Linguistics 4: Language as a Cognitive System

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Course Rationale and Objectives

Language has traditionally been identified as the distinguishing mark of our species. In the latter half of the 20th century, the study of language became a focal point of scientific research on human cognition, in hopes that it could provide us with a privileged window into the workings of the human mind. Since World War II, there have been tremendous advances in the fields of linguistics, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and computer science. All of these disciplines have to varying degrees taken up the challenge of characterizing the human ability for language, and recent years have witnessed the advent of interdisciplinary studies of language, which allow us not only to fine tune our theories of language, but to constrain them as well.

This course will cover cognitive aspects of human language. Its purpose is to provide you with a body of sophisticated knowledge, based on current findings in the study of language, from which you can draw to:

(1) critically evaluate articles on language appearing in the popular press; and
(2) state the implications of language research for fundamental issues in cognitive science and linguistics.

Course Structure (tentative)

The course consists of two lectures of 80 minutes per week. Videotapes related to the topics that we cover will be shown in class.

The course will cover three different topics in language and cognition; each of these units will last for approximately three weeks. These topics cover the development of communicative and language abilities

(1) across animal species,
(2) across hominid species (the origins and evolution of language), and
(3) across the human life span (language acquisition and loss).

After each of the first two topics there will be a test, which may include any of the following types of questions: multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer. There will also be a cumulative final exam that covers the third topic in addition to material from the first two topics. The tests and final exam may include material from class lectures, the reading assignments, and videotapes designated as test material in class.
The first two tests will count for about 25% of your grade; the third test will constitute one half of the final exam, which itself will count for about 50% of your final grade. The final exam will be on Thursday, March 18, from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m.

Course Policies

Cheating on the homework, the tests, or the final exam will result in no credit for the homework, test, or exam in question, and you will be referred to your dean for disciplinary action. This is university policy and there will be no exceptions. PLEASE NOTE: If you turn in homework or a test/exam that resembles homework or a test/exam handed in by anyone else in this class or in previous classes like this one, that constitutes cheating. Also, plagiarism is also a clear violation of the university’s academic integrity policy. Therefore, all work must be your own and no one else’s. As there has been local media coverage of cheating on the UCSD campus in recent years, and as I have had to deal with several instances of cheating during this same time period, you should know that I feel very strongly about this issue and that I will handle all cases of cheating accordingly. I truly hope there will be no cause to discuss this issue any further this quarter, but if there is, I will strictly adhere to the policy outlined in this paragraph without exception.

Course Readings

All readings will be on electronic reserve at Geisel library. You can find the electronic reserves page for this course at:

http://reserves.ucsd.edu

Note that online materials like these are restricted by UCSD IP address, so you will only be able to view the readings from a campus computer, or from home if you are coming through the campus proxy. You can obtain information about off-campus proxy service from the library. If you have trouble with the proxy service, please contact the addresses listed in these handouts; we do not control the proxy service, and can do little to help you with it.

Syllabus and Readings

1. Sign System or Language?

   The nature of sign systems; naturally occurring animal communication; trained animal communication; human and primate gesture; home sign systems; human sign languages.

Tuesday, 1/6: Overview of Course and Introduction—The Nature of Sign Systems

   - **CEL**: Section 17, ‘Semantics’, pp. 100-102.

Thursday, 1/8: Naturally Occurring Animal Communication


**Tuesday, 1/13: Trained Animal Communication I**


• ‘Transcript of the Chat with Koko’.

• ‘Koko’s World: Transcript for Webcast held November 29, 2000 at 3 p.m. PST’.

**Thursday, 1/15: Trained Animal Communication II**


**Tuesday, 1/20: Sign Language**


**Thursday, 1/22: Human and Primate Gesture, Home Sign Systems**


**Tuesday, 1/27: TEST ON UNIT 1**

2. The Origins and Evolution of Language

   The history of thought on the origins of language; hominid evolution; the evolution of the vocal tract; the bioprogram theory; gesture-based theories; language and brain evolution.

**Thursday, 1/29: History of Thought on Language Origins**


**Tuesday, 2/3: Current Theories of Hominid Evolution**


  http://allafrica.com/stories/200012040191.html

**Thursday, 2/5: Evolution of the Vocal Tract**


• ____ (2001). ‘In the Beginning was the Vowel’.  
  http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/monitoring/media_reports/newsid_1480000/1480303.stm

**Tuesday, 2/10: The Bioprogram Theory**


**Thursday, 2/12: Gesture-Based Theories**


**Tuesday, 2/17: Language and Brain Evolution**

**Thursday, 2/19: TEST ON UNIT 2**

3. **Language Development in the Individual**

First language acquisition; language attrition in bilinguals; language and aging.

**Tuesday, 2/24: Theories of Language Acquisition—Nature vs. Nurture**


**Thursday, 2/26: Phonetic and Phonological Development**


**Tuesday, 3/3: Grammatical and Semantic Development**


**Thursday, 3/5: Language Attrition in Bilinguals** (guest lecture)


**Tuesday, 3/10: Language and Aging**


**Thursday, 3/12: REVIEW**

**THE FINAL EXAM WILL BE ON THURSDAY, MARCH 18, FROM 3:00 P.M. TO 6:00 P.M.**