1 Description

This course introduces students to the scientific study of human language and the language faculty. We will examine the fundamental properties that all languages share, and how languages differ, with respect to structure (sound system, work formation, syntax), expression of meaning, acquisition, variation, and change.

The study of linguistics is typically broken up into four basic sub-areas, and introducing each of these will form the bulk of the course’s content: the study of sound traits and sound patterns (phonetics and phonology), of word structures (morphology), of sentence structures (syntax), and of meaning and its use in context (semantics and pragmatics). In the first two-thirds of the course, each of the basic sub-areas will be approached largely from a synchronic perspective, comparing the traits present in a broad range of languages currently spoken around the world. In the final third of the course we will touch on several other important areas of linguistics, including language variation and change, language acquisition, and sociolinguistics.

2 Learning goals

By the end of the course, students will:

1. gain an understanding of the nature of human language: how it is structured, acquired, and used;

2. learn about properties shared by all human languages (spoken, written, and signed), as well as ways in which languages and dialects can differ from one another;

3. gain insights into various aspects of languages they already know (i.e., their native language and other languages they have studied) and learn something about languages that they have never encountered;
4. come to appreciate the rich heritage and wide diversity of human language;

5. become familiar with the major subfields of linguistics and the fundamental questions that drive modern linguistic research;

6. develop the ability to analyze sets of data to solve problems and discover regularities;

7. learn to think critically, to evaluate popular beliefs concerning the nature and use of language, and to provide informed contributions to contemporary debates about language.

3 Prerequisites

This course has no prerequisites and assumes no prior knowledge of linguistics.

4 Readings


Additional recommended and required readings will be made available on the course Blackboard site from time to time.

5 Blackboard

Please check the course Blackboard site frequently. The course schedule, additional/supplemental readings, assignments, and other materials will be posted on the site as we progress through the semester.

6 Requirements and grading

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<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>Homework assignments</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>Participation and attendance</td>
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<td>Attendance and participation at lecture</td>
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<td>Quizzes and exams</td>
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6.1 Assignments

There will be approximately 7 homework assignments during the semester. Assignments are due at the beginning of class and will be graded on a 10-point scale. The lowest homework grade will be dropped. Late homework will not be accepted. If you are unable to attend class on the day an assignment is due, you may deliver it to your TA before class on the day it is due (by leaving it for your TA in room 120 of 621 Commonwealth Ave.) or arranging for another student to turn in your assignment for you in class.

Unless otherwise stated for a particular assignment, all homework must be typed and submitted in hard copy; due to the many issues that can occur with fonts, assignments may not be submitted by email. Please be sure to write your section number in the upper right-hand corner of the first page.

In alternation with the graded homework assignments, ‘practice exercises’ will be assigned. Even though these will not be collected, you should do them carefully and write out your answers completely. These will generally be due on Fridays so that you will be able to go over them in discussion section. Answer keys will usually be provided so that you can correct your own work. (Material from practice assignments is fair game for quizzes in subsequent classes.)

Students may work together on homework assignments, provided that (i) at the top of the first page of the assignment you must identify the person(s) that you worked with and (ii) each student must write up the assignment separately. Note that this does not mean copying the group's solution and handing it in separately; rather, it means that you should start from the beginning and regenerate the solution yourself, benefiting from your recollection of the group's discussion of the problem.

Assignments will be available from the course Blackboard site. Homework assignments due on Tuesdays will generally be available from 3pm on the previous Friday (and will also be distributed in Friday sections). Practice exercises due on Fridays will normally be available from the site by Monday morning.

6.2 Participation and attendance

Class attendance in both lectures and section is required and participation in class is expected. Please come to class each day on time and ready to discuss the readings for that day. Unexcused absences will adversely affect your grade, and you may not pass the class if you do not attend both the lectures and the discussion section meetings regularly.

(a) If you are unable to attend class because of religious observance, please submit email notification to Prof. Plaster, with a cc to your TA, at least a week in advance. Please look over the syllabus. If you anticipate a conflict, please bring this to their attention ASAP. If a religious conflict prevents you from submitting an assignment on the due date, you are invited to submit the assignment in advance.

(b) In case of illness or other serious issues that may prevent your attending a class, please contact Prof. Plaster by email in advance (or as promptly after the class as possible, depending on circumstances). In such cases, you should make every effort to catch up with what you missed, by consulting materials posted to the online syllabus (handouts, copies of PowerPoint presentations when available, etc.), and come to office hours to ask any questions you may have.

Unless you provide the email notification specified in (a) or (b) above, your absence will be considered unexcused. More than 2 unexcused absences during the semester will have an impact on your final grade, and more than 5 unexcused absences will put you in jeopardy of failing the course. (This is separate from the effect on your participation grade of not being able to participate by virtue of not being present.)
Since it is expected that there may be a few occasions during the semester when you are unable to attend class, for valid reasons, several extra credit opportunities will be offered during the semester. All students are welcome to take advantage of these opportunities, but this will be especially helpful in compensating for an occasional missed class.

6.3 Quizzes and exams

There will be a three quizzes during the semester on or about the dates given in the schedule below. The final exam will take place at the date and time scheduled by the Registrar (Friday, May 12 from 6-8pm); please plan to remain on campus until after the date of the final exam. I will provide more details on each as the dates approach.

6.4 Maintaining a portfolio

Please keep a folder or notebook with all of your work: homework assignments, practice exercises, exams, etc., arranged chronologically. This is a course requirement.

1. Whenever you come to meet with a TA or the professor, please always bring your entire portfolio.
2. You are also advised to keep all handouts and other course materials; these will be useful to review.
3. You will be asked to submit your portfolio for brief review one or more times during the semester; it will be evaluated for organization and completeness.
4. Your portfolio will enable the TAs and the professor to provide you with individualized assistance.

7 Other logistics

7.1 Readings

It is essential that you do the assigned readings prior to the lecture indicated on the syllabus. Do these carefully. This will make your homework assignments substantially easier, and it will make your experience in the course much more interesting and rewarding. It won't hurt on exams either. Lectures present information to supplement, not reiterate, the contents of the readings.

7.2 Discussion sections

Every student should be registered for a section. These sections provide you with a chance to review and practice in smaller groups material presented in lecture, and to ask any questions you may have. They are a valuable resource for you, and they are not optional.

7.3 Technology

Please do not use laptop computers, phones, tablets, or other electronic devices during class for any reason. Your attention should be directed at the PowerPoint presentations. If you have concerns, please talk to Prof. Plaster. To understand the reasoning behind this policy, see:


7.4 Email

Please make sure that your BU email address is working properly (and that it forwards to your email address of choice, if different). I will send out messages about the class through the Link, and that means that they will go to your BU address. If it is not working properly, you will not get these important messages.

7.5 Time commitment

In addition to the time spent in class, you should expect to spend about 5 hours a week on the assigned readings and homework assignments. The first priority should be careful reading of the assigned chapters, and you should set aside at least 2 hours for this each week. If you do the reading carefully, you will be in a very good position to answer the homework questions; however, if you try to take a shortcut by skipping the reading and focusing on the homework questions only, this will be a very inefficient and wasteful use of your time, and will probably lead to frustration and unhappiness.

7.6 Office hours and tutoring

If you are attending classes and doing the readings and still having difficulty with the material, you should take advantage of (free) tutoring services offered through the university (http://www.bu.edu/erc/) as well as the office hours of the teaching assistants and the professor. There is a huge advantage to resolving any difficulties right away, as the material in this course builds progressively on the concepts that are discussed.

8 Disabilities

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at BU and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

9 Academic integrity

Students should be sure to read http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/. This is taken very seriously, and violations must be reported to the Dean's Office.

10 Copyright notice

All class materials are copyrighted and may not be reproduced for anything other than personal use without written permission from the instructor. Please note: this means that no course materials distributed in conjunction with this course (in hard copy or electronically) may be shared with any note-sharing website.
11 Topics and general schedule

The topics that will be covered in the course and general schedule are as follows (subject to slight change based on class progress and interests):

Week 1: Introduction to the course

- O’Grady et al. ch. 1: Language: A Preview

Week 2 - 3: Phonetics

- O’Grady et al. ch. 2: Phonetics: The Sounds of Language

Weeks 4-6: Phonology

- O’Grady et al. ch. 3: Phonology: The Function and Patterning of Sounds
- Tues., Feb. 21: No class (substitute Monday schedule)
- Quiz (tentatively sched. for Thurs., Feb. 23)

Weeks 7,9: Morphology

- O’Grady et al. ch. 4: Morphology: The Analysis of Word Structure
- Spring break: Mar. 4 - 12

Weeks 9-11: Syntax

- O’Grady et al. ch. 5: Syntax: The Analysis of Sentence Structure
- Quiz (tentatively sched. for Thurs., Mar. 30)

Week 12: Semantics and Pragmatics

- O’Grady et al. ch. 6: Semantics: The Analysis of Meaning

Weeks 13-14: Sociolinguistics, Language Variation and Change

- O’Grady et al. ch. 14: Language in Social Contexts
- O’Grady et al. ch. 7: Historical Linguistics

Week 15-16: Language Acquisition, Language and the Brain

- O’Grady et al. ch. 10: First Language Acquisition
- Quiz (tentatively sched. for Thurs., Apr. 27)
- O’Grady et al. ch. 12: Psycholinguistics: The Study of Language Processing

Final exam scheduled for Friday, May 12 from 6-8pm