**PSYCH 334: Language and Thought**

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Pronouns: he/his/him

**Course Overview**

*Please note this course meets every Tuesday 6:15 – 9:15 in Wieboldt Hall 406, as part of the School of Professional Studies.*

**Course Description**

Language is a signature of human cognition: a rich and flexible method of communicating our most complex thoughts. Indeed, an intellectual tradition stretching from Ancient Greek philosophers to present-day scientists proposes that language is what makes us human. This class will examine the fundamental question: What is language’s role in human cognition? Drawing on research from psychology, as well as cognitive science, linguistics, and occasionally neuroscience, philosophy, anthropology, and animal cognition, we will ask questions like whether our language changes the way we perceive the world (e.g., the way we see colors), how language helps infants and children develop, and what role language plays in defining our abstract concepts like time and number. We will review both seminal and cutting-edge research concerning when, if ever, the language(s) we speak influence how we perceive, reason, and act on the world. The goal of the course is not simply to survey research in these areas, but rather to explore the many different theories of language’s role and to identify the evidence that supports or challenges them.

**Learning Objectives:**

Students will effectively read and integrate primary research from several inter-related disciplines (psychology, linguistics, cognitive science, etc.).

Students will evaluate alternative theories against a large body of evidence.

Students will propose their own psychological theories by synthesizing existing evidence and devising novel experiments to support their theories.

**Course materials:**

Primary research articles, all provided on Canvas.

**Evaluation**

**Grade Breakdown:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Discussion  Quizzes | 20% (60 pts)  14% (42 pts) |
| Article presentation | 16% (48 pts) |
| Midterm paper | 20% (60 pts) |
| Final paper | 20% (60 pts) |
| Final presentation | 10% (30 pts) |

**Grading Guidelines:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A 92.50 - 100% | C+ 76.50-79.49% |
| A-    89.50 - 92.49% | C 72.50 - 76.49% |
| B+ 86.50 - 89.49% | C- 69.50 - 72.49% |
| B 82.50 - 86.49% | D+ 66.50 - 69.49% |
| B-  79.50 - 82.49% | D 59.50-66.49% |
|  | F 0-59.99% |

**Assessments**

**Discussion.** This grade will reflect students’ engagement with the course discussions. As this is an upper-level seminar course, I expect all students to actively participate in discussion, contributing their own perspectives and insights thoughtfully and respectfully. Please note that course attendance is a prerequisite for participating in the discussion, and as we have only 10 class meetings, I expect that you will attend all of them (see absence policy below for more detail).

**Reading Quizzes.** At the beginning of each class, you will take a short reading quiz, typically consisting of multiple-choice or short-response questions. The quiz will primarily cover the reading material for the week, though questions may also focus on how the week’s reading interacts with previously covered material. This quiz is intended as a comprehension check and will help me keep track of which topics the course needs to clarify or focus on.

There will be 8 reading quizzes (in Weeks 2 – 9). Each will count as 2% of your final grade. Note that if you complete all 8, the final quiz will simply be scored as extra credit.

**Article presentation.** Between Weeks 4 and 9, each student will present a research article to the class and moderate discussion of that article. Only you will read the article, and you will be responsible for communicating the article’s findings to the class and putting them in the context of the theories and findings we have discussed in the course so far. You will sign up for an article/presentation day in Week 2. While there will be no specific time limits, please aim for at least a 20-minute PowerPoint (or other media) presentation of the article, with an additional 20-40 minutes for questions and discussion.

**Midterm paper.** In your midterm paper, you will summarize novel research findings (findings not covered in class) and discuss how these findings relate to the theories we have discussed in class. A more detailed rubric will be provided later.

**Final paper.** In your final paper, you will summarize and synthesize findings from at least 5 journal articles focusing on a topic of your choice. In addition to considering the theoretical implications of this body of work, you will propose at least one additional study which would provide additional insight into how language and cognition interact within this particular domain. A more detailed rubric will be provided later.

**Final presentation.** In addition to writing your final paper, you will also present the highlights of your paper and proposed experiment to the class, in Week 10. This will take the form of a short PowerPoint presentation.

**Course Schedule**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Topic** | **Class reading** | **Student Presentation** |
| 1/8 | Introduction to L&T | Fodor 1975 (Brief excerpt provided) |  |
| 1/15 | The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis | |  | | --- | | Whorf (Foreword, Ch 15),  Guardian article | |  | |  |
| 1/22 | Anti-relativism: “[Whorf is] wrong, all wrong” | Pinker, Ch. 3: Mentalese (pp. 44 - 73, esp. 44 - 57), Malt et al. (2008) |  |
| 1/29 | Color | Kay and Regier 2009: Whorf was half right | Winawer et al, 2007: Russian blues reveal effects of language on color discrimination |
| 2/5 | Space | Spelke 2003: What makes us smart? | Gentner et al. 2013: Spatial language facilitates spatial cognition: Evidence from children who lack language input |
| **Midterm Paper Due 2/8/19** | | | |
| 2/12 | Number & Time | Frank et al. 2008: Number as cognitive technology | Boroditsky 2001: Does Language Shape Thought?: Mandarin and English Speakers' Conceptions of Time |
| 2/19 | Neuroscience of Language and Thought | Lupyan & Mirman 2013; Linking language and categorization: Evidence from aphasia | Fedorenko & Varley 2016: Language and thought are not the same thing: evidence from neuroimaging and neurological patients |
|  | ***Final Paper Proposals Due 2/22/19*** | | |
| 2/26 | Bilingualism | Pavlenko 2005: Bilingualism and Thought | Athanasopolous et al. 2011: Representation of colour concepts in bilingual cognition: The case of Japanese blues |
| 3/5 | Language evolution | Senghas et al. 2004: Children Creating Core Properties of Language;  Smith (2018): Cognitive Prerequisites for Language | |  | | --- | | Pilley (2011): Border collie  comprehends sentences containing a prepositional object, verb, and direct object | |
| 3/12/19 | **Final Presentation** |  |  |
| **Final Paper Due 3/18/19** | | | |

**Administrative Details**

**Policy on absences.** If you are going to miss a class, you must make your own arrangements to learn the material you missed. Generally, I will provide the slides used in the class period, but I encourage you to also talk with a classmate and look over their notes. Please also feel free to set up a meeting with me about the material.

In addition, if you miss class, I will email you the quiz you have missed so you can complete it virtually. In accordance with Northwestern’s honor code, please do not discuss the quiz with other students, either before or after you take it.

**Policy on deadlines.** Please note that assignments are due by midnight at the end of the day posted on the syllabus. For instance, I expect the final paper to be turned in by 11:59pm on March 18. The midterm and final paper will be turned in on Canvas.

**Policy on extensions.** For the midterm and final papers, extensions will not be granted except in dire circumstances. After all, you will be given several weeks' worth of time to develop each of them. However, if you have an extended medical crisis that prevents you from working on them over this time period, please let me know, and we will find a solution. If no extenuating circumstances exist, I will deduct 10% for each 24-hour period the assignment is late.

No extensions will be granted on the article presentation or final presentation as these compose a crucial part of the class for that day. If you believe you are unable to complete them for that day, please let me know as soon as possible so we can discuss it.

**Policy on plagiarism.** Students are expected to be familiar with Northwestern’s policies on plagiarism and academic dishonesty. For this course, you should never produce an assignment identical to another student’s, nor should your assignments be identical to any other source (e.g., a paper abstract). All writing must be your own.

**Policy on accommodations for academic disabilities.** I encourage students with disabilities, including "invisible" disabilities like chronic diseases or learning disabilities, to identify themselves to me either after class or over email, prior to the 3rd week of the term.

**Policy on grade changes:** If you are doing poorly in the course, come see me! I am committed to helping you succeed. However, if you wait until the end of the course, do badly, and then come to me for help, there is nothing I can do. I do not offer extra crediton an individual basis. In short, your final grade will be final.

**Important note.** Like a good mattress, these policies are firm but not rock-hard. I realize that individual cases may involve extenuating circumstances that would allow for changing some of these policies. I encourage you to contact me if you have any questions about how your particular case should be treated.