks of Language and the Human

In this final lecture, we will review the topics and the questions that we faced in each of the weeks of the first and second quarters of Language and the Human, and we will look at how perspectives on language from several disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, and philosophy, have informed our discussion, and how events in the larger world around us interact with these questions.


Week 10. March 10

We only meet on Tuesday this week, for a review of the material covered in the past two quarters. Rooms to be announced.