

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Course description

This course is a complement to the Introduction to Linguistics sequence. It can also be taken as an alternative to it by those students who are not majoring in Linguistics but are interested in learning something about language. It covers a selection from the following topics: What is the position of spoken language in the usually multimodal forms of communication among humans? In what ways does spoken language differ from signed language? What features make spoken and signed language linguistic? What features distinguish linguistic means of communication from animal communication? How do humans communicate with animals? From an evolutionary point of view, how can we account for the fact that spoken language is the dominant mode of communication in all human communities around the world? Why cannot animals really communicate linguistically? What do the terms language "acquisition" and "transmission" really mean? What factors account for differences between language acquisition by children and by adults? What does it mean to be a bilingual? Are children really perfect language acquirers? What factors bring about language evolution, including language loss and the emergence of new language varieties? What is language contact and what are its manifestations? This a general education course without any prerequisites.

Topics tentatively selected for Winter 2007

How do human languages (spoken and signed) differ from means of communication used by other animals?

- “DESIGN FEATURES” of human languages
- Innateness and (social) learning – “copying” and the spread of cultural phenomena
- PATTERNS *vs* RULES *vs* ANALOGIES
- What language “ACQUISITION” and “TRANSMISSION” really mean
- Structural complexity of spoken languages – the significance of modularity
- Speaker-INDEXICALITY – language and identity (race/ethnicity, socio-economic class, gender, age group, education, professional affiliation, etc.)

Spoken *vs* signed languages

- Signed language *vs* gesture
- How the medium constrains structure – the question of linearity
- Contact of spoken and signed languages
- Is there really a PHONOLOGY of signed language?

The origins of human language(s)

- Gradualism *vs* punctuated equilibrium
- Why the evolution of language is likely to have been gradual
- Why it can be claimed that modern languages are not the end of the process yet
- Why are there more spoken than signed languages? Why are there more people speaking than signing? – non-structural, “ecological” aspects of language evolution

- Why are there so many different languages in the world? (Preliminary considerations)

Humans vs other animals (again)

- Can humans learn to communicate with animals in the latter's means of communication?
- Can animals be taught to communicate with humans in spoken or signed language?
- Cross-species communication barriers

Why do human languages differ structurally, despite their architectural similarities? Trying to make sense of typology.

- The significance of variation in populations – a population genetics perspective
- The effects of population dispersals on variation
- Variational vs transformational evolution
- Implications for the proto-language – Was there ever a proto-language for mankind? (The Nostratic vs the Out-of-Africa hypotheses!)

Language change/evolution

- How do languages change/evolve?
- Why do languages change/evolve?
- Variation and the “ACTUATION QUESTION” (Why it need not be considered a “PROBLEM”?)
- The ecology of language evolution
- Language genetic families: what do they reflect?
- Genetic vs typological classifications of languages
- Typological heterogeneities within languages and language families

The coexistence of languages

- Societal vs individual multilingualism
- Societal multilingualism and language competition
- Ecological factors leading to language endangerment and loss
- Globalization vs glocalization – the real causes of language endangerment and loss (the significance of ‘POPULATION STRUCTURE’)

Language and communicative media

- Writing systems – The variation that matters or does not matter
- The impact of writing on communication
- The impact of other media on communication
- Can animals benefit from communication technology?

Other forms of communication

- Traffic signs
- Professional sign conventions
- How NORMS/conventions arise (Norms and NORMALIZATION)

- PATTERN EMERGENCE – “rule-governed” phenomena – SYSTEMS