

Course: LIN 421/521 Linguistic Anthropology
Term: Spring 2008
Instructor: Jürgen Bohnemeyer
Text: Foley 1997

Overview: This course provides an introduction to linguistic anthropology, the study of the relation between language and culture. As a discipline, linguistic anthropology is at the intersection of cultural anthropology and linguistics. Linguistic anthropologists seek to understand language as an integral part of *culture* - the sum total of the knowledge and *practices* (socially shared habitual behavior) that an individual partakes in by virtue of being a member of a *community*. This perspective makes it possible for linguistic anthropologists to use linguistic evidence and methods of linguistics to illuminate the culture of the speech community and to bring cultural evidence and anthropological methods to bear on the study of those aspects of language that are culture-specific. Such culture-dependent traits pervade every part of language, from phonology and phonetics through morphology and syntax to semantics and pragmatics.

Linguistic anthropology has developed two broad themes, each branching off into numerous different lines of inquiry. **Cognitive anthropology** focuses on the meanings expressed by the lexical items and grammatical constructions of a language, asking to what extent these reflect culture-specific conceptualizations of the speech community. For example, *ethnobotanists* and *ethnozooologists* study indigenous terminologies for life forms, seeking to determine what aspects of these vary from community to community, depending on the particular use of and significance attributed to a life form, and what aspects are shared across cultures, reflecting the shared biological and cognitive heritage of humankind. Similar research has targeted terminologies for color, kinship, emotions, tastes and smells, and so on. The most controversial idea in cognitive anthropology is the **Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis** - the hypothesis that the language habitually used by the members of a community may influence the way they memorize and conceptualize reality. The **ethnography of speaking** (or *ethnography of communication*), the other major sub-field within linguistic anthropology, examines culture-specific aspects of language use, viewing speaking itself as a cultural practice - from simple *speech acts* such as greetings and leave-takings via more complex "scripted" *speech events* (e.g., religious ceremonies, political speeches, court room proceedings) to the *ethno-poetic* study of verbal art and to culture-specific norms of linguistic politeness.

Goals: The course aims to familiarize students with some of the key ideas, methods, approaches, and findings within linguistic anthropology. At the end of this course, students should have a working understanding of these issues that is sufficient to allow them to determine, when confronted with a phenomenon in their future academic or non-academic practice, the basic questions a linguistic anthropologist might ask about this phenomenon and where to look for existing research that might have addressed the phenomenon. The general learning goal for this course is to properly understand the central ideas of linguistic anthropology, including the following:

- Both languages and cultures can be viewed from three complementary perspectives:
 - cognitively, in terms of (declarative or procedural) knowledge
 - semiotically, in terms of (systems of) signs and their interpretations
 - socially, in terms of conventions of social behavior or *practices*
- In each of these respects, the language(s) spoken by the members of a community emerge(s) as a *part* of the larger culture shared by this community
- Cultural knowledge is learned - as opposed to *innate* - knowledge. It is diffused in two ways:
 - through the observation of practices enacted by other members of the community

- through the use of external representational systems such as language, gesture, and art
- As learned cultural knowledge is complementary to the innate knowledge stored in the human DNA, so cultural evolution has taken over from biological evolution in the development of humankind.
- Given the key role that language plays in the transfer of cultural knowledge, it has been hypothesized that language, culture, and the complex brain that enables humans to learn and use linguistic and cultural knowledge have co-evolved.
- It is an open question what aspects of cognition are innate, biologically determined, and what aspects are learned and culturally diffused. In other words, it is an open question where in the mind the dividing line between *nature* (biology) and *nurture* (culture) is. An important boundary condition on answers to this question is set by the extent to which cognition - e.g., memory, inferences, and similarity judgments - is influenced by language use. The possibility of such influences is claimed by the *Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis* (LRH).
- In the first half of the 20th Century, various authors proposed *strong, deterministic* versions of the LRH, according to which the categories and terms in which people think are (almost) exclusively those of their native language. Under this view, there is a strong influence from language onto internal cognition, but no influence from cognition onto language. Consequently, it is assumed that linguistic categorization varies from language to language "arbitrarily", i.e., without non-trivial non-linguistic constraints. Historically, this view has been associated in particular with the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf.
- Through its lexical items and constructions, every language expresses a highly complex system of categorizations of reality. This includes categories of the natural world - categories for plants and animals, colors, emotions, kinship relations, and so on. These categories vary somewhat from language to language, reflecting in part differences in cultural significance (e.g., the same plant is cultivated as a food resource in one culture, collected in the wild for medicinal use in another, and considered a weed in the third).
- Evidence for cognitively motivated universals in *ethnosemantics* - the linguistic categorization of the natural world - discourage the strong = deterministic version of the LRH. But a *weaker, non-deterministic* interpretation, according to which non-linguistic cognition exists and functions independently of language, but may nevertheless be influenced by it, is very much debated today.
- The use of language is highly culture-specific. Different cultures recognize different *speech events* - conventional, "scripted" activities in which language plays a constitutive role. These range from simple *speech acts* such as greetings and apologies via economical, political, and judicial transactions and religious or curing rituals to verbal art forms. They can be classified and compared across cultures in terms of, above all, the linguistic expressions and *registers* and the roles of the participants they involve.
- Languages, dialects, registers, and even particular lexical items and grammatical constructions acquire cultural meanings by indexical association with particular groups of people - defined in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, age, and so on - viewed as stereotypically using them. These indexical values in turn become the objects of attitudes both in the users of a particular variety or expression and in other members of the community. Speakers may choose a variety or expression and thereby identify themselves with the stereotypically associated group or choose an alternative and distance themselves from the stereotyped group. These choices constitute secondary indexical associations.
- One of the most important aspects of social interactions is the maintenance of the social ties between the participants. *Politeness* is the cover term for a myriad of linguistic and non-linguistic practices with this goal. The role of politeness is pervasive in all aspects of linguistic structure and language use. The strategies of showing respect and solidarity

used in a language are sensitive to fine-grained distinctions in the cultural conceptualization of power and personhood.

Classes: T/R 15:30-16:50 in 123 Baldy

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Coursework:

- Reading assignments and reading comprehension questions - there'll be a reading assignment from the textbook in preparation of each class. To make sure that students indeed read these before class, they are required to write up two (421) or three (521) questions about each reading on a sheet of paper with their name on it. These questions will be collected in the beginning of class. Both the number and the quality (in terms of thoughtfulness/incisiveness) of the questions submitted count towards the participation grade.¹
- Three homework assignments: For the first and third assignment, students will collect and analyze data from a language other than their native language. For the second assignment, students will design an experiment to test the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis.
- A final exam, consisting of a set of questions to be answered in single-paragraph essays (e.g., "What generalizations emerged from Berlin & Kay's 1969 study of Basic Color Terms"?). The exam will be open-book and open-notes. Students who do not wish to take the exam may elect to instead write a short (maximally 10 pages) term paper, the topic of which must be accepted by the instructor at least three weeks in advance of submission.

Assessment: Participation (determined largely, but not exclusively, by the reading comprehension questions), the three homework assignments, and the final exam each count for 20% of the final grade.

Outline

Part I: Introduction

Linguistic anthropology is the anthropology of language use and structure. Both languages and cultures may be viewed as (a) semiotic (= sign) systems; (b) the knowledge and cognitive processes that enable people to understand and use these sign systems; and (c) the conventional acts or *practices* of using the sign systems and the dispositions that direct such acts. 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.

¹ Students earn zero, one, or two points for questions on the reading assigned for a given class. To earn one point, they need to have two (421)/three (521) or more questions of the kind that the assigned reading might raise in a reader with their background (a background of having taken college-level classes in language-and/or-culture-related subject areas). To earn two points, the questions need to be thoughtful and incisive (i.e., not the kind of questions one might ask if one just opens the book in a random place and considers a random sentence in isolation). At the end of the course, everybody gets a grade based on their reading points: 38 or more for an A; 36 for an A-; 34 for a B+, and so on, and an F for 18 points or fewer. This means that in order to score an A on the reading questions, you need to submit quality questions for about two thirds of the classes, and in order to avoid getting an F, you need to make sure that you submit quality questions to more than one third of the classes. The reading questions grade will make for 75% of the participation grade, which in turn constitutes 20% of your overall grade.

Week 1: Language, culture, cognition – an introduction

Reading:	Foley 1997: ch.1 (T: p.3-24/R: p.24-40)
Optional/Advanced:²	Boas 1911; Goodenough 1957; Hymes 1974: ch. 4; Palmer 1996: ch. 2

Part II: The evolution of language, culture, cognition, 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 2: Dawkins, Dennett, and Deacon

Reading:	Foley 1997: ch.2 (T: p.43-58/R: p.59-78)
Optional/Advanced:	Deacon 1992; Dennett 1996: ch. 12

Part III: 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.

Week 3: Ethnobiology

Reading:	Foley 1997: ch.5 (T: p.106-120/R: p.120-130)
Optional/Advanced:	Berlin, Breedlove, & Raven 1974: ch. 3; Berlin 1992: 20-51; Boster 1985

Week 4: Kinship

Reading:	Foley 1997: ch.6 (T: p.131-139/R: p.139-149)
Optional/Advanced:	Lounsbury 1964; Danziger 2001: ch. 1-3
First HW assignment , to be completed and submitted by week 6	

Week 5: Color

Reading:	Foley 1997: ch.7 (T: p.150-159/R: p.159-165)
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² "Optional/advanced" means follow-up reading for those interested. You won't need to have read any of these to participate or complete assignments, and they are not meant to be the subject of the comprehension questions you are supposed to prepare for each class. Most of these can be found online on the course reserve site of the UB libraries. Use these readings in particular as material for term papers!

Optional/Advanced: Berlin & Kay 1991: ch. 1; Kay & McDaniel 1978; Levinson 2000

Part IV: 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.

Week 6: Relativism: background

Reading: Foley 1997: ch.8-9 (T: ch.8/R: ch.9)
Optional/Advanced: t.b.a.

Week 7: Whorf's ideas and the Neo-Whorfian paradigm

Reading: Foley 1997: ch.10 (T: p.192-208/R: p.208-214)
Optional/Advanced: Whorf 1940; Lucy 1992: 85-135; Kay & Kempton 1984

Second HW assignment, to be completed and submitted by week 9

Week 8: Relativistic effects in a universal domain: space

Reading: Foley 1997: ch.11 (T: p.215-222/R: p.222-229)
Optional/Advanced: Pederson et al. 1998; Majid *et al.* 2004; Bohnemeyer 2000; Li & Gleitman 2002; Levinson *et al.* 2002

***** SPRING BREAK March 10-15 *****

Week 9: Sources of relativistic effects

Reading: Bowerman & Choi 2003 (T: p.388-401/R: p.401-418)
Optional/Advanced: Slobin 1996

Part V: 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. 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.

Week 10: Ethnography of speaking

Reading:	Foley 1997: ch.13 (T: p.249-253/R: p.254-259)
Optional/Advanced:	Hymes 1972; Sherzer 1989

Week 11: Language and social position

Reading:	Foley 1997: ch.16 (T: p.307-326/R: p.326-344)
Optional/Advanced:	Eckert 1988; Milroy & Milroy 1992

Week 12: Politeness, face, and the linguistic construction of personhood

Reading:	Foley 1997: ch.14 (T: p.260-273/R: p.273-285)
Optional/Advanced:	Brown 2001; Brown & Levinson 1987: 101-129; Matsumoto 1988; Ishiyama in press; Keenan 1989
Third assignment , to be completed and submitted by week 14	

Week 13: Language and gender

Reading:	Foley 1997: ch.15 (T: p.286-299/R: p.299-306)
Optional/Advanced:	t.b.a.

Week 14: Contact-induced language change

Reading:	Foley 1997: ch.19 (T: p.381-388/R: p.389-397)
Optional/Advanced:	Dorian 1981: ch. 3; Jackson 1989

****** FINAL EXAM Date and time tba., exam week May 1-8 ******

Reading list

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- 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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- Eckert, P. (1988). Adolescent social structure and the spread of linguistic change. *Language in society* 17: 183-207.
- Foley, W. A. (1997). *Anthropological linguistics: An introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
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