Ling 106: Illusions of Language

Spring 2017, Mondays & Wednesdays, 11:35am–12:50, WLH 115

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Short description

In order to understand language, speakers must successfully navigate complex linguistic expressions on a rapid time-scale. Failures of the linguistic parser provide a window into how language is encoded in the brain and how it is deciphered in real time. This course gives special attention to 'grammatical illusions': expressions which the parser mistakenly accepts as grammatical, despite making little sense upon closer reflection, and on the other hand grammatical sentences which the parser has difficulty processing. Emphasis is also put on illusions and misconceptions *about* language, such as the belief that women speak more than men, that 'vocal fry' can harm your voice, and that double negation as in *I dont have no time for this* is illogical.

Requirements

1. **Problem sets (40%):** Problem sets will provide an opportunity to use the tools and ideas from class and the readings, in order to better understand them.

2. **Blog posts (25%)**: Two posts (500 words or less) identifying potential illusions of language, developed based on the topics covered in the first half of the semester. In addition, three responses (250 words or less) to posts created by other students.

3. **Final paper (20%):** Should be approximately 10 pages. The paper should identify a puzzle and use the skills developed in class to carefully diagnose and describe the issue, and sketch a possible analysis.

4. **Class presentation (10%):** A presentation of the topic of the final paper, during the last week of the semester.

5. **Attendance and participation (5%):** Active attendance, participation in class, and preparation (doing the readings) are crucial for success in the class.

Problem sets

There will be a problem set most weeks in the first half of the semester. **Problem sets will be posted online Wednesday afternoons and will be due (physical copy) in class the following Wednesday**.

Blog posts and responses, in the second half of the semester, will be submitted online (more on this later in the semester). You will have some flexibility in when you choose to submit these posts.

Grace Days

You will have 3 grace days per semester. "Grace Days" are extensions you can give yourself on the due date for assignments. **Everyone in the class gets three Grace Days per semester**. You can use these whenever the press of other things—a paper in another course; a concert, play, or game you're in; a late start on the assignment—makes it hard for you to meet the deadline. (Grace Days are not for emergencies or illness; that's what extensions are for.) Hence for an assignment due on Wednesday, you can turn it in on Thursday without penalty, at the "cost" of one Grace Day. (Weekends count as one day.)

Website

Lecture notes and additional readings and materials will be posted on our course website. Please make sure you have access to the website on Canvas.

Readings

- *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*, 11th Edition. 2011. Vedrana Mihalicek and Christin Wilson (eds). Ohio State University Press.

- *Foundations of Language*. Jackendoff, Ray. 2002. Oxford University Press.

- Selected readings from specialized journals and online blogs.

Rules of note

- **Cooperation:** You may discuss homework assignments with other students. However, you must always submit your own write-up, and you must list the students who you worked with on your assignment.

- **Integrity:** All written work submitted for a course, except for acknowledged quotations, must be expressed in the student's own words and of their own devising. The submission of plagiarized work will, under University rules, render the offending student subject to an F grade for the work in question or for the entire course, at the discretion of the instructor, and will also make the student liable for referral to the Yale College Executive Committee. Click here for more details.

- **Disabilities:** Any student who feels they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss their specific needs and to discuss potential accommodations. I rely on the Resource Office on Disabilities for assistance in verifying the need for accommodations and developing accommodation strategies. Please see here for more information.

- **Talk to me!:** I want you to succeed in this class. If any material or requirement is unclear, let me know. In extreme cases, alternative arrangements can be made for some of the course requirements, but only by talking to me first.

- **Participation:** As the instructor, I will be doing a large portion of the talking in class, but the course will be vastly improved by you, the students, sharing your ideas and asking your questions. If you have a question, there is probably at least one other person with the same question. Ask it; others will be grateful you did. If what I've said is hard to follow, or if you think I've made a mistake, let me know right away. It's easiest to fix problems as they come. Moreover, when I ask questions, I typically expect answers. Don't be shy! I will wait.

- **Copyright:** Instructor-generated course materials (e.g., slides, handouts, assignments, exam questions, answer keys, etc.) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

Course outline (subject to change as the semester progresses)

1. **Speech production and speech perception**

   - Phonemic restoration
   - Categorical perception
   - The McGurk Effect
   - Speech and music
   - Reading: Language Files 2.0–2.4 (pp. 35–58), 3.0–3.3 (pp. 101–124), 9.0, 9.4 (pp.354–355, 376–380); Jackendoff ch. 1 (pp.1–15)
   - **Assignments 1–2**

2. **The mental lexicon: how words are created and how they are stored**

   - Spoonerisms
   - Priming effects
   - Slips of the tongue
   - Reading: LF 4.0–4.2 (pp.147–165), 9.3, 9.5 (pp. 367–375, 381–386) ; Jackendoff ch. 2 (pp.19–38).
   - **Assignment 3**

3. **Processing sentences**

   - Garden path effects
   - Center embedding
   - Attachment ambiguities
   - Reading: LF 5.0–5.5 (pp.196–229), 9.6–9.7 (pp. 387–394); Jackendoff ch. 3.4 (pp.51–58), ch. 6.1–6.5 (pp.152–172).
   - **Assignment 4**

4. **What sentences mean and what they don't mean**

   - The comparative Illusion
   - Unlicensed anaphora and negative polarity items
   - Scope ambiguities
   - Reading: LF 6.0–6.4 (pp. 240–259)

5. **Reading and Writing**

   - Agreement Attraction
   - Eye-tracking in reading
   - Writing systems
   - Visual illusions
   - Reading: LF 15.0–15.3 (pp. 590–610)

6. **Language and the mind**

   - The Whorf-Sapir hypothesis: does language determine thought?
   - Color terms
   - Spatial orientation
   - The numbers system and the Analog Magnitude system
   - <u>Reading:</u> LF 11.2 (pp. 461–467), online posts (links on Canvas)
   - **Blog post #1 due**

7. **Language and culture**

   - Do women speak more than men?
   - Does 'vocal fry' harm your voice?
   - Should you apologize less?
   - Where did uptalk come from?
   - Are there 'gay' speech characteristics?
   - <u>Reading:</u> LF 11.2 (pp. 461–467), online posts (links on Canvas)
   - **Responses #1–2 due**

8. **Non-standard dialects of English**

   - Language vs. dialect
   - Properties of African American Vernacular English
   - Appalachian English
   - Negative Concord
   - <u>Reading:</u> LF 10.0–10.4 (pp. 408–435); Selected entries from the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project webpage; online posts (links on Canvas)
   - **Blog post #2 due**
   - **Response #3 due** (the following week)

9. **Final presentations**

10. **Final paper due: May 5, 2017**