

# ***Linguistics, Language and Culture: A Human Ecological Approach***

Course Syllabus for Fall of 2016 – Gray Cox

Classes 1:00-2:25 MTh -- Seafox Seminar Room

Office Hours: MTh 2:30 -4:00, Davis second Floor and, of course, by chance or appointment – I am around most of the week ;- )  
gray@coa.edu -- phone #801-5712 or #460-1163

“If it is true that the era of humanism is followed by – something, as yet unknown, is it not indispensable to approach this unknown through language, which is and will always remain more unknown than man, and coextensive with his being?”

– Julia Kristeva, *Language: The Unknown – an Initiation Into Linguistics*

This course explores the basic questions concerning the origins, nature, history, functions and philosophical significances of human languages. Comparisons to other species and to machine languages will also be examined. Readings will include classic texts by Chomsky and others as well as selected materials from diverse disciplines such as linguistic anthropology, psychology, ethology, aesthetics, history of languages, and philosophy. Class sessions will include a mix of discussion, lecture, and visiting speakers.

Each student will undertake a term long project examining some topic of interest and examine it from the point of view of the different disciplines and theories covered in the course. Project topics might include, for example: the development of identity, the articulation of gender, forms of representation, the expression of emotion, concepts of rationality, relations between meaning and truth, and communication in an age of artificial intelligences.

The goals of the course are: 1.) to familiarize students with the range of phenomena associated with language and the principal questions they raise and the theories used to interpret them and 2.) to develop skills in researching interdisciplinary questions. Assignments will include two problem sets, a series of weekly homework exercises, and the term project which must be presented both orally and in a major paper due at the end of the term.

Evaluation will be based on the extent to which in class participation and work on the assignments demonstrates substantive progress on the two goals of the course. There are no specific prerequisites but students will be expected to be able to contribute insights, information and questions from previous work in relevant disciplines and/or studies of languages, undertake challenging readings, and pursue a major research project. HS, M, lab fee \$20

Texts for the course will include four books: 1. George Yule's *The Study of Language*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition; 2. Stephen Pinker's *The Language Instinct: How the Mind*

Creates Language; 3. Julie Tetel Andresen and Philip M. Carter's Languages in the World: How History, Culture and Politics Shape Language; and Christine Kenneally's The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language. (The first three are available at Sherman's.)

The readings cover a wide variety of complex issues. To allow extra time to work through aspects of them not covered in class, there will be a lab/study session slot set up as well as regular office hours which can be used for this purpose by individuals or groups.

A note on the readings and material: There is just way more to deal with than we can in a normal class. So we are going to try the experiment of this not being a normal class:

1. Instead of providing a tightly focused body of ideas and texts that you should master, we are going to look at a wide range that you should become acquainted with to varying degrees – as makes sense, given your interests and abilities. This means that we should experience streams of information and conceptual overloads throughout the course and that we will need to learn to negotiate the complex waters of those streams both individually and as a group – a bit like a party of canoeist navigating a long series of complicated stretches of whitewater. Perhaps another useful metaphor would be to think of us as travellers trying to survive and pursue individual research interests in a great city in the Third World, filled with layer upon layer of different cultures, languages, institutions, threats and opportunities.
2. Instead of evaluating your progress towards mastery of material by setting goals and criteria and using problem sets, tests and other devices to gauge your progress, we are going to let you cultivate the forms of your engagement, critical analysis and synthesis of material and try to get them to emerge in organic ways.

Assignments for the term will be adapted in light of these 2 considerations. They will be of three types:

A. Besides readings, the homework for each class will include writing responses on the various materials and the discussion in previous classes. It should normally include a page worth of comments. These will be shared in a threaded online format. In some cases specific writing prompts or exercises will be assigned. In others it will be left open. These should provide comments on theory, philosophy, empirical issues, comparisons between authors, applications to specific languages and/or connections to their term projects – and comments on previous comments and threads. Each person will also be expected to sign up at least 4 times to comment on the recommended readings to insure that someone reads the recommended readings for each session.

B. An oral presentation in class on a topic of your choice. Normally reports should be done in teams of 2, topics can be of their interest. The report should include a reading assignment shared a class ahead with everyone to read as preparation for the presentation, an executive summary of the presentation, and

supplementary materials that may be of use including, for instance, an annotated bibliography.

Topics can vary widely. They might include, for example: the history or characteristics of specific languages; theories of language developed in linguistics, psychology, philosophy, anthropology or other disciplines; activist issues in endangered languages; pedagogical questions; philosophical problematics or puzzles; et cetera.

C. A final paper due at the end of the term on one of the big questions raised in the course -- showing how your topic report does or does not cast light on it. This should be 8 to 10 pages in length. The possible questions may be revised as we proceed in the term but will likely include:

1. Is language primarily determined by genetics as an “instinct” or by culture or in some other way (e. g. by the logic of thought or the nature of subjectivity)?

2. In what sense and to what extent might languages be untranslatable, incommensurable or frame the world in terms of fundamentally different categories – and how might these things affect our understanding of the relationships between language, truth, reality and objectivity in ethics?

3. In what sense and to what extent is human language similar to and/or different from the genetic codes, behavioral communication systems of animals and/or computer language?

4. In what sense and to what extent is every language “Spanglish”?

5. A further question of your choice.

Revised

Assignments – have students present in pairs on the Yule chapters

Then a pair on a topic of interest

Then a final paper on a topic

And 150-250 words per class worth of comments

Week Zero

9/8 Introductions – and the big questions (origins, comparisons, futures, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and monologue vs. dialogue)

Week One

9/12 **Some Alternative Ways of Studying Language**

Stephen Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (LI) ch 1 “An Instinct to Acquire an Art”

George Yule, *The Study of Language*, fifth edition (SL) ch 1 “The Origins of Language” and 2 “Animals and Human Language”

Julie Tetel Andresen and Phillip M. Carter, *Languages in the World* (LW) ch 1 “All Languages Were Once Spanglish”

9/15

**Ferdinand de Saussure**, *Course in General Linguistics*, Introduction, ch. 2  
“Subject Matter and Scope of Linguistics; Its Relations with Other Sciences”, ch. 3  
“The Object of Linguistics” and Part I: General Principles, ch. 1 “Nature of the  
Linguistic Sign” and ch. 2 “Immutability and Mutability of the Sign”

SL 3 “The Sounds of Language” and 4 “The Sound Patterns of Language”

LW 2 “The Language Loop”

Week Two

9/19

**Noam Chomsky**, “Language and Problems of Knowledge”(1990) in *The  
Philosophy of Language*, ed. A. P. Martinich, fifth ed. Pp. 675-692

SL 5 “Word Formation” and 6 “Morphology”

LI 2 “Chatterboxes” and 3 “Mentalese”

9/22 **Language and Art**

R. G. Collingwood, “Language as Expression”, from *The Principles of Art*

Nick Sousanis, “The Shape of Our Thought”, from *Unflattening*

SL 7 “Grammar” and 8 “Syntax”

LI 4 “How Language Works”

Week Three

9/26 **Theories of signs**

Selections from Locke, Peirce, Gottlob Frege’s “Sense and Reference” and  
Kripke’s “Naming and Necessity”, and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s “Metaphors  
We Live By”

SL 9 “Semantics” and 10 “Pragmatics”

LI 5 “Words, Words, Words”

LW 5 “The Development of Writing in the Litmus of Religion and Politics”

9/29 **The Institutionalization of Language Norms**

LW 4 “Effects of the Nation-State and the Possibility of Kurdistan” and 5 The  
Development of Writing in the Litmus of Religion and Politics”

Vivian E critique of the language instinct

SL 11 “Discourse Analysis” and 12 “Language and the Brain”

Week Four

10/3 Visitor: **Dave Feldman – computer languages**

10/6 **Language, Logic and Dialogue**

selections from Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*

*Russell and Quine on object language and metalanguage*

A. M. Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”

SL 13 “First Language Acquisition” and 14 “Second Language

Acquisition/Learning”

Recommended: selections on the history of logic from Howard DeLong’s *A  
Profile of Mathematical Logic*

Week Five

10/10 Some **Continental Approaches**

David Abram, from *The Spell of the Sensuous*, ch. 3 “The Flesh of Language”  
Julia Kristeva, *Language, The Unknown: An Initiation into Linguistics*, ch. 20  
“Psychoanalysis and Language”  
Jacques Derrida, “Differance”  
SL 15 “Gestures and Sign Language” and 16 “Written Language”

10/13 Visitor: **Rich Borden – language and psychology**

Week Six

10/17 **Language Histories**

LW 7 “A Mobile History: Mapping Language Stocks and Families” and 8  
“Colonial Consequences: Language Stocks and Families Remapped”  
Selections from Nicholas Ostler’s *Empires of the Word: A Language History fo  
the World*  
SL 17 “Language, History and Change” and 18 “Regional Variation in  
Language”

10/20 Visitor: **John Visvader – philosophy and language**

Week Seven

10/24 **Translation, Commensurability and Relativism**

John Searl, “Indeterminacy, Empiricism and the First Person”  
Benjamin Lee Whorf, “Science and Linguistics” and critique of his views  
Lawrence Venuti, on translation and communities  
SL 19 “Social Variation in Language” and 20 “Language and Culture”

**10/26 NOTE EXTRA SESSION Wednesday Night Student Reports**

10/27 Student Reports

Week Eight

10/31 Student Reports

11/3 Faculty Retreat – no class meeting

Week Nine

11/7 Visitor: Netta van Vliet – language and anthropology

11/10 **Our Animal Origins**

Christine Kenneally, from *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of  
Language*, pp. 91-138  
LW 10 “The Remote Past: Language Becomes Embodied”  
LI 11 “The Big Bang”

Week Ten

11/14 **Our Animal Origins (continued)**

Christine Kenneally, from *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of  
Language*, pp. 139-202

11/17 **Closing – and Future Studies**

LW 12 “The Imagined Future: Globalization and the Fate of Endangered Languages”