Spring 2019

PSYC 355/NEUR 355

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Language is arguably the most powerful tool on the planet. Think of any product of human culture—all of it was influenced by language. This course asks four big questions about this unique device: What is language? Where did it come from? Is the brain designed for language? How does language affect thought? We will approach these questions from multiple perspectives, from linguistics to anthropology, neuroscience to philosophy and cognitive science to developmental psychology. In addition, you will become competent in the varied ways researchers attempt to answer these questions, with the ultimate goal of asking your own empirical questions about this distinctly human capacity.

Evaluation

1. Exams. In lieu of a few large exams, there will be 16 separate exam questions over the course of weeks 3 through 16. There will be two types of question:

   a. There will be 12 daily in-class or take-home questions (10 points each) that will test your comprehension of the weekly readings and your ability to integrate readings across the semester. The questions will be manageable if you thoroughly read and understood the main points of the articles when they were originally assigned. However, they will be very difficult if you do not stay on top of the reading and you do not think about the readings on a daily basis. You can drop your lowest score (including a zero from missing class).

   b. There will be four take-home “Integration Pieces” (IPs) (10 points each). These short writing assignments (usually 150 words) require you to not only understand the readings, but to integrate them and propose a novel research question. I will provide examples that should be used as a model. You should bring your typed (no email) integration piece with word count when it is assigned (late submissions will receive the regular penalty). Word limits are important for honing your concise writing skill. You cannot drop your lowest score, but you are free to hand in practice IPs to get additional feedback if you need it.

Together, the exam questions are worth 150 points (110 for daily questions and 40 points for the IPs), and account for 40% of your total grade.

2. Research proposal. The final project requires you to write an NSF-formatted research proposal on a topic of your choice related to the class material. You must choose and submit a preliminary idea for your topic by Week 11. It may be on material already covered or material not covered in this course but relevant to one of the four big questions. In Week 12, you must hand in a 300-word mini-proposal for your project and
include a list of 10 new references not covered in the course that are relevant to your topic. In addition, there will be short presentations of your research ideas to be discussed in the last weeks of class. The final proposal is due on the last day of finals week at noon. The paper should be no longer than 4000 words and is worth 40% of your grade. Late papers will not be accepted.

3. **GE Assignment.** All human languages share some basic features, while at the same time varying in significant ways. This makes language an interesting lens through which to consider how diversity in a globally shared tool maps onto neural, cognitive and social differences across cultures. The claim that differences in language lead to differences in thought is called the Whorfian Hypothesis. In this assignment, you will be asked to respond to a statement made about the Whorfian Hypothesis either defend, critique or add nuance to that statement. This will be due in class during Week 13 and will be worth 15% of your grade. Late assignments will not be accepted.

4. **Class participation.** Participation is important in this seminar. This is not a lecture course, so your active engagement is crucial for the class to function well. The expectation is that everyone will:
   1) Make meaningful contributions in class discussions
   2) Provide feedback on your peer’s final research proposals
   3) Be discussion “experts” for two different class periods (see Google doc)
   4) Email at least one link about relevant topics to class

Participation counts for 5% of your grade. This is a small amount, but don’t mistake that for it not being important. I know that some of you are shy, but learning to speak up and actively participate in a college seminar is excellent practice for when you graduate and are expected to communicate with confidence and clarity in a professional setting.

**Readings**
Readings assigned for a date should be read *before* that class period. This will promote good discussion on the readings. You may access these readings on the Google Doc that will be shared with all of you.

**Email**
Email is the official means of correspondence in this class. If you do not check your email daily, I encourage you to develop this healthy habit. In general, faculty—and future employers—will expect that you respond to emails in a timely manner (within 48 hours). If you need more time, you should write a brief email asking for it.

**Office Hours**
Olin 105D on M 1:00-2:30; T: 10:00-11:30; W 2:30-3:30 and by appointment. I encourage you to use these times to discuss the readings and your ideas for the final research proposal.
**Tips for Success**

This class is heavily discussion based. As such, you will need to be an active participant to get the most out of it. Here are a few key factors to your success:

1. Because of the heavy emphasis on discussion, I expect that everyone to thoroughly read the assigned readings before class. You should spend approximately one to three hours per reading (depending on the length and complexity) to understand them at the right level. However, understanding the articles is not the end point, so you will need to dedicate additional time to think after you have read the papers. The goal is to understand the readings and integrate them to generate new research questions. Generating new questions in science is challenging, so make sure you put yourself in a position to rise to that challenge.

2. Unlike lower-level psychology and neuroscience classes, there will be minimal lecturing. In addition, there will be no use of PowerPoint in the class discussions of the articles. You are expected to seek outside help (text books, the internet, meetings with me, etc.) if you need visual aids help to understand the readings. Therefore, you need to be independent and take initiative in the class if you want to succeed. With this responsibility, you will be expected to identify important themes from the readings *on your own*, without the aid of having general discussion questions in advance. For those of you who usually require extensive guidance to succeed in a class, this course will challenge you to create your own structure. This skill will prove extremely valuable when you graduate from Colgate.

3. This class requires you to hone your writing and communication skills. One aspect of good science is concise communication. To facilitate concise communication, I enforce strict word limits on written material and time limits on class presentations. You should view these limits not as impediments to, but as *clarifiers of*, your thinking. If your writing is clear, your thinking probably is too! As a junior or senior at Colgate, now is the time to practice clear and concise communication.
Course Outline

Week 1
1/22
Why should you care about language?

Haidt, J. & Lukianoff, G. (July 18, 2017). Why it's a bad idea to tell students words are violence. The Atlantic.

1/24
Section I: What is language?

Week 2
1/29
Section I: What is language?
Practice Exam Q

1/31
Section I: What is language?
Practice Exam Q (IP)

Week 3
2/5
Section II: Where did language come from?
Exam Q 1

2/7
Section II: Where did language come from?
Exam Q 2

**Week 4**  
2/12  
**Section II: Where did language come from?**  
*Exam Q 3 (IP)*  

2/14  
**Section II: Where did language come from?**  
*Exam Q 4*  

**Week 5**  
2/19  
**Section III: Is the brain designed for language?**  
*Exam Q 5*  

2/21  
**Section III: Is the brain designed for language?**  
*Exam Q 6*  

**Week 6**  
2/26  
**Section III: Is the brain designed for language?**  
*Exam Q 7 (IP)*  
Section III: Is the brain designed for language?

Exam Q 8


Week 7

Exam Q 9

Section IV: How does language affect thought?


Week 8

Exam Q 10 (IP)


McWhorter, J. H. (2014). *The language hoax: Why the world looks the same in any language*. Oxford University Press. (Chapter One)

*Read as a model for the final research proposal:* Hirata, Y., & Kelly, S. D. (2010). RUI: Effects of hand gesture on auditory and vocabulary learning of a second language. Grant funded by the *National Science Foundation*.

Week 9

Section IV: How does language affect thought?
Exam Q 11

Section IV: How does language affect thought?

3/21
Exam Q 12

Week 10

3/26
Section IV: How does language affect thought?
Exam Q 13

3/28
Section IV: How does language affect thought?
Exam Q 14 (IP)

Week 11

4/2
No exam but idea for proposal due
Interlude: NSF Proposal Brainstorming Session

4/4
Section IV: How does language affect thought?
Exam Q 15

**Week 12**
4/9

*Section IV: How does language affect thought?*

Mini proposal due


4/11

*Section IV: How does language affect thought?*

TBA: Papers chosen by class

**Week 13**
4/16

*Grant Proposal Writing and Presentation Workshop*

Re-read the grant by Hirata & Kelly (2010)

4/18

*GE Assignment due*

*NSF Proposal Workshop*

**Week 14**
4/23

*NSF Proposal Discussions*

4/25

*NSF Proposal Discussions*

**Week 15**
4/30

*NSF Proposal Discussions*

5/2

*NSF Proposal Discussions*

Exam Q 16

**Week 16**
5/10

Final paper due at noon