

Psychology of Language

Psych 53: Issues in Social Psychology

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Course Description

Imagine having the ability to transmit your thoughts from your own brain to your friend's brain by sending them through the air as encoded signals. It sounds like science fiction if you put that way, but this is precisely what language allows us to do everyday all day long. In this course we will study the science of language – including topics ranging from the philosophical foundations of symbolic thought and meaning, to how children learn language, to language comprehension and production, to what we know about how the brain creates language. Assignments and evaluation will include short persuasive essays pertaining to selected readings from each topic area and two scheduled exams.

Required Reading

The Language Instinct by Steven Pinker, 1994 Morrow, NY

Introduction to Psycholinguistics: Understanding Language Science by Matthew J. Traxler, 2012 Wiley-Blackwell

Coursework

Study Questions As incentive to keep up with the reading and spur class discussion, students are required to submit “Study Questions” for course credit. Each study question should be in the form of a short answer question – a question that can be answered in one paragraph. These must be original questions – questions copied from the text, other students, or other sources is plagiarism and a violation of the Academic Honor Principle. Questions must be accompanied by a short answer and a reference with page number to the reading it pertains to. Questions may be used as material for the mid-term and final exams. While students may submit as many questions as they like, only 10 questions (5 questions per half of the course) will count toward the final grade. In total each question along with its one-paragraph answer should not exceed 150 words.

1000 word essays Students should complete at least two essays (at least one per course half) on a chosen topic from the course material. Essays may not exceed 1000 words in length. The point of these essays is to engage students in critical thinking about the topics. The point of the short format is to be as concise and clear as possible. These are persuasive essays addressing a contentious scientific issue. Essays should compare and contrast at least two primary source scientific articles. They should have a thesis statement, and provide evidence in favor of one side or another of the issue at hand. Each essay is worth 15 points (see below).

Examinations There will be two scheduled examinations. One midterm and one final. Each will be worth 30 points. The first exam is mandatory, the second is optional (see below).

Grading Policy

Grading for the class is based on a 100 point scale. The maximum number of points earned cannot exceed 100. The class will be graded in two phases – one based on the first half of the class and the second based on the second half. Each half is worth 50 points.

Points may be earned for the first half of the course as follows:

No more than **five points** for **Study Questions**. Each study question handed in is worth one point.

No more than **fifteen points** for an essay.

No more than **thirty points** for the Midterm exam.

The three components of the first half of the course should be considered non-optional. You must hand in at least 5 study questions, one essay, and take the mid-term for full credit.

In contrast, the second half of the term is “**Choose your own adventure**”:

No more than **five points** for **Study Questions**.

No more than **Three essays** where each essay is worth a maximum of **15 points each**.

Optional Final Exam, worth **30 points**.

For example, you could write three perfect essays for the second half of the term (hand in no Study Question, and skip the final) and still get 95 points for the course, assuming a perfect first half.

If a student does more than the minimum amount of work, then the combination resulting in the highest score will make the final grade. Note that this is only possible given two scenarios:

1) The student takes the Final Exam and writes 4 essays in total or 2) The student takes the Final exam and writes 3 essays in total. In the former case, either one exam, or a combination of two essays – whichever has the lowest combined grade – will be dropped. In the latter case, the essay with the lowest grade will be dropped.

Note: "Extra" exams or essays may not replace credits for Study Questions. Only the following substitutions are possible:

1. An extra essay may replace a grade for an essay with a lower score.
2. An exam with a score higher than the sum of two essays can replace those essays.

or

3. Two essays whose sum exceeds the score of one exam can replace the exam.

Grade Corrections: Grading should be fair. If a student receives a grade that is lower than it should be because of an ERROR on my part, that would be unfair. If the error is tangible and real, I will correct my mistake. However, I will not discuss grades with students in person. If a student believes that a grade was given in error, they must send me a letter, printed out on paper, explaining the error. (The purpose of the written letter is to avoid hasty exchanges by email.)

Tentative course schedule

Week 1

M 9/15	Intro, Syllabus, Policies	Ch. 1 Pinker
W 9/17	Discuss Koko Ape Language	Ch. 1 Traxler pp 1-18 Prior to this class watch: Koko The Talking Gorrilla
F 9/19	Language Origins	Ch. 11 Pinker

Week 2

M 9/22	Language and Thought	Ch. 1, Traxler, pp18-31
W 9/24	Mentalese	Ch. 3, Pinker
F 9/26	Mentalese continued	50

Week 3

M 9/29	No Class	Ch 6 Pinker
W 10/1	Speech Production	Ch 2 Traxler pp 37-54
F 10/3	Speech Perception	Ch 2 Traxler pp 54-71

Week 4

M 10/6	Words, Words, Words	Ch 5 Pinker
W 10/8	Lexical Semantics	Ch 3 Traxler pp 79-97
F 10/10	Lexical Processing	Ch 3 Traxler pp 97-129; First Essay Due

Week 5

M 10/13	TBA	
W 10/15	Review	
F 10/17	Mid Term Exam	

Week 6

M 10/20	Sentence Processing	Ch 4 Traxler pp 141-151; Ch 4 Pinker
W 10/23	Constraint-Based Models	Ch. 4, Traxler pp 151-166; Ch 4 Pinker
F 10/25	Parsing continued	Ch. 4 Traxler

Week 7

M 10/28	Language Acquisition	Ch. 9 Pinker
W 10/30	Early learning	Ch. 9, Traxler pp 325-344
F 11/1	Words, Syntax etc	Ch. 9 Traxler pp 344-361; Essay deadline*

Week 8

M 11/3	Language & Brain	Ch. 10 Pinker
W 11/5	Aphasia	Ch. 13 Traxler
F 11/7	Language Mavens	Ch. 12 Pinker;

Week 9

M 11/10	Metaphor & Dialogue	Chps. 7 and 8 in Traxler
W 11/12	Mind	Ch 13 Pinker
F 11/14	Review	Essay Deadline**

Week 10

M 11/17	No Class	
	Final Exam TBA	Essay Deadline*** This will be BEFORE final exam

* After this deadline only TWO (2) more essays may be handed in – you may hand in three, two, or one essays between the Mid-term and this deadline.

** After this deadline only ONE (1) more essay may be handed in – you may hand in only one or two essays between the last deadline (11/1) and this one.

*** This is the final deadline to hand in an essay. You may hand in only one essay between the last deadline (11/14) and this one.