The language of deception and humor – 2019

Humor and deception both make significant use of language and yet they can also both occur independent of language. Furthermore, they both rely heavily on expectations and conventions regarding communication and language but they do so in somewhat different ways – humor often works by tweaking or confounding our expectations and conventions while deception often works by exploiting them.

In this course we will examine deception and humor from a variety of perspectives: historical, developmental, neurological, and cross-cultural and in a variety of contexts: fiction, advertising, politics, courtship, and normal conversation. We will focus on the (linguistic) knowledge and skills that underlie the use of humor and deception and on what sorts of things they are used to communicate.

Topics by week:

1. **Enigma**
   Language is a hot mess. How so? Why?

2. **Cooperation**
   We manage to reliably extract meaning from messy signals. How?

3. **Deceit**
   When does cooperation break down and why are lies special?

4. **Incongruity**
   What happens when cooperation goes off the rails? Why is this delightful?

5. **Contagion**
   Most untruthful statements are unwittingly spread. Why? What factors are involved?

6. **Delusion**
   The most common deception is self-deception. How does this work? What factors are involved?

7. **Persuasion**
   Emotional manipulation and behavioral heuristics are powerful tools for indirect deception.

8. **Truthiness**
   Authenticity, being honest with lies, and obfuscating culpability.

9. **Truth**
   Jokes, stories, and even some lies as a reliable channel for honesty.

10. **Wisdom**
    What we learned and what it all means.

Course requirements and grading

Section attendance is mandatory. Each section will have its own discussion forum online. We will use Piazza for discussion sections.

30% of your grade will be based on the discussion section. Each week you will be expected to participate in the discussion threads on Piazza. These assignments will take the form of short essays, reactions to papers, small projects, etc. The only rules you need to follow in order to ace the discussion grade are 1. contribute to the discussion online (almost) every week and in person at least a few times during the quarter and 2. DO NOT be ‘that kid’.

30% of your grade will be based on your midterm project (due at the end of Wk6)

30% of your grade will be based on your final project (due at the end of finals week)

10% of your grade will be based on random [easy] in-class quizzes (you have to come to class). Your best quiz will be 40% of your quiz grade, next best 30%, next best 20%, next best 10%. We will have 5 quizzes and I will drop the lowest grade. This means that missing more than one quiz day will reduce your grade and the more days you miss the greater the effect.