BORN TO TALK: LANGUAGE IN THE HUMAN MIND
AS.050.128
Fall 2015
Section 01: Monday 3-5:30pm
Section 02: Wednesday 3-5:30pm
Krieger 134A

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Office hours: TBD

Human infants learn to understand and speak their native language by age 3-4 with essentially no direct teaching from adults. This mysterious fact is the basis of the modern study of language as a cognitive and computational system. This seminar is an introduction to the scientific study of language through the lens of human language acquisition. We will review major findings about how children learn the sound system, words, and grammar of their first language, focusing on how the evidence reveals the role of biological structures and environmental influences on language development. Throughout the course, students will read summary texts, original research articles, and coverage of language science in the popular media. Language development is a topic of real importance to parents, educators, and policy-makers, but, as in all sciences, it is often difficult to disseminate findings in a way that the public can understand. We will discuss the potential applications of basic research on language development, and students will practice “translating” scientific reasoning for a general audience.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
By the end of this course, you should be able to:
• Describe different stages of language development.
• Analyze the phonological, syntactic, and semantic properties of utterances.
• Recognize interesting language and speech phenomena in everyday conversation (with adults or children).
• Explain how language is a product of both “nature” and “nurture”, and how we know.
• Describe experimental techniques we can use to investigate what infants know about their native language at different stages of development.
• Discuss the role of parents and other caregivers in children’s language development.
• Evaluate articles in the public media about language and child development.
• Explain what you’ve learned about language and child development to people with no background in linguistics or science.

CLASS REQUIREMENTS & EVALUATION
• Active participation in class discussions is an essential part of this course. You’re expected to attend every class ready to discuss the week’s readings. If you know you’re going to miss class, please inform me in advance so we can discuss how you can make up the lost time.
• By the night before each class, you will submit one question or discussion point about the readings, which will be included in the class discussion. These need not be more than a
sentence or two. Alternatively, if you see something about language in the popular media (newspaper, blog, podcast, video, etc.) that you’d like to discuss in class, you can post a link along with a couple sentences about why you thought it was interesting.

- My goal is for every student to meet the learning objectives described above by the end of the course. I will frequently administer mini-quizzes during class (or as homework) to make sure that everyone is up to speed. I’ll give you feedback so you know how you’re doing, but the quizzes are only graded for completion, not for accuracy.

- Aside from reading, homework assignments are of two main types:
  1) Transcription and analysis of speech data: At the beginning of the semester, you will record 3 minutes of normal, casual conversation. Throughout the semester, you will transcribe and analyze this data in different ways, as we learn more about different levels of linguistic analysis. Later in the semester, you will apply some of the same techniques to publicly-available transcripts of parent-child interactions.
  2) Brief (500-1000 word) essays: The goal of these writing assignments is to practice explaining language science in a way that an average person can understand. For example, you may be asked to summarize a research article in a way that would be understandable and interesting to the general public. Sometimes you might draw on examples from your own conversation data to illustrate a point.

- Both types of homework assignments will be evaluated in class by your peers as well as outside of class by the instructor or TA. You will submit a digital copy of your work on the Blackboard site, and also bring a paper copy to class for evaluation and discussion with other students.

- At the end of the semester, you will submit an additional piece (500-1000 words) on a topic of their choosing, in the format of a newspaper article or op-ed.

**ACADEMIC HONESTY**

The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Ethical violations include cheating on exams, plagiarism, reuse of assignments, improper use of the Internet and electronic devices, unauthorized collaboration, alteration of graded assignments, forgery and falsification, lying, facilitating academic dishonesty, and unfair competition. In addition, the specific ethics guidelines for this course are:

1) You may discuss the readings prior to class (in fact, you are encouraged to). However, the written piece that you hand in must be your own work, not collaborative.

2) You must indicate by quotation marks and citation any material five words or more that has been taken directly from another source.

Report any violations you witness to the instructor. You may consult the associate dean of students and/or the chairman of the Ethics Board beforehand. See the guide on "Academic Ethics for Undergraduates" and the Ethics Board web site (http://ethics.jhu.edu) for more information.

**RESOURCES**

- Academic support: academicsupport.jhu.edu
- Study consulting: academicsupport.jhu.edu/study-consulting
- Improve your study skills: web.jhu.edu/prepro/health/study_skills.html
- News and resources for Cog Sci majors: cogsci.jhu.edu/undergraduate/news-for-cogsci-majors
GRADES
In this class, your job is to do the work that’s required of you, and fully engage your mind in that work. Simply put, you have to show up, put in some effort, and ask for help when you need it. My job is to make sure that the things I’m asking you to do are useful so that you actually learn something. My philosophy about grading is that it should mostly reflect the effort you’ve put in. If everyone worked hard all semester but I did a terrible job of teaching, then it would hardly be fair to flunk everyone for not learning the material.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance and participation</th>
<th>20%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Attend every class and complete in-class quizzes and peer evaluations</td>
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Discussion questions | 10%
- Submit a question or comment for discussion by midnight the night before class.
- 12 opportunities, 2 “freebies” (full credit if you do at least 10 weeks)

Homework: Transcription/analysis and writing assignments (completion) | 40%
- Complete the assignment posted on Blackboard
- Submit a digital copy of your assignment through Blackboard before class time on the day it’s due. Bring a paper copy to class for peer review.
- Graded as 0 (not turned in), 1 (acceptable effort and/or late), or 2 (good effort and submitted on time)

Final writing assignment | 30%
- Revise one writing assignment from earlier in the semester.
- Write an additional piece on a topic of your choice.
- Submit your portfolio through Blackboard by midnight on Tuesday, 12/16.

SCHEDULE
Homework assignments are due by class time on the date they are listed (see above). Discussion questions are due by midnight the night before.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Homework</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1 M 8/31 W 9/2</td>
<td>Introduction and overview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 2 W 9/9 M 9/14</td>
<td>Innate knowledge, mental grammar</td>
<td>Yang, Ch. 1-2 (pp. 1-31) <em>The Language Instinct</em>, Ch. 2 Language Files, Ch. 1.2-1.3</td>
<td>Record 3 minutes of conversation Complete surveys</td>
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<td>Week 3 W 9/16 M 9/21</td>
<td>Mental grammar, language and thought</td>
<td><em>The Language Instinct</em>, Ch. 3 &amp; 13 Eagleman (2013)</td>
<td>Transcribe full conversation using ELAN</td>
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<td>Week 4 W 9/23 M 9/28</td>
<td>Sound systems</td>
<td>Yang, Ch. 3-4 (pp. 33-72) “<em>With a nasal drawl</em>”</td>
<td>Writing: descriptive vs. prescriptive grammar Transcribe 20 seconds of sounds</td>
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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Readings</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Week 6</td>
<td>W 10/7 M 10/12</td>
<td>Learning words</td>
<td>Yang, Ch. 5 (pp. 73-91) “Getting rid of your English accent”</td>
<td>Writing: Speech sounds and accents</td>
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<td>Week 8</td>
<td>M 10/19 W 10/21</td>
<td>Syntax; Learning grammar</td>
<td>Yang, Ch. 6 (pp. 93-125) The Language Instinct, Ch. 4 “So, like, you want your kids to speak, like properly?”</td>
<td>Writing: Slang</td>
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<td>Week 10</td>
<td>M 11/2 W 11/4</td>
<td>Cross-linguistic variation</td>
<td>Yang, Ch. 7-8 (pp. 127-216)</td>
<td>TBD</td>
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<td>Week 13</td>
<td>M 11/30 W 12/2</td>
<td>Teaching language to animals</td>
<td>Terrace (1979; pp. 1-30, 208-221) “Smart dog”</td>
<td>Writing: animal language</td>
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<td>Final</td>
<td>12/16</td>
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<td>Submit a revision of a previous writing assignment plus your final piece on a topic of your choice.</td>
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**REQUIRED BOOK**

**ADDITIONAL READINGS**
*All readings may be found on the course Blackboard site.*


**Newspaper/website articles (partial list):**


