



university of
groningen

campus fryslân

Language & Culture I

Syllabus 2020 – 2021

Course code:
CFB011A05
Level:
Credits: 5 EC

Lecturers: Matt Coler
Nicholas Q. Emlen

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Introduction

This course is an introduction to the study of culture, with a special focus on the relationship between culture and language. We take language to be the primary fact of human social and cultural life; conversely, we take culture to give structure and meaning to all aspects of human communication. This approach puts language and culture, together, at the center of human action, including such diverse phenomena as the formation of families, the production and consumption of food, participation in economic systems, conceptualization of the environment and its transformations, and how we adorn and even hold our bodies. We approach all of these facets of language and culture through ethnography--the methodological core of the discipline of anthropology--which adopts the perspective of a culture's practitioners to understand the complexities of the human experience from the ground up.

The course is divided into three parts. In the first part, we explore the concept of *culture*, and learn about how it has been theorized since anthropology emerged as a scholarly discipline in the late 19th century. In the second part, we turn our methodological and theoretical toolkit to language, and ask how people make meaning in interaction across a diverse array of cultures. The final part of the course applies this approach to some urgent geopolitical topics--especially climate change and the environment--and shows what an on-the ground, engaged ethnographic perspective has to offer to those who wish to forge a better future for our planet.

Learning goals

Upon the successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- 1- Identify and theorize the role of culture in human behavior
- 2- Understand the role of language in shaping and reproducing culture, and the role of culture in structuring human communication
- 3- Reflect upon the ethnographic method as a unique and crucial perspective on human behavior
- 4- Apply the anthropological approach to issues of urgent geopolitical importance, especially how climate change is conceptualized and negotiated on the ground
- 5- Write rigorous academic essays that give a critical examination of anthropological theories of language and culture
- 6- Discuss their ideas with peers, both in person and in a digital forum, and engage with others' ideas in a critical but constructive manner

Course structure

The course runs for 9 weeks. Tuesdays are a "theory" day, while Thursdays are a "lab" day featuring discussions and projects.

Practical Information

Literature

The readings for this course are articles assigned on a weekly basis. They are listed in the bibliography in Appendix 3. We also include readings that are recommended, but not required, in that section.

Essentials library

In the Library area you can find the required books for the course. You can borrow the resources when you are studying at De Beurs or make copies of the parts you want to read at home. Please note that it is not allowed to take resources from the library home.

Nestor

We use the virtual learning environment "[Nestor](#)" as the main platform for communication. Here, you'll find recommended literature, information on assignments and your grades. Announcements regarding schedule or content changes will also be published in Nestor. Moreover, you will find quick links to SmartCat and diverse RUG tools (such as Ocasy, Enrolment and Photo and wireless printing). The course's discussion section is also on Nestor.

Assessment

The final grades will be calculated on the basis of the following scores. These are explained in greater detail in Appendix 2.

- three short essays completed over the course of the semester (20%, 25%, 30%)
- participation in class (10%)
- weekly contribution in the discussion forum on Nestor (15%)

Assignment grades are given in letters (A – F), expressed as C- or more for a pass and F for a fail, in line with the following grading table (see Appendix 1 for explanation of each grade):

Letter grades	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
Grade point	4.0	4.0	3.7	3.3	3.0	2.7	2.3	2.0	1.7	1.3	1.0	0.7	0

Attendance & Absence

The course meets twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday. In light of the current Corona restrictions, the course will follow a "hybrid" format: the Tuesday class each week will be held in person, and the Thursday class will be held virtually. Attendance of all classes, both in person and virtual, is mandatory. If you are unable to attend a class, please inform your lecturer as soon as possible by email and add the educational secretary in cc. All contact details are provided below. You are allowed to miss 3 (physical/online) classes. **Note:** the structure of the course may change during the semester as the Corona measures are updated.

Cheating and plagiarism

Cheating and plagiarism are academic offenses, with severe consequences. They are acts or omissions by students to partly or wholly hinder accurate assessment. Per the Teaching and Examination Regulations, cases of cheating and plagiarism are reported to Exam Board, which will decide upon the consequences. NB: all assignments are automatically checked for plagiarism.

Contact information

The instructors are:

- Dr. Matt Coler (m.coler@rug.nl), Sections A and C
Office hours: T.B.A. (also listed in Nestor)
- Dr. Nicholas Q. Emlen (n.q.emlen@rug.nl), Section B
Office hours: T.B.A. (also listed in Nestor)

The teaching assistant is Sara Argyiridis (s.g.a.argyriadis@student.rug.nl)

General questions or suggestions with regard to the course can be addressed to the educational secretariat. Email: cf-sec@rug.nl, phone number: 058-2882132.

Part 1: Culture

Week 1. Introducing the concept of culture

Class 1: 10 November 2020

In this course about language & culture, we begin with a general and non-theoretical introduction to the concept of culture and the anthropological approach to social relations.

Objectives

- Introduction to the course structure, assignments, and overall learning objectives
- Introduction to the concepts of cultural relativism, universality, and ethnocentrism
- Introduction to the fields of anthropology and linguistics

Homework for today

- Read the course syllabus

Class 2: 12 November 2020

In the second class, we continue to develop our understanding of culture, focusing on fieldwork and ethnography as the methodological heart of the discipline of anthropology. We read some accessible anthropological work to develop a further understanding of the ethnographic method and the systematic study of culture.

Objectives

- Introduction to ethnography
- The concept of culture as an all-encompassing, embodied system of meaning

Homework for today

- Fox (2014), selected pages

Week 2. Theorizing culture

Class 3: 17 November 2020

After developing a taste for the ethnographic approach to culture in week 1, we turn to the history of anthropological theorizing about culture. We begin with a history of the concept of culture, and then introduce the first of two approaches that will guide our analyses throughout the rest of the semester: interpretive anthropology (Geertz).

Objectives

- Introduction to the "culture" concept in the history of anthropological theory
- Exploration of interpretive anthropology

Homework for today

- Geertz (1973), selected pages

Class 4: 19 November 2020

In Class 4, we continue our discussion about the anthropological theorization of culture. After learning about interpretive anthropology in Class 3, we introduce practice theory (Bourdieu), and how it addresses the relationship between culture, structure, agency, and social inequality.

Objectives

- Learn about the distinction between interpretive anthropology and practice theory
- Explore the concept of embodiment in contemporary anthropological theory
- Learn about the concept of the habitus, and why it is an important development in social theory

Homework for today

- Bourdieu (2004)

Week 3. Gifts, commodities, and exchange

Class 5: 24 November 2020

This week, we take a specific domain of human social life--exchange--to see how the cultural concepts in the previous two weeks play out in particular societies. Much of human social and cultural life consists of people exchanging things with one another: money, food, gifts, commodities, care, labor, etc. What kinds of things can be bought and sold? What kinds of things cannot, or should not, be bought and sold? How do things circulate within a society? How are our social lives mediated by exchange, and how does culture shape those mediations? Our purpose this week is to apply the theoretical concepts from the first two weeks to this important domain of culture and society.

Objectives

- Introduction to "exchange" as a cultural phenomenon
- Learn about the anthropological distinction between gifts and commodities
- Discuss how particular culturally-defined categories of things are exchanged in different ways among societies.

Homework for today

Counts (1995)

AND Choose one:

Carrier (1993)
MacFarquhar (2009)

Class 6: 26 November 2020

Objectives

- Extend our understanding of exchange to include labor
- Take an ethnographic perspective on work and workplaces
- Learn about the Marxian concept of "alienation" and how it can be seen in the modern labor system

Homework for today

Graeber (2018)

Part 2: Language

Week 4. Language, the ethnography of communication, and social categorization

Class 7: 1 December 2020

In the second section of the class, we apply the anthropological concepts from the first section to language and language use. We begin by distinguishing the concept of language as it is studied by linguists (as an abstract code) with its understanding among anthropologists (as a lived fact of everyday social life). We begin with a simple introduction to the ethnography of communication through comparative readings about how people in different societies order alcoholic beverages.

Objectives

- Introduction to the ethnography of speaking
- Understanding how humans produce meaning in interactions
- Distinction between approaches to language from linguistics and anthropology

Homework for today

- Frake (1964)
- Spradley and Mann (2008)

Class 8: 3 December 2020

After introducing the ethnography of speaking, we turn to the closely related question of how systems of social categorization (rank, gender, kinship, gender, race, etc.) are enacted and reproduced in language use. We discuss the notion of appropriate communicative behavior, how it relates to those kinds of social categories, and how it varies from one society to the next.

Objectives

- Learn about how socially constructed categories are produced in interaction

Homework for today

Choose one:

- Bucholtz (2001)
- Irvine (1972)

Week 5. Linguistic relativity and language socialization

Class 9: 8 December 2020

An important and enduring question regarding language & culture is to what extent the structure of our languages influences the way we describe and conceptualize the world.

Objectives

- Learn about studies from experimental psychology regarding the influence of language structure on cognition
- Compare language-culture interactions on the basis of case studies from around the world

Homework for today

- Boroditsky (2006)
- Lucy (2004), selected pages

Class 10: 10 December 2020

The aspects of language that might influence cognition and conceptualization go beyond mere language structure; how languages are used, and in which contexts, plays a more important role in our formation of social concepts. This week, we explore the scholarly tradition of "language socialization", and discuss how it relates to linguistic relativity.

Objectives

- Extend our understanding of linguistic determinism into the interactional and pragmatic aspects of language use
- Integrate approaches from language acquisition and anthropological linguistics to understand the socialization of children into language and culture

Homework for today

- Heath (1982)

Week 6. Minoritized and endangered languages: conflict and empowerment

Class 11: 15 December 2020

Most of the world's languages are in danger of disappearing, many without being documented. Why is this happening, and what is the scope of the phenomenon? How does language come to be a site of discrimination and inequality?

Objectives

- Learn about linguistic diversity and the disappearance of the world's languages.
- Critically examine language as a site of discrimination and inequality.

Homework for today

- Nettle and Romaine (2000), selected pages

Class 12: 17 December 2020

Amidst the global language endangerment crisis, native speakers and academics around the world are working to stem the tide and implement more just, democratic, and sustainable language policies.

Objectives

- Learn about the responses to the global language endangerment crisis
- Consider the possibilities of language policy to promote the rights of minoritized and indigenous people

Homework for today

- [TBA]

Part 3: Culture, language, and environment

Week 7. Natures and cultures

Class 13: 5 January 2021

In the third part of the course, we turn our anthropological lens onto an urgent geopolitical topic: the environment and climate change. To begin, we read anthropological work showing that the categories of "nature" and "culture" are in fact culturally constructed, and vary substantially among societies. We also learn about so-called "transspecies engagement" in anthropology as a

basis for considering issues of culture and environment.

Objectives

- Introduction to the ontological turn in anthropology
- Interrogate the universality of concepts like "nature" and "culture"
- Explore how different cultures classify types of food

Homework for today

- Kohn (2007)

Class 14: 7 January 2021

Continuing the theme of "transspecies engagement" at the heart of much current anthropological work on the environment, we discuss the linkages between ecosystems, migration, climate change, and the global capitalist system. We will view sections of the documentary film *The Last Season* (by Sara Dosa).

Objectives

- Situate transspecies engagement within an anthropological approach to the environment
- Analyze the place of local economies, ecologies, and cultural behavior within the globalized capitalist system.

Homework for today

- Tsing (2015) (selected pages, Part 1)

Week 8. Culture, labor, and environments in crisis

Class 15: 12 January 2021

Anthropologists, in recent years, have begun to dedicate themselves to understanding climate change. This week, we read ethnographic texts to learn about how climate change is perceived and conceptualized within local systems of meaning.

Objectives

- Learn about climate change as it is conceptualized within particular cultures
- Consider what ethnography can contribute to climate policy and awareness

Homework for today

- Roncoli et al. (2016)

Class 16: 14 January 2021

One of the primary links between culture and the environment is labor. Today, we discuss how particular economies and labor practices are linked to the environment and the capitalist system. We also consider the place of language in this dynamic.

Objectives

- Analyze labor as a link between culture and the environment
- Theorize language within the anthropological approach to the environment

Homework for today

- Emlen (2020)

AND Choose one:

- Howard (2017)

- Todd (2014)

Week 9. Conclusions

Class 17: 19 January 2021

In the final week, we draw some conclusions about language and culture, and finish with a further discussion of the environment.

Objectives

- Learn about the role of migration and ideology in the global capitalist system

Homework for today

- Tsing (2015) (selected pages, Part 2)

Class 18: 21 January 2021

Recap and discussion.

Objectives

- Tie together the class themes.

Homework for today

- None

Appendices

Appendix 1. Grading at UCF

Background

At UCF, we always use letter grades. Letter grades are allocated according to the following scheme:

Letter grade	Grade point	Percentage	Description
A+	4.0	95,0% - 100%	Outstanding: the student demonstrates an understanding of issues and methodologies that is well-above undergraduate level. The output is original and shows a level of independent thinking. Arguments are accurately supported by evidence derived from a wide range of sources selected by the student. The work is very well presented, in writing, form and expression.
A	4.0	90,0% - 94,9%	Excellent: the student demonstrates an understanding of issues and methodologies that is of high level, placing them at the top of the class. The output shows independent thought. Arguments are supported by evidence from a wide range of sources selected by the student. The work is very well presented, in writing, form and expression.
A-	3.7	85,0% - 89,9%	Excellent: the student demonstrates an understanding of issues and methodologies that is of high level, placing them at the top of the class. The output shows independent thought. Arguments are supported by evidence from a wide range of sources selected by the student. The work is very well presented, in writing, form and expression.
B+	3.3	80,0% - 84,9%	Good: the student demonstrates an understanding of issues and methodologies that is above-average of what is expected. The output is well-organised, following academic guidelines for structure and use of sources to which students are directed by the course material or instructor. The work is competently presented, in writing, form and expression.
B	3.0	75,0% - 79,9%	Good: the student demonstrates an understanding of issues and methodologies that is above-average of what is expected. The output is well-organised, following academic guidelines for structure and use of sources to which students are directed by the course material or instructor. The work is competently presented, in writing, form and expression.
B-	2.7	70,0% - 74,9%	Good: the student demonstrates an understanding of issues and methodologies that is above-average of what is expected. The output is well-organised, following academic guidelines for structure and use of sources to which students are directed by the course material or instructor. The work is competently presented, in writing, form and expression.
C+	2.3	65,0% - 69,9%	Fair: the student demonstrates an understanding of issues and methodologies that is at the minimum level of what is expected. The output is reasonably well-organised and supported by a standard range of sources. The output may display some shortcomings, but no fundamental errors. There are no or minor flaws in the way the work is presented in writing, form and expression.
C	2.0	60,0% - 64,9%	Fair: the student demonstrates an understanding of issues and methodologies that is at the minimum level of what is expected. The output is reasonably well-organised and supported by a standard range of sources. The output may display some shortcomings, but no fundamental errors. There are no or minor flaws in the way the work is presented in writing, form and expression.
C-	1.7	55,0% - 59,9%	Fair: the student demonstrates an understanding of issues and methodologies that is at the minimum level of what is expected. The output is reasonably well-organised and supported by a standard range of sources. The output may display some shortcomings, but no fundamental errors. There are no or minor flaws in the way the work is presented in writing, form and expression.
D+	1.3	50,0% - 54,9%	Unsatisfactory: the student demonstrates a minimal to no level of understanding of issues and methodologies. There are substantial omissions in the output and there is limited or
D	1.0	45,0% - 49,9%	Unsatisfactory: the student demonstrates a minimal to no level of understanding of issues and methodologies. There are substantial omissions in the output and there is limited or

D-	0.7	D- 40,0% - 44,9%	irrelevant use of sources. There are flaws in the presentation of the work, in writing, form and expression.
F	0.0	< 40,0%	Fail: the student demonstrates no level of understanding of issues and methodologies. There are fundamental misconceptions in the output and/or output is entirely missing. There are serious flaws in the presentation of the work, in writing, form and expression.

Appendix 2. Assignments and Assessment

Three short essays [20%; 25%; 30%]

Over the course of the semester, you will write three critical essays that reflect upon the course material. The essays' weight in the course grade will increase (20%, 25%, 30%) as you develop your writing skills during the semester. Each week, we will post a few essay questions that correspond to that week's topics and readings. If you choose to address a particular week's topic and readings, the essay is due on the following week on Friday at 17h. The course is divided into three parts (of three weeks each), and you must write one essay during each of those three parts.

These essays are not summaries of the reading, but rather thoughtfully and textually grounded responses to the reading that engage with the arguments that the authors make. The essays should be between 500 and 750 words each. We will discuss the best techniques for writing an essay like this, and we will provide a rubric so you know how we grade the essays.

Participation [10%]

You are expected to be well-prepared for the lectures by means of reading the allocated study material before the lectures as well as doing the assignments. You are expected to engage in discussions with your peers on topics relevant for the lectures and challenge each other's ideas in a constructive way. Please note that not only the frequency of participating is important, but also whether your contribution is content-related and on the topic.

Nestor forum comments [15%]

By Saturday of every week, by 5pm, 1/3 of the students will ask (at least) one question or offer a thoughtful reflection about the readings for the upcoming Tuesday's class. Then, by Monday evening before the upcoming class, at 5pm, the other 2/3 of the students will offer (at least) one thoughtful response to one of those posts.

The groups are organized by FIRST name:

Group 1: A-D

Group 2: E-L

Group 3: M-Z

These are the deadlines for the posts. (S) means Saturday, and (M) means Monday.

	Group 1 (A-D)	Group 2 (E-L)	Group 3 (M-Z)
For 12 November	-	-	-
For 17 November	Ask	Respond	Respond
For 24 November	Respond	Ask	Respond
For 1 December	Respond	Respond	Ask
For 8 December	Ask	Respond	Respond
For 15 December	Respond	Ask	Respond
For 5 January	Respond	Respond	Ask
For 12 January	Ask	Respond	Respond
For 19 January	-	-	-

Appendix 3. Course readings

- Boroditsky, Lera (2006). 'Linguistic relativity,' *Encyclopedia of cognitive science*.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (2004). 'The peasant and his body,' *Ethnography* 5 (4): 579-99.
- Bucholtz, Mary (2001). 'The whiteness of nerds: Superstandard English and racial markedness,' *Journal of linguistic anthropology* 11 (1): 84-100.
- Carrier, James (1993). *The rituals of Christmas giving*.
- Counts, David (1995). 'Too Many Bananas, Not Enough Pineapples, and No Watermelon at All: Three Object Lessons in Living with Reciprocity,' *Annual Editions: Anthropology*, 95 96: 95-98.
- Emlen, Nicholas Q. (2020). 'Farmer Talk,' *Anthropology News*.
- Fox, Kate (2014). *Watching the English: the hidden rules of English behavior revised and updated*. Nicholas Brealey.
- Frake, Charles (1964). 'How to ask for a drink in Subanun,' *American Anthropologist* 66 (6.2): 127-32.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Graeber, David (2018). *Bullshit jobs*. Simon & Schuster New York.
- Heath, Shirley Brice (1982). 'What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school,' *Language in society* 11 (01): 49-76.
- Howard, Penny McCall (2017). 'Environment, labour and capitalism at sea: 'Working the ground' in Scotland.'
- Irvine, Judith T. (1972). *Strategies of status manipulation in the Wolof greeting*.
- Kohn, Eduardo (2007). 'How dogs dream: Amazonian natures and the politics of transspecies engagement,' *American ethnologist* 34 (1): 3-24.
- Lucy, John A. (2004). 'Language, Culture, and Mind in Comparative Perspective,' in Michel Achard and Suzanne Kemmer (eds.), *Language, Culture, and Mind*. 1-22.
- MacFarquhar, Larissa (2009). 'The Kindest Cut: What sort of person gives a kidney to a stranger?,' *New Yorker* (New York, NY: 1925): 38-51.
- Nettle, Daniel and Romaine, Suzanne (2000). *Vanishing voices: The extinction of the world's languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roncoli, Carla, Crane, Todd, and Orlove, Ben (2016). 'Fielding climate change in cultural anthropology,' *Anthropology and climate change*. Routledge, 87-115.
- Spradley, James P. and Mann, Brenda E. (2008). 'How to Ask for a Drink,' *The Cocktail Waitress: Woman's Work in a Man's World*. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 120-43.
- Todd, Zoe (2014). 'Fish pluralities: Human-animal relations and sites of engagement in Paulatuuq, Arctic Canada,' *Études/Inuit/Studies* 38 (1-2): 217-38.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press.