

Words and the World: How Words Capture Human Experience

Seminar in Cognitive Processes (PSYC 471S)
Special Topics in Linguistics (LING 385S)
Emory University
Spring 2005

Time and Place:

Tuesdays & Thursdays, 2:30 – 3:45pm
Psychology 302

Instructor information:

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Course Description:

This course will focus on the ways in which languages can differ with respect to the encoding of some of the most fundamental categories of human experience, including space, time, causality, motion, and objecthood. Some of the questions to be addressed include: 1) How are word meanings related to non-linguistic concepts, given cross-linguistic semantic variability? 2) Are there true semantic universals, that is, are there elements of meaning that all languages specify? 3) Which aspects of language might be shaped by thought and which aspects of thought might be shaped by language? 4) What are the implications of cross-linguistic variability for the acquisition of non-linguistic concepts through language? 5) What are the implications of cross-linguistic variation for children's word learning and for learning a second language? Recently, psychologists, linguists, and anthropologists have begun to conduct cross-linguistic studies using experimental approaches to examine the nature of word meaning and its relation to cognition. The course will review the literature covering these exciting new findings.

This course fulfills the GER advanced seminary requirement. There are no prerequisites.

Format:

The course will be conducted as a seminar / workshop. During the first 50 minutes of every class, we will discuss a paper. In the remaining 25 minutes, we will discuss the class project. The course will be run in many ways like a graduate level course in which students take responsibility for their own learning. Specifically, each student will present two papers, write weekly assignments, conduct research, and write an end-of-semester paper. Details are provided below.

Course Materials:

Articles will be put on electronic reserve. Electronic reserve can be reached at <http://www.library.emory.edu>. Press the "Reserves Direct" button at the top of the page. You will be prompted for your university login and password. After entering these, you will be shown the option "Add a class." After pressing this, you will be able to "Search by Instructor." Search for "Wolff, Phillip". I currently have only one class, "Words and the World". Click this option and you're all set.

Course Requirements:

Student presentations. The instructor will present the class reading for 6-8 of the classes. In the remaining classes, the class reading will be presented by a student. A presentation should accomplish three objectives. First, it should summarize the paper (~20 minutes). In summarizing a paper, you should be sure to specify 1) the problem being investigated, 2) hypotheses, 3) predictions, 4) the experimental methods used to test these predictions, including details about the stimuli and procedure, 5) the key findings, and 6) conclusions. Second, class presentations should provide a critical reaction to the paper (~10 minutes). In this part of your presentation, you should go beyond what was said in the paper. There are many ways in which you might react to a paper. For example, you might challenge the hypotheses, methodology, or conclusions. Alternatively, you might elaborate on the significance (or insignificance) of the paper. Finally, your presentation should include 2-3 deep questions for the class. Deep questions often spur class discussion. However, perhaps the most effective way of spurring class discussion is to describe the papers clearly and with sufficient detail. Handouts and/or powerpoint presentations are not required. Instead, focus on knowing the paper well enough that you can talk about it mostly from memory. It is expected that everybody will bring a printout of the assigned reading(s) to class.

Presentations will be graded on the quality of the summary, critical reaction, and overall coherence.

Tickets. For each class, students must turn in a "ticket." The tickets should have two parts: a comment and a question. Ask good questions, that is, questions whose answers (if known) would be consequential. In formulating your ticket, you might begin with an observation (the comment part), then raise a question. Alternatively, you might begin with a question, and then propose an answer. Your tickets should be 120 words or less, printed out (not emailed), and turned in at the end of class. In most classes, I will ask you to read your comments and questions. Your tickets will be graded as either good (√), very good, (√+), or excellent (√++) (= 85%, 95% & 100%). (The paragraph above is 115 words, and hence it would just right for a ticket.)

Class project homework. We will spend a significant amount of time working on a class project. The project will focus on the way in which causal relationships are expressed in English and in other languages. The project will involve 1) identifying the different ways in which we can describe causal relationships, 2) examining the differences in meaning between these kinds of expressions, 3) finding examples of causal expressions from online corpora, 4) designing materials for an experiment, 5) interviewing speakers of different languages on how they express causation in those languages, and 6) analyzing the results. This project will be given regular assignments throughout the semester. As with the tickets, the assignments will be graded as either good (√), very good, (√+), or excellent (√++).

Class participation. Even if you are shy, you need to contribute to the class discussion. Class participation will be graded as either good (√), very good, (√+), or excellent (√++).

Course paper. At the end of the class you need to write a paper addressing one or all of the following questions: 1) How are word meanings related to non-linguistic concepts, given cross-linguistic semantic variability? 2) Are there true semantic universals, that is, are there elements of meaning that all languages specify? 3) Which aspects of language might be shaped by thought and which aspects of thought might be shaped by language? 4) What are the implications of cross-linguistic variability for the acquisition of non-linguistic concepts through language? 5) What are the implications of cross-linguistic variation for children's word learning and for learning a second language?

Your paper should be "thesis-driven." Start the paper by identifying a problem or question (~ 2 paragraphs). Then state your thesis. A thesis is signaled by a statement like "In this paper I will argue that..." Once you state your thesis, you should then briefly outline how you plan to defend your thesis. The rest of the paper should constitute your defense and final conclusions. Your defense should cite studies and theories from the literature. You are encouraged, but not required, to go beyond the readings covered in the course.

All papers must 7.5-8 pages long, 1.5 spacing, with 1 inch margins, in 12 point Times-Roman font (or 11 point Arial). Citations and references should be in APA style. Papers not meeting these style requirements will be returned ungraded.

A draft of each paper is due by class on Tuesday, April 19. I will provide feedback and grades by April 28. Final papers are due by the 5 PM on Monday, May 9.

Papers will be graded on the following dimensions: 1) thesis quality, 2) literature covered, 3) logical coherence, and 4) written presentation.

Grades:

Your class grade will be based on your class presentations (20%), tickets (25%), class project homework (25%), class participation (5%) and first (10%) and final (15%) drafts of your class paper. Extra credit assignments will not be offered. Class grades will be assigned according to the following averages: A (93-100%), A- (90-92%), B+ (87-89%), B (83-86%), B- (80-82%), C+ (77-79%), C (73-76%), C- (70-72%), D+ (67-69%), D (63-66%), D- (60-62%), F (below 60%).

Students taking the course Pass/Fail must attend course meetings regularly, read the assigned articles, turn in the class questions regularly, and turn in class project homework. The class paper and a presentation is not required.

Miscellaneous policies:

Academic honesty. Every student who applies to and is accepted by Emory College, as a condition of acceptance, agrees to abide by the provisions of the Honor Code so long as he or she remains a student at Emory College. By his or her continued attendance at Emory College, a student reaffirms his or her pledge to adhere to the provisions of the Honor Code. Plagiarism and/or cheating won't be tolerated.

Students with disabilities. It is the policy of Emory University to make reasonable accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. All students with special requests or need for accommodations should make this request in person as soon as possible.

Tentative Schedule

Dates	Discussion topic	Presenter	
Jan. 20	Introduction	Instructor	Wolff, Klettke, Ventura, & Song (2005)
Jan. 25	Basic issues	Instructor	Crystal (1997) pp. 1-7 & 14-15 Whorf (1950) pp. 57-64 Whorf (1941) pp. 233-245
Jan. 27		Instructor	Pinker (1994) pp. 55-67 Pullum (1991) pp. 159-171
Feb. 1	Spatial Orientation	Instructor	Li & Gleitman (2002)
Feb. 3		Instructor	Levinson, Kita, Haun, & Rasch (2002)
Feb. 8	Spatial relations	Annette	Bowerman (1996)
Feb. 10		En	Munnich & Landau (2003)
Feb. 15	Objects	Rebecca	Malt, Sloman, & Gennari (2003)
Feb. 17		Annette	Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett (2004)
Feb. 22	Entities	Instructor	Frawley (1992) 62-99
Feb. 24		Instructor	Frawley (1992) 99-139
March 1	Substance	Hae	Soja, Carey, & Spelke (1991)
March 3		Sherona	Imai & Gentner (1997)
March 8	Grammatical Gender	Alexis	Sera, Maria, Berge, & Pintado (1994)
March 10		Caroline	Boroditsky, Schmidt, & Phillips (2003)
March 15	SPRING BREAK		
March 17	SPRING BREAK		
March 22	Events	Instructor	Frawley (1992) 140-169
March 24		Instructor	Frawley (1992) 170-196
March 29	Motion	Tim	Slobin (2003)
March 31		Rebecca	Gennari, Sloman, Malt, & Fitch (2002)
April 5	Aspect	Hali	Li & Bowerman (1998)
April 7	Tense	Hali	Boroditsky, Ham, & Ramscar (2002)
April 12	Time	En	Boroditsky (2001)
April 14		Hae	Boroditsky and Ramscar (2002)
April 19	Number	Tim	Gordon (2004) Dehaene, Spelke, Pinel, Stanescu, & Tsivkin (1999)
April 21		Alexis	McCrink & Wynn (2004)
April 26	Color	Sherona	Roberson, Davies, & Davidoff (2000)
April 28		Caroline	Kay & Regier (2003)
May 9	Final paper due		

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