Language and the Human Humanities (HUMA) 17100

Spring

Sections meet on TU/TH 12-1:20; Tuesday lecture in Rosenwald 011;

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 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) : Rosenwald 011
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 by noon of the day after the lecture, when the lecture falls on a Thursday), 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.

**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.

**Responses comments:** Each student is expected to post a brief comment (word limit to be announced by the instructor) on the week’s readings and lecture. The deadline for submitting comments will be set by the instructor. The comments are used to broaden or deepen the in-class discussion.

**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 Chalk website for this course at http://chalk.uchicago.edu. Changes, if there are any, will be announced in class, on the chalk “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.
Schedule

Week 1, March 28.
Matt Teichman. Language Universals.

One of the guiding principles behind the study of language since the 1950s has been not just that there are features that are common to all languages, but that there is a biological explanation for this. Languages vary tremendously in certain respects—some have case and some don’t. Some have strict word order, and some don’t. On the other hand, all languages have both nouns and verbs, and all languages have negation. So there are as many differences as there are similarities. The discovery that Noam Chomsky made in the 1950s was that the universal features of language go way beyond that level of generality. There are a number of incredibly specific characteristics exhibited by all the world’s languages, features too specific to be plausibly attributable to chance. The best explanation for these more specific features seems to be biological—that is, they seem to arise as a result of how the human brain is set up. This week, we will examine some of the major evidence in favor of this view, and consider how it fits in with the incredible amount of variation across the world’s languages that we see.

Obligatory Reading:

Week 2, April 4.
Matt Teichman. Animal Communication.

Bees can communicate the location of their hive by doing a dance. Prairie dogs can make noises that encode visual features of possible predators as they approach. And yet, although there are a number of animal species that can boast very sophisticated systems of communication, none of the systems of animal communication studied to date (including those of our close ancestors, like chimpanzees) share any of the basic, defining features of human language. This week, we will examine what various animal species both can and can’t do with their systems of communication. In the process, perhaps we will learn something about what we can and can’t do ourselves.

Obligatory Reading:

Optional Reading:

Week 3, April 11.
Matt Teichman. Language and Agency.

Though there are a number of expressively powerful systems of animal communication, the ability to speak languages like English, Hungarian, or Chinese is unique to humans. But what are we to make of this fact? Is it just a random fact about people, or does it have some deeper significance? This week, we will look at an argument that the ability to natively acquire a language is the defining characteristic of human beings. Everything we do in life, including not just talking, but thinking, perceiving, and even acting, is
linguistic through and through. Dogs, horses, and bats also act, think, and perceive, but not at all in the same way that we do. We will also consider what empirical evidence there may be for such a view.

**Obligatory Readings:**

**Week 4. April 18**
Laura Casasanto. *Language and Politics.*

Political thoughts are communicated via language, but language may also play a role in how those thoughts are formulated. How do talking and writing influence our beliefs about politics, policies, and their moral and social underpinnings? This week, we will consider some arguments about how using language can consciously and unconsciously shape our thoughts and therefore the political world.

**Obligatory Reading:**
Orwell, George. 1946. *Politics and the English Language.*

**Week 5. April 25.**
Laura Casasanto. *Prescriptivism.*

Most linguists believe that all native speakers have command of the grammar of their own dialect, and that these dialects are equally valuable in a scientific sense. Yet anyone who has ever attended school has probably been taught a set of prescriptive rules for using language that imply the superiority of some forms over others. Where do these rules come from, and why do many people espouse their importance? This week, we will examine arguments in favor of and against the notion that prescriptive rules play an important role in language-using society.

**Obligatory Reading:**

**Week 6. May 2.**
Laura Casasanto. *Language and Social Identity.*

Native speakers of a single language can usually understand one another’s speech. But they don’t all speak it the same way. Why do speakers vary so much in the way they speak their native languages, and what can we learn about them from this variation? This week, we will consider the factors that shape how individuals talk, and try to understand the relationship between individual social identities and the larger social landscape that they constitute.

**Obligatory Readings:**
Week 7. May 9.

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 that is 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 will look at various examples of diglossia and code switching and at the reasons underlying the development of prestigious versus non-prestigious language registers.

Readings

Videos, links to be posted

Week 8. May 16
Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee. Multilingualism and Language Contact

Multilingualism, the use of various languages in a given speech community or individual, is, contrary to what we know from most western countries, the norm for the majority of the world’s population. In other words, most people speak more than one language, often even more than two languages. In these multilingual settings, different languages naturally come into contact. In this lecture, we will look at how multilingualism develops, that is, which factors trigger the development of situations, in which individuals or whole societies use multiple languages. We will also look at what effects the contact of languages with each other can have on them. Languages in contact can, for example, influence each other in that they can borrow words or other grammatical features, as is well known from English. In other cases, language contact can lead to the replacement of one language by another and ultimately to the death of a language. In yet other cases, language contact leads to the adoption of cultural features, such as writing, with hardly any impact on the languages themselves. We will look at the cultural, political, sociological, and religious factors that influence the outcome of language contact in order to understand the vibrant interactions that languages can have with one another.

Readings
Week 9. May 23.
Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee. The origin of Language: The “hardest problem in science”?

The origin of human language has always fascinated thinkers and scholars. Given that language is what seems to be a uniquely human trait, it is natural to ask where it comes from and how it developed. The answer to the question, however, is difficult to find due to the lack of conclusive evidence and no consensus exists of when and how language came into being. In fact, the question of the origin of language was long regarded as not being suitable for serious scientific study and abandoned by Linguists in the mid-19th century. Only since the 1990s have scholars started to look at it again from different angles. In this lecture, we will look at various approaches to the origin of human language, including ancient ideas that language was God-given, purely mechanistic suggestions that try to explain how language was first produced, and modern-day approaches that take into account the necessary social requirements for language to exist.

Readings
TBA

Week 10. June 1
This week is the last week of the quarter. Thursday and Friday are reading period (no undergraduate classes). Therefore, we will meet only on Tuesday, but we will meet with our sections, not as a whole, for general overview and discussion. Room numbers for TU will be announced soon.