

Language and the Human

Humanities (HUMA) 17100

Winter

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

Professors

Section

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room

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 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. January 8. Yaroslav Gorbachov. *The Historical Method and the Indo-European Hypothesis*

In the past four millennia, numerous Indo-European languages have been spoken throughout vast swaths of Eurasia, from the Indian subcontinent across Central and Western Asia all the way to Western Europe (hence the label *Indo-European*). Following the "Age of Discovery" and the European colonial expansions of the past 500 years, some IE languages (most notably English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, and Russian) have spread into the Americas, Africa, and Northern Asia, making Indo-European the world's widest dispersed language family.

All IE languages are descendent from a hypothetical "parent" language, *Proto-Indo-European*, which is estimated to have been spoken some six+ millennia ago. Speakers of Proto-Indo-European left no written records, as the invention of writing postdates the disintegration of Proto-Indo-European and the dispersion of its speakers by at least a thousand years. Indo-Europeanists glean information about the structure and lexicon of Proto-Indo-European through a process of available-data analysis known as '**reconstruction**.' Since the Indo-European family was among the first three language families to be established (Semitic, Indo-European, and Uralic—in that order), much of the methodology of historical linguistics—including the methods of *linguistic reconstruction*—was first formulated, validated, and refined in application to Indo-European material.

In this week, we will discuss the **discovery** of the Indo-European family and some of the **methods** used in **historical and comparative linguistics** (including reconstruction of prehistoric languages and, possibly, the **decipherment** of ancient written records). We will also see how the reconstructed cultural vocabulary of a protolanguage opens a window on the human past (through a series of techniques known as '**linguistic paleontology**').

Readings:

1. Beekes, Robert (1995), *Comparative Indo-European Linguistics. An Introduction*. Ch. 2, The Indo-European Family of Languages (skip sections 2.3-2.5)
2. Fortson, Benjamin (2010), *Indo-European Language and Culture. An Introduction*. Ch. 1: The Comparative Method and the Indo-European Family (skip sections 1.10-1.12)
3. **Optional and suggested readings:**
4. Fortson, Benjamin (2010), *Indo-European Language and Culture. An Introduction*. Ch. 2: Proto-Indo-European Culture and Archaeology (skip sections 2.37-2.45)

5. Campbell, Lyle (2004), *Historical Linguistics. An Introduction*. Ch. 15: Linguistic Prehistory. Sections 15.3-15.4: methods of linguistic paleontology and their limitations; Proto-Finno-Ugric, Proto-Maya, Proto-Algonquian, Proto-Salishan, Proto-Uto-Aztecan, and Proto-Mize-Zoquean homelands and cultures.
6. Mithun, Marianne (1984), The Proto-Iroquoians: Cultural Reconstruction from Lexical Materials. In: M. K. Foster, J. Campisi, M. Mithun (eds.), *Extending the Rafters. Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies*, 259-281.
7. Stevens, Benjamin (2007), Aeolism: Latin as a Dialect of Greek. *The Classical Journal* 102.2 (2006/2007), 115-144.
8. Beckman, Gary (1996), The Hittite Language and its Decipherment.

Week 2. January 15.

Adam Singerman. Historical Linguistics in the languages of the Americas.

Building upon the previous week's lecture, by Professor Gorbachov, during week two we will discuss what historical linguistics can tell us about the native languages and peoples of the Americas. We will focus in particular on how the comparative methodology that was refined in the context of the Old World (particular with regards to the Indo-European language family) has been applied in North and South America, where — except for Mayan writing — native languages did not have written traditions. We will also discuss the sometimes fuzzy boundaries between "language", "culture" and "race" — all concepts that are difficult to define in a rigorous fashion. The lecture concludes by asking what we can learn about ancient migrations in and the peopling of the Americas by using the findings and methodology of historical linguistics.

Readings:

Selections from Boas's introduction to the Handbook.
 Selections from Sapir and Bloomfield.
 Selections from more recent work by Lyle Campbell.

Week 3. January 22.

Anqi Zhang. Language and Writing.

Writing is often considered an essential part of language. However, writing has a much shorter history than the spoken language and not every spoken language has a writing system. When and where did writing originate? What types of writing systems are there in the world? How well does a writing system represent a spoken language? In this lecture, we consider the relationship between writing and the spoken language in general, and also in depth through the case of the Chinese writing system. Through the case of the Chinese script and its influence in East Asia, we discuss various topics such as the invention, the spreading, and the reforms of writing systems.

Readings:

Coulmas, Florian. 2003. *Writing Systems: An Introduction to Their Linguistic Analysis*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 10
<http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e00Oxn&AN=125049&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
 Pullum, Geoffrey K. 2010. "The Land of the Free and The Elements of Style." *English Today* 26 (02): 34–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000076>.
 Sebba, Mark. 2009. "Sociolinguistic Approaches to Writing Systems Research." *Writing Systems Research* 1 (1): 35–49. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wsr/wsp002>.

Week 4. January 29.

Eduardo Escobar. Classification and the Language of Scientific Taxonomy

This lecture (and the accompanying readings) will explore the relationships between language and classification. We will begin in the ancient world with cuneiform "determinatives." Determinatives were unpronounced markers that, in the cuneiform writing system (ca. 3100 BC–AD 69), preceded Akkadian and Sumerian nouns and provided information regarding the semantic groupings of those terms. Within the cuneiform determinative system, shells and metals are "stones," bats are "birds," and there is no distinction between "genuine" and "artificial" gems. Contending with the challenge of cuneiform determinatives—a non-Western and ancient system of classification—will give rise to a broader set of questions (historical, philosophical, and linguistic) regarding the nature of classification itself. What distinguishes cuneiform classification from Linnaean scientific taxonomy? What distinguishes Linnaean taxonomy from the imaginative classifications we encounter in the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges? What role does language play in the classification of the natural world? Can nature be said to have an ordering system that is independent of human culture?

Readings:

1. Borges 1952 "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" first published in *Otras Inquisiciones* (1937-1952), published by Sur (Buenos Aires) in 1952
2. Chapters 2 and 3 (pp. 28–84) in Wilkins, John S., and Malte C. Ebach. 2014. *The Nature of Classification: Relationships and Kinds in the Natural Sciences*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
3. Veldhuis, Niek. 2006. "How To Classify Pigs: Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian Lexical Lists." In *De la domestication au tabou: Le cas des suidés dans le Proche-Orient ancien*, edited by B. Lion and C. Michel, 25–29. Paris: De Boccard.

Supplementary Readings:

1. Hacking, Ian 1991. "A Tradition of Natural Kinds." *Philosophical Studies* 61:109–126.
2. Rosch, Eleanor. 1975. "'Cognitive Representations of Semantic Categories'." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 104:192–233.

Week 5. February 5.

Cherry Meyer. Language Acquisition

We learn how babies acquire their first language and how it continues to develop throughout childhood. We cover concepts such as the critical period for language acquisition, Universal Grammar and the poverty of the stimulus hypothesis, and answer questions such as: How do babies learn the sounds of their language? When do children start morphological and syntactic analysis? What can we learn from children's speech errors? How does bilingual or multilingualism affect these processes? We will also discuss various theoretical approaches to the study of language acquisition.

Reading(s):

1. Goldin-Meadow, S. (2005). The resilience of language: What gesture creation in deaf children can tell us about how all children learn language. Psychology Press. Chapters 1-2 (pp. 3-20).

2. Tomasello, M. (2009). The usage-based theory of language acquisition. In Edith L. Bavin (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of child language* (pp. 69-87). Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Week 6. February 12.

Anastasia Giannakidou. Bilingualism, language and cognition.

In this class, we discuss the ways in which bilingualism affects the human mind. How exactly is the relation between language and thought shaped when one uses in more than one language? How does bilingualism affect one's judgment? Do bilingual advantages carry through an individual's lifespan and into old age?

Readings

1. Bialystok, Ellen, Fergus I.M. Craik, and Gigi Luk. 2012. Bilingualism: consequences for mind and brain. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 16.4: 240-250.
2. Javor, Rebeca. *Bilingualism, Theory of Mind and Perspective-Taking: The Effect of Early Bilingual Exposure*. *Psychology and Behavioral Sciences* 2016; 5(6): 143-148
3. Costa et al. 2015, "Your Morals Depend on Language." *PloS One* 9 (4)

Week 7. February 19.

Jason Riggle. BAD language.

In week 6 we explored truth and bullshit and the ways that language can be used to deceive. In week 7 we will explore yet still more of BAD language including the ways it can be used to marginalize others through things like hate speech, slurs, and coded "dog-whistle" messages. We will also discuss humor and contrast benign examples with humor that masks the perpetuation of—or covertly celebrates the existence of—social inequalities.

Readings:

TBA

Week 8. February 26

Matt Teichman. Performatives and Speech Acts.

Many of us are inclined to think of language as consisting primarily of statements. When I say something to someone, I convey information to that person about things like what I'm called, or where the car keys are, or where the nearest gas station is. But describing facts isn't the only thing I do. Sometimes, just by saying something, I can make the thing I described the case--automatically, merely in virtue of having said it. Isn't that surprising? This week, we will consider many examples of how in the very act of saying something, it is possible to do something else.

Obligatory Reading:

Austin, J. L. 1956. 'Performative Utterances,' in *Philosophical Papers: Third Edition*. Clarendon Press.

Week 9. March 5.

John Goldsmith. Economists look at the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

In the past few years, economists have been looking for evidence that bears on what has been called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that the structure of a language affects the categories with which a person who speaks the language views and understands the world. The paper that started this new discussion was written by Keith Chen: "The Effect of Language on Economic Behavior." In this paper, Chen asks whether there is a connection between (a) the use of a present tense form of a verb in a language to express events in the future and (b) economic behavior that directly deals with the future and how an expectation about the future may change the way a person behaves today. Many linguists have expressed a great deal of concern about how Chen argued for his position, but a number of young economists have developed similar ideas linking grammatical structure and economic behavior since Chen's paper was published in 2013. We will look at Chen's idea, his arguments, and the way in which scholars from one discipline may or may not succeed in convincing scholars in another discipline.

Readings

1. The Effect of Language on Economic Behavior: Evidence from Savings Rates, Health Behaviors, and Retirement Assets. M. Keith Chen. *American Economic Review* 103 (2), 690-731. 2013.
2. Reader's guide to Chen 2013. John Goldsmith

Week 10. March 12

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