

Course: LIN 421/521 Language and Culture
Term: Fall 2003
Instructor: Bohnemeyer
Text: Reader

Overview: This course provides an in-depth view of the relationship between language and culture cross-culturally from the point of view of linguistic anthropology. The course relies on primary readings, looking both at descriptive studies of particular languages and cultures, and theoretical issues, specifically the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis.

Goals: The course is designed to familiarize students with concepts and analytical techniques of linguistics and cultural anthropology as they are related to each other, in particular: descriptive linguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse studies, semantics, and cognitive aspects of linguistics. One intended outcome is that linguistics students in this class will gain the knowledge of linguistic anthropology required to study a non-western language in the field. Beyond this practical goal, the theoretical goals of this class are to look at the language-cognition interface within its cultural environment, reviewing both classisical and recent studies on the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis, which states that linguistic practice influences culture-specific conceptualizations and representations of reality.

Assessment: Students will have four graded assignments:

- Two assignments consisting of data sets to be analyzed (20% per assignment = 40%)
- A field assignment for which the students collect data themselves and analyze it (30%)
- A short essay (10 pages) or in-class oral presentation summarizing and evaluating a set of articles, arguing contrasting views on one of the issues discussed in class (20%).
- Class participation (10%), assessed by attendance and participation in class discussions.

Syllabus

Part I: Linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics: Overview

Linguistic anthropology is the anthropology of language use and structure. Both languages and cultures may be viewed as (a) symbolic systems; (b) the knowledge and cognitive processes that enable people to understand and use these symbolic systems; and (c) the patterned actions during which people use the symbolic systems, and the principles and dispositions that direct such actions. Languages are an integral part of the cultures in which they are spoken. Linguistic anthropologists study all aspects of the structure and use of a language that directly depend on the culture of the language community, applying methods of cultural anthropology and sociology. In doing so, they at the same time bring methods of linguistics to the study of culture and society.

Week 1: Basics

Reading:	Boas 1911 (7 pages); Goodenough 1957 (4 pages); Palmer 1996: ch. 2 (17 pages)
Background:¹	Duranti 1997: ch. 1-2; Hudson 1997: ch. 1
Optional/Advanced:²	Hymes 1974: ch. 4 (34 pages)

¹ You may make use of the background readings given for each unit for reference. The content of these readings, wherever relevant, is summarized by the instructor. You won't need to have read any of this to participate or complete assignments!

² "Optional/advanced" means follow-up reading for those interested – again, you won't need to have read any of this to participate or complete assignments!

Part II: Language variation in society and linguistic ideologies

We begin by asking what exactly is a language anyway? No two people have the exact same linguistic competence or coincide completely in their patterns of language use. Languages are forever changing. Their differentiation into distinct varieties is driven by the interplay of external sociocultural pressures and internal structural constraints. Language use is a powerful indicator of group identity. The flip side: communities may be stigmatized and marginalized through their languages, and eventually pressured to abandon them.

Background:	Bonvillain 1997: ch. 6, 11-12; Hudson 1997: ch. 2
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Week 2: Social determinants of language variation and change

Reading:	Labov 1972 (27 pages)
Optional/Advanced:	Eckert 1988 (24 pages)

Week 3: Language contact and multilingualism

Reading:	Gumperz & Wilson 1971 (16 pages)
Optional/Advanced:	McConvell 1985 (30 pages)

First assignment, to be completed and submitted by week 6

Week 4: Emergence and disappearance of languages

Reading:	Labov 1982 (36 pages)
Optional/Advanced:	Schmidt 1985 (23 pages)

Part III: Culture-specific aspects of linguistic practice

Cultures are frameworks in which others interpret our actions. A large amount of our actions is subject to cultural conventions (many of which we are usually not aware of). This holds above all for the symbolic actions par excellence: actions of language use. Our verbal interactions depend on the roles we assume in our societies and cultures, such as gender roles. These roles are themselves cultural constructs. A question emerges here which will not go away for the rest of the course: the question of culture vs. nature – in this case, to what extent our sociocultural actions are governed by biological dispositions, including the neurological circuitry that affords cognition, and to what extent languages and cultures interpret or warp biological and cognitive dispositions. Societies differ widely in their degree of hierarchical stratification and their concepts of personhood. Language communities differ accordingly in the rules that determine what it means to be 'polite' in verbal interaction, i.e. to act in such a way as to preserve the 'face' of the interlocutor. Yet, some underlying principles of goal-directed reasoning seem to be shared across languages and cultures.

Background:	Bonvillain 1997: ch. 4-8; Duranti 1997: ch. 9; Foley 1997: ch. 13-18
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Week 5: Ethnography of speaking

Reading:	Sherzer 1989 (20 pages)
Optional/Advanced:	Hymes 1972 (36 pages); Sacks 1975 (10 pages)

Week 6: Politeness and 'face'

Reading:	Brown 2001 (4 pages); Brown & Levinson 1987: 101-129
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Optional/Advanced: Matsumoto 1988 (15 pages)
Second assignment, to be completed and submitted by week 9

Week 7: Power and socioculturally constructed roles in linguistic practice

Reading: Keenan 1989 (18 pages)
Optional/Advanced: Bourdieu 1991: ch. 29 (11 pages); Gumperz 1993 (21 pages)

Part IV: Cognitive anthropology and ethnosemantics

Knowledge does not exist in a culture-free space. This concerns not only knowledge of culture-particular institutions (e.g. art forms; forms of government and economical organization), but also knowledge of the natural world. Languages express the cultural concepts of their speakers, and the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge proceeds to an important extent through language. Linguistic anthropologists study cultural concepts through their linguistic expressions. Languages vary dramatically in how they organize semantic domains. Yet, concept formation and the organization of semantic domains are constrained by culture-independent principles of cognition.

Background: Duranti 1997: ch. 3; Foley 1997: ch. 3-7; Hudson 1996: ch. 3

Week 8: Ethnobiology

Reading: Berlin 1992: 20-51
Optional/Advanced: Boster 1985 (20 pages)

Week 9: Kinship

Reading: Goodenough 1965 (28 pages)
Optional/Advanced: Danziger 2001: ch. 1-3 (35 pages)

Third assignment, to be completed and submitted by week 12

Week 10: Color

Reading: Berlin & Kay 1991: ch. 1 (14 pages)
Optional/Advanced: Levinson 2000 (52 pages, eight of which are charts)

Part V: Linguistic relativity

Do our native languages influence the way we think? Our shared cognitive heritage imposes important constraints on linguistic variation. At the same time, humans must be able to communicate any culture-specific aspects of cognitive representations through 'external' representations, i.e., prominently, language. The question then arises as to just how much of cognition is in fact culture-specific. A growing body of evidence suggests that language may have an impact on which parts of an object or event we attend to first, which aspects we memorize best, and even on some conceptual choices in the cognitive representation of the object or event. Developmental research indicates that children at very young age "tune into" the semantic categories of the languages they are learning, and that semantic acquisition may have indirect impacts on concept formation.

Background: Duranti 1997: ch. 3; Foley 1997: ch. 8-12; Hudson 1996: ch. 3

Week 11: Whorf's ideas and the Neo-Whorfian paradigm

Reading:	Whorf 1940 (12 pages)
Optional/Advanced:	Lucy 1992: 85-135

Week 12: Relativistic effects in universal domains: color, space, time

Reading:	Kay & Kempton 1984 (14 pages); Pederson et al. 1998 (32 pages)
Optional/Advanced:	Bohnemeyer 2000 (16 pages)

Fourth assignment, to be completed and submitted by week 14

Week 13: Sources of relativistic effects

Reading:	Bowerman & Choi 2003 (40 pages)
Optional/Advanced:	Slobin 1996 (27 pages)

Part VI: The evolution of language, culture, and the brain

Three things that make us human: language, culture, and an over-sized neocortex. These three systems, in all their baroque complexity, evolved over what seems from a Darwinian perspective an astonishingly short time. How was this possible? Given that we can't have language (as we know it) without culture, or vice versa, and that both presuppose the brain power to run them, while there appears to be nothing but the evolution of language and culture to select for the expansion of the pre-frontal cortex over the past two million years – what evolutionary mechanisms could afford the emergence of these three systems? What can we learn about language, culture, and their relationship by trying to understand how they might have evolved?

Week 14: Dawkins, Dennett, and Deacon

Reading:	Dennett 1996: ch. 12 (34 pages)
Optional/Advanced:	Deacon 1992 (27 pages)

Reading list

- Bauman, R. & J. Sherzer (Eds.) (1989). Explorations in the ethnography of speaking. [2nd Edition!] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berlin, B. (1992). Ethnobiological classification. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Berlin, B. & P. Kay (1991). Basic Color Terms. [Paperback Edition! Reprinted 1999] Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Boas, F. (1911). Linguistics and ethnology. In F. Boas (Ed.), Handbook of American Indian languages (BAE-B 40, Part I). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution. 59-73. [Reprinted in Hymes (Ed.) 1964: 15-22.]
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- Dennett, D. C. (1992). *Darwin's dangerous idea*. [Penguin Paperback Edition!] London: Penguin Books.
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- Goodenough, W. H. (1965). Yankee Kinship Terminology. *American Anthropologist* 67/5 (part 2): 259-287.
- Gumperz, J. J. (1993). Culture and conversational inference. In W. A. Foley (Ed.), *The role of theory in language description*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 193-214.
- Gumperz, J. J. & S. C. Levinson (Eds.), *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*. Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press.
- Gumperz, J. J. & Wilson, R. (1971). Convergence and creolization: A case from the Indo-Aryan/Dravidian border in India. In D. Hymes (Ed.), *Pidginization and creolization in language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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