

Language Evolution & Language Emergence

Fall, 2015
Laurel Hall 305
Mondays, 8:00-10:50am

“Article 2: The Society will not accept any work concerning either the origins of language or the creation of a universal language.”

–*Linguistic Society of Paris, 1866*

“Talk about the evolution of the language capacity is beside the point.”

–*Noam Chomsky, 1972*

“Give orange me give eat orange me eat orange give me eat orange give me you.”

–*Nim Chimpsky, 1979*

Instructor: Dr. Hall
Office Hours: Oak 355, Mondays, 11:00am-12:00pm
Virtual Hours: By appointment
Email: matthall.research@gmail.com or matthew.l.2.hall@uconn.edu

(*N.B: there's a Dr. Matthew Hall in the orthopedics department. He is unlikely to be able to answer your questions.*)

Grading Options: Letter or S/U

I. Rationale:

Traditional scholarship in linguistics often proceeds without much inquiry into a basic question: where does language come from? Here, we pursue answers to that question.

II. Course Aims, Format, and Outcomes:

Aims

Our course mantra will be “*Argument, Evidence, Source!*” Because there are no clear answers to any of the questions this class addresses, we will develop the ability to understand arguments, evaluate their evidence, and consider sources with respect to the broader theoretical landscape. These skills are valuable in all disciplines and professions.

Format

Our class is small enough to be held as a seminar, in which there will be a balance of instructor-led lecture, student-led presentation, and interactive discussion. This approach is common in graduate programs, and is excellent preparation for advanced students.

Specific Learning Outcomes:

As a result of taking this course, students will:

(1) Understand why very smart people disagree about topics such as:

- Which aspects of language are the most “interesting” or the most “core”
- The extent to which important aspects of language are shared with non-human animals
- What the earliest human communication systems looked like, and to what extent they involved signs/gestures

- The degree to which natural selection, cultural evolution, and other factors contributed to the emergence of language
- The utility of various methods for investigating language origins

(2) Know about the many new sign languages evolving around the world, including

- Nicaraguan Sign Language
- Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language
- Kafr-Qasem Sign Language
- Israeli Sign Language
- Central Taurus Sign Language
- Kata Kolok
- “Z”
- Chatino Sign Language

Evaluations:

Evidence of learning will be demonstrated in several ways, including:

- Contributions to class discussions (10%)
- Weekly submission of questions for discussion based on reading assignments (10%)
- Mid-term exam consisting of short-answer essay questions (40%)
- Final paper (20%) and in-class presentation (20%) on an instructor-approved topic of the student’s choice

Expectations & Policies:

We will be meeting only once a week, for 3 hours at a time. Your presence, both physically *and intellectually*, is highly valuable. **Attendance** is not strictly mandatory, but participation in course discussion does constitute 10% of the final grade.

Empirical evidence suggests that students learn more when they take notes by hand; I therefore **strongly discourage the use of laptops** for taking notes. As an incentive, the mid-term exam is open-notes, provided that the notes are **handwritten**.

I realize that 3 hours is a long time to go without checking your **cell phone**. We will take a break partway through each class. Please refrain from using your phone except during this break. I’ll do the same.

No one wants to be in class on Mondays at 8am. I will do my best to make sure there are **tasty treats** each week. Feel free to bring your own caffeine.

My Own Views

While doing my best to remain neutral/objective, I cannot promise that my own perspective will come through in various ways. Without dismissing the evident structural complexity in human language, I personally gravitate toward views that emphasize continuity between language and non-language. This places me in a minority within the UConn Linguistics department; however, I believe that some exposure to this view is useful.

V. Course Requirements:

1. Be thoughtful and engaged! This covers class attendance and participation, but also your approach to assigned readings (see below). Participation is 10% of your final grade.

2. Reading Assignments:

(a) There is **no textbook** for this course. Instead, I will post readings for each week (including this one!) online. It is your responsibility to download the readings. I strongly recommend that you **print them out**, take notes on them as you read, and bring them to class. Recall that I will allow you to bring hard copies of the readings to the in-class midterm, and these can have your notes on them. *Digital copies will not be allowed during the midterm.* The readings as currently planned are already online; however, readings more than 1 class period out are subject to change.

(b) For each week's readings, you will each submit 2-3 questions (per week, not necessarily per reading). These questions can be anything from a clarification about something you didn't understand (seriously! that's totally ok) to a challenge to the author's view, to a curiosity question about a related subject. This will (i) allow you to demonstrate your engagement with the ideas at issue, (ii) let me see where you have content questions, and (iii) stimulate class discussion. There is no specific quota for how many of what type of questions you submit; however, students whose questions consistently demonstrate understanding of the major points of the paper will earn more credit than students whose questions consist exclusively of clarification/content questions. Reading questions are due by **Saturdays at 11:59pm** and are worth 10% of your final grade.

(c) In the second part of the course, we will read primary academic literature, which is not written with undergraduate students in mind. To help each other become more comfortable with such readings, each student will be assigned a particular section of the paper to focus on (e.g. Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion). This contributes toward the 10% participation mentioned in (1) above.

3. In-class midterm: blue book essay questions: 40% of final grade

This course tackles complex issues that aren't easily distilled into multiple-choice exams.

Essay questions allow you to more thoroughly demonstrate your understanding of the topics we discuss in the first part of the course. Our 3-hour course period also provides ample time to compose in-class essays. This midterm is worth 40% of your final grade. You will find that making active use of the "Questions for Reflection" each week will be excellent preparation for this exam.

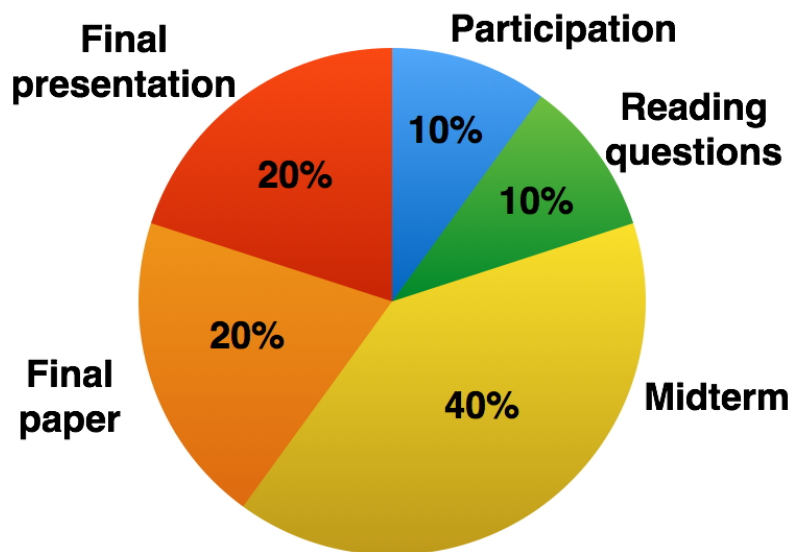
4. Final presentation (in class, Monday 12/7): 20% of final grade

The material we will cover directly barely scratches the surface of the many interesting dimensions of this topic. Each student will therefore have the opportunity (...and obligation) to pursue a topic of interest in greater depth. The topic **must be proposed by Monday, 10/26**. The proposal should be an email that states your intended topic and lists at least one relevant reference that you propose to read.

The in-class presentation should clearly state a question and report on the sources, argument, and evidence addressing that question. (There is no need to argue for a particular answer over another.) The use of PowerPoint/Keynote slides is encouraged; if not, a formal outline in handout form is required. Presentations will last between 20-30 minutes each. It is worth 20% of your final grade.

5. Final paper (due at the end of finals week)

The paper is simply a version of your presentation in written form. Although it is somewhat traditional in linguistics for a spoken presentation to consist of merely reading an already-written paper, (a) I find such presentations difficult to attend to, and (b) it is usually much easier to present a clearly-structured paper if you first have to express your thoughts to a live audience. Thus, by having the presentation come first, I hope that the process of writing the paper will be greatly simplified. The paper should follow APA citation format, and is worth 20% of your final grade.



V. Extra Credit

1. Up to 3% of extra credit is available by participating in research studies in Linguistics. Each half-hour of participation is worth 1%. <https://uconn-ling.sona-systems.com>

VI. Academic Integrity

Each student in this course is expected to abide by the UConn Code of Academic Integrity. Any work submitted by a student in this course for academic credit will be the student's own work.

You are encouraged to study together and to discuss information and concepts covered in lecture and the sections with other students. You can give "consulting" help to or receive "consulting" help from such students. However, this permissible cooperation should never involve one student having possession of a copy of all or part of work done by someone else, in the form of an e-mail, an e-mail attachment file, other electronic file, or hard copy.

Should copying occur, both the student who copied work from another student and the student who gave material to be copied will both automatically receive a zero for the

assignment. Penalty for violation of this Code can also be extended to include failure of the course and University disciplinary action.

During examinations, you must do your own work. Talking or discussion is not permitted during the examinations, nor may you compare papers, copy from others, or collaborate in any way. Any collaborative behavior during the examinations will result in failure of the exam, and may lead to failure of the course and University disciplinary action.

VII. Accommodations for students with disabilities

Please contact me during office hours to discuss academic accommodations that may be needed during the semester due to a documented disability. If you have a disability for which you wish to request academic accommodations and have not contacted the Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD), please do so as soon as possible. The CSD engages in an interactive process with each student and reviews requests for accommodations on an individualized, case-by-case basis. The CSD collaborates with students and their faculty to coordinate approved accommodations and services. The CSD is located in Wilbur Cross, Room 204 and can be reached at (860) 486-2020 or at csd@uconn.edu. Detailed information regarding the process to request accommodations is available on the CSD website at www.csd.uconn.edu.

VIII. Tentative Course Schedule:

(May change to accommodate guest presenters & student needs)

Topics	Readings	Assignments	Misc. notes
August 31 <u>Course Overview</u> Terms & Concepts Historical Perspectives	Fitch, Ch 1 Darwin (short) Kenneally, Ch 1 & 3 Berwick & Chomsky	Do these readings (after class, clearly)	National Trail Mix Day
Sept 7 No class		Week 1 Reading questions due 9/5	Labor Day
Sept 14* <u>Primate communication</u> In the wild In the lab: signs & symbols	Gibson & Tallerman Anderson, Ch. 10 Johansson, Ch. 6-7 Lyn et al. (2011)	Reading questions (due 9/12)	*Rosh Hashanah Last day to drop without "W"
Sept 21 <u>Protolanguage</u> Did it exist? What was it like?	Fitch, Ch. 12 Bidese et al. Arbib/Wray (pick 1) Tallerman	Reading questions (due 9/19)	National Pecan Cookie Day
Sept 28 <u>Syntax</u> What is it? Where could it come from?	Anderson, Ch. 8 Bickerston, Ch 49 Hurford, Ch. 18 Newmeyer, Ch 19 Progovac, Ch. 1	Reading questions (due 9/26)	National Strawberry Cream Pie Day
Oct 5 <u>Hands and Voices</u> Vocal origins? Manual origins?	Fitch Corballis McNeill Lieberman	Reading questions (due 10/3)	National Apple Betty Day

Oct 12 <u>Change without selection</u> Pidgins, creoles, & the Basic Variety	Bickerton Klein & Perdue Galantucci/Steels Kirby	Reading questions (due 10/10)	Columbus Day Bartolomé Day
Oct 19 Midterm Exam (in class)			Dress Like a Dork Day
Oct 26 <u>Intro to Sign Languages</u> & <u>Homesign</u>	Goldin-Meadow (2005) Meir et al. (2010) Anderson	Reading questions (due 10/24) Final project proposal (due in class)	National Pumpkin Day
Nov 2 <u>Lexical level</u> KSL, ISL, ABSL, Z	Morgan Tkachman & Sandler Haviland	Reading questions optional	Last day to drop courses
Nov 9 <u>Sublexical level</u> ABSL, KSL, CTSL	Sandler et al. (2007) Morgan & Mayberry Caselli et al.	Reading questions optional	Go To an Art Museum Today Day
Nov 16 <u>Supralexical level I</u> NSL, ABSL, KQSL	Coppola & Newport Kastner et al. Sandler et al. (2005)	Reading questions optional	International Day for Tolerance
Nov 23 No class		Enjoy quality time & quality food!	Thanksgiving week
Nov 30 <u>Supralexical level II</u> Ban Khor SL, Chatino SL, AdaSL	Nonaka Hou/Mesh Nyst	Reading questions optional	Cyber Monday
Dec 7 Final Presentations		Final presentation	National Cotton Candy Day
Dec 18		Final paper	Bake Cookies Day

IX. Additional Resources: Below are books that have shaped my own thinking about language evolution & language emergence. They are also great resources for digging deeper into anything we've covered, as well as for finding inspiration for final projects! Most are available in our library; if not, make good use of Interlibrary loan!

Anderson, S. (2004). *Doctor Dolittle's Delusion: Animals and the uniqueness of human language*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Armstrong, D. F., & Wilcox, S. E. (2007). *The gestural origin of language*. Oxford University Press.

Barrett, L. (2007). *Oxford handbook of evolutionary psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Corballis, M. C. (2003). *From hand to mouth: The origins of language*. Princeton University Press.

Darwin, C. (2004). *The descent of man*. Digireads. com Publishing.

- Fitch, W. T. (2010). *The evolution of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hurford, J. R. (2011). *The origins of grammar: Language in the light of evolution II*. Oxford University Press.
- Hurford, J. R. (2014). *Origins of language: A slim guide*. Oxford University Press.
- Jackendoff, R. (2002). *Foundations of language: Brain. Meaning, Grammar, Evolution*.
- Johansson, S. (2005). *Origins of language: Constraints on hypotheses* John Benjamins Publishing.
- Kenneally, C. (2007). *The first word: The search for the origins of language*. Penguin.
- Stam, J. H. (1976). *Inquiries into the origin of language: The fate of a question*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Tallerman, M., & Gibson, K. R. (2012). *The oxford handbook of language evolution*. Oxford University Press.
- Wray, A. (2002). *The transition to language*. Peterson's.