Language and the Human
Humanities (HUMA) 17000

Fall

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

Professors
Section  
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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; 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 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.

**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.

**Week 1. October 2.**

**Anastasia Giannakidou. What is language? What is the relation of meaning and form? Is there a language authority?**

In this first lecture, we discuss fundamental questions about the nature of language. What does it mean to know a language? What is 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 9.**

**John Goldsmith. Vowels in motion.**

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:**

Vowel Shift and the Changing Character of English.

2. What are the vowels of modern American English? Here is a link to a good website; explore the sounds: 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.html; British vowels: http://www.fonetiks.org/engsou2.html

3. On the Northern Cities Vowel Shift, read Matthew Gordon’s short article: http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/midwest/

4. Finally, read -- or better yet, listen to -- this NPR interview with William Labov: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5220090

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Week 3. October 16.

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:


3. Watch: “Something out of nothing: A brand new language” Lecture by Rabia Ergin
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RO1cXxEQm-w

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Week 4. October 23.

Matt Teichman. Language and thought.

Do native speakers of English think differently from native speakers of Russian? Are there thoughts that it’s possible to have in Russian but not in English? Are there reasoning patterns that make sense to an English speaker but would be impossible for a Russian speaker to understand? The idea that the language you speak natively somehow conditions the way you can think is called the Whorfian hypothesis (named for the early 20th century amateur linguist, Benjamin Lee Whorf), and it has historically been rather controversial in linguistics. Why? Although it may intuitively feel like you’re thinking differently when you speak in Russian vs. when you speak in English, it is far from straightforward to find hard scientific evidence that supports that intuition. And yet, despite those difficulties, a wave of research in psycholinguistics over the past decade or so has uncovered some interesting evidence which, although not definitive, raises new prospects for the Whorfian hypothesis. We will consider the case for and against.
**Readings:**

**Week 5. October 30.**
**Michelle Yuan. Invented Languages**

With so many languages in the world to choose from, why would someone invent a language? How do you even start? In this lecture, we will explore the creation of invented languages such as Esperanto, Klingon, Ithkuil, and other lesser-known languages. We will also consider some of the factors that may influence the success or failure of an invented language and, in doing so, we’ll discuss how invented languages can give us insight into our own “natural” languages and what may fuel our desire to communicate with others in a language that is and is not “our own.”

**Readings**

**Week 6. November 6.**
**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**
Anqi Zhang. Language policy and education.

As a crucial way to transmit knowledge, language plays an important role in education. However, it is not always easy to determine what languages should be used or taught at school, especially in a multilingual country. What factors should language policy makers consider when making decisions on what languages should be used and taught at school and how do these decisions impact people's lives? In this lecture, we will explore how language policy, language planning and education interact with people's lives. We will first discuss some general concepts and ideologies of language in education, and the advantages and disadvantages of various forms of language policies and planning, and then we will look at some cases of the language policies and planning in the education in China, focusing on the Cantonese province and Hong Kong.

Readings:

Week 8. November 20. No class on Thursday, Thanksgiving]
Adam Singerman. Language endangerment, language shift, and language death.

Scholars estimate that between fifty and ninety percent of the world's 7000 languages will no longer 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? This lecture will discuss the aforementioned questions and will also consider critiques of the enterprise of endangered language documentation. Does it make sense to speak of "preserving" or "saving" languages that are losing speakers/signers, or are these terms incoherent? Is "endangered language" the right metaphor to describe what is going on? The discussion will draw upon the instructor's experiences conducting linguistic fieldwork in the Brazilian Amazon.

Readings:
1. Evans, Nicholas. 2009. *Dying words: endangered languages and what they have to tell us*. Wiley-Blackwell. (chapter 3)
Week 9. November 27

[Because of Thanksgiving, we will have section discussion of week 9’s lecture and readings on Tuesday, Dec. 4, locations to announced; In week 9 we will have discussion of the topic of Week 8]

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 name-giving, 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


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.