

Sp Cm 305: "Semantics"
a/k/a Language, Thought & Action
Spring, 2006

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223 Ross, Mon 10-12, Wed 3-5

Where we are going:

Humans have language—indeed, we may be the only things that do. This course promises to make you wonder about the significance of this apparently obvious fact. It's because of language, perhaps, that humans live in a world full of *meanings*. We have meaningful relationships with other people; objects have significance for us; even space and time has a certain shape—all because of language.

We are going to examine two big ways language can make meaning for us:

1. Perhaps language controls the way we think. Perhaps people and other things in the world mean something to us—or indeed, are see-able by us at all—because our language names or organizes them.
2. Perhaps language gives us a way to act. Perhaps we can use words to change the world—in particular, to create identities for others and ourselves.

These are the two main units of this class: Unit 1, looking at the way that human language influences thought, and Unit 2, looking at the way that it allows action. (In fact, next year the class will be called “Language, Thought and Action.”)

Because *curiosity* is key to this class, we will be focusing less on answers than on questions. There are three main kinds of questions we will be asking throughout this class:

What? Questions. What influence does our language have on the way we think—or the way we think on our language? What kinds of actions can we perform using language? What? questions ask us to examine something that's around us every day—language—and to *imagine* what is really going on.

So What? Questions. Assume we imagine an answer to a What? question. So what? Why does it matter? So What? questions ask us to examine why we should spend our valuable time even thinking about What? questions.

How? Questions. How do we know what language really is, and how it does what it does? What kind of evidence can we use to support our answers to the What? questions? How? Questions ask us to examine how (and whether) we know what we think we know. At the end of this class, you'll ask these three questions for yourself, examining some aspect of language in a final project.

Even to ask such questions, we will need a new vocabulary—new words to capture the new things we are trying to see. Therefore also central to this class is a set of basic course concepts. The exams at the end of each unit, and the optional final exam, will test you on your understanding and ability to apply these concepts.

Starting point:

This is a 300-level (advanced) class on the ways we use language. Previous coursework in language, speech or linguistics is useful but not required. But good writing, speaking and group work skills are expected, as well as curiosity, imagination and some elbow grease. See the last page of this syllabus for advice from former students about what to expect in this class.

Three principles guiding us from starting point to goals:

Responsibility. Fundamentally, your learning is in your own hands. It's therefore *your* responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities and freedoms this class will offer: to invest your time wisely, to cooperate with your peers willingly, and to evaluate carefully your strengths and weaknesses.

Accommodation. It's *my* responsibility to help every student achieve the highest level of learning. Everyone learns differently. Therefore *everything in this course can be changed*—if you ask in advance, and give me a good reason. Hint: Tell me how it will help you learn. For example:

1. You have a personal emergency that takes you out of class for two weeks. If you contact me as soon as possible, I am sure we can work out a way for you to “make up” missed work. If you contact me during Dead Week, I will say “sorry, no.”
2. You are taking this class “pass/fail.” If you talk to me towards the beginning of the class, we can probably work out a “grade contract.” Instead of doing a bunch of things in a poor and uninteresting manner, you can do fewer fun things, well.
3. You hate group work, and learn nothing from it. If you talk to me towards the beginning of the class, we can probably figure out a way for you to work independently. If you come in to complain about your group at the end of the class, I will sympathize, but probably do nothing.
4. Your other classes or the rest of your life are giving you ideas directly related to language, thought and action. If you talk to me about it in advance, I'm confident we can set up an “extra credit” opportunity for you. If you ask me for extra credit assignments during Dead Week, I will say “sorry, no.”
5. Written exams don't allow you to show how much you've learned. If you ask in advance, we can set up an oral exam for you instead. If you come to me after the exam to complain about your grade, I will sympathize, but probably do nothing.

Integrity. This class will work on the honor system. I will presume you are being honest and up front with me. At the same time, I have *zero* tolerance for plagiarism or any other academic dishonesty. All work you (or your group) submit must be your own. If it is not, you *will* be reported for disciplinary proceedings, as required by University rule. Further, the plagiarized work will be given a grade of “zero,” and you will be on probation in this course for the rest of the semester; the second incident of plagiarism, however minor, will result in a grade of “F” for the course.

One reason students are sometimes tempted to cheat is because they feel they are being asked to do meaningless busywork. If you think that about any work in this course, instead of being dishonest, come and talk to me. In accordance with the principle of Accommodation, we'll try to see if we can work out a meaningful alternative assignment to help you learn.

Grading

Your final grade will be based on three components:

Exams, 2 exams, worth 30% each. The exams will test your *understanding* of course concepts and your ability to *apply* them. See the Exam FAQ in the course reading packet (and online) for further details. There will also be an optional final exam, which will replace the lower of the two unit exams. If the optional final is lower, it will be dropped.

Coursework or Class Participation: 20 %, “Coursework” includes pop quizzes, homework assignments, and group presentations. Pop quizzes will occur at the very beginning of class and test basic comprehension of the reading/activity assigned for the day. They will be "open" anything but the reading itself—you are free to use any notes or materials that you yourself prepared. Quizzes and homeworks will generally be graded on a 0-2 points basis. “2”=adequate work; “1”=“half-assed work”; “0=did not hand it in/very poor.” Group projects will be graded on a 0-4 points basis. “4”=Good; “3”=Adequate; “2”=Inadequate; “1”=Poor. If I judge that your overall conspicuous class participation (including both your contributions to your group and to the class as a whole) shows a higher degree of accomplishment than your coursework scores suggest, I will use it instead.

Final Project: 20%. In your final project, you will come up with a question about language, thought and action, and then answer it. Your answer will be based on observations you make of actual human language use. You will be able to work on your project either on your own or in a group of up to three people—your choice. It is due during finals week.

Resources for getting from starting point to goal:

Peer group. At the end of the first week, you’ll be assigned to a peer work group. Many in-class activities will be done as part of this group, and you'll work together on several out-of-class assignments. NOTE: *I expect that you’ll learn more from working with your groupmates than from anything else in this course.* But groups are only as good as the members make them; it is up to you to contribute to making your group work. See the course packet for suggestions about group work.

The instructor. Who am I? See my personal website (goodwin.public.iastate.edu) for details. It is easiest to reach me via email (goodwin@iastate.edu). I also *strongly* encourage you to come to my office hours (or make an appointment) with any concerns:

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| <p style="text-align: center;">Office Hours 223 Ross Hall, Mon 10-12, Wed 3-5 and freely by appointment (goodwin@iastate.edu)</p> |
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Readings. A course packet is available at UBS. I'll be handing out and/or putting online other readings.

Course webpage. This "online filing cabinet" will have links to some of the required readings, copies of everything I hand out, plus links to further resources:

<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~goodwin/spcom305/>
Grades will be recorded online on WebCT.

Your fellow students, the ISU community, and the rest of your life. Basically, if you never discuss our issues with someone outside of class, then we've all failed!

Schedule in detail:

| day | date | What to prepare before class— readings & assignments | What to expect in class— topics & activities |
|---|-----------|---|--|
| 1 T | 10 Jan | --- | Introduction to the class. “Language, Thought, Action”? “What? So what? How?”? |
| R | 12 Jan | Read this Syllabus thoroughly. Read <i>Genesis</i> chapters 1 and 2, and Herodotus (online). | “Pop” Quiz on Syllabus. Where do we imagine language came from? You will be assigned to your work group. |
| 2 T | 17 Jan | Meet with your group and prepare your hypothesis. Read “One Hypothesis” about the origin of language (handout). | Groups present their hypotheses about the first use of language. What was it? How could we figure this out? Why should we care? |
| UNIT ONE: Language & Thought | | | |
| R | 19 Jan | Read Unit One case (online). Read Exam FAQ (online/packet). Read "True Language?" (1 and 2), and "American Sign Language" (packet). | Introduction to Unit One: Does the fact that we speak English influence the way we think? About the Unit One case. About the exams. |
| 3 T | 24 Jan | Read "Color Terms" (packet). Read "About <i>Umami</i> " and "Experts & Novices" (online). | Does our language change our perceptions—does it make us see (taste, hear...) things? |
| R | 26 Jan | Meet with your group and prepare your poster. | Poster session: Is translation between languages really possible? Or is a “translator” always a “traitor”? |
| 4 T | 31 Jan | Read “Terministic Screens” (packet). | Does our language tell us what exists, and why it is important? Does language “reflect, select, and deflect” reality? |
| R | 2 Feb | Study for the "warm-up exam." Read "oral and literate cultures" (online). | We'll have two quizzes with questions like the ones on the exam. Do people who depend on writing think differently than people who depend on oral communication? |
| 5 T | 7 Feb | Read "The Whorf Hypothesis" (packet). Read "More on Whorf" (online). | Does our language create the way we experience space and time? |
| R | 9 Feb | Meet with your group and prepare your presentation. | Group presentations on “god terms.” |
| 6 T | 14 Feb | Read "On Deaf Culture" (online). | We'll watch a movie related to the Unit I case. |
| R | 16 Feb | Review the packet readings on ASL and the Case Essay question. | We'll discuss the Unit I case and review for the exam. |
| 7 T | 21 Feb | Study for the exam. | Unit One, final exam. |

| day | date | What to prepare prior to class | What to expect in class |
|--|--------------------------------|--|---|
| UNIT TWO: Language & Action | | | |
| 7 R | 23 Feb | Read Unit Two case and background materials (online). | Introduction to Unit II: Does our language use make us who we are—our identities? About the Unit II case. |
| 8 T | 28 Feb | Read "Implicit Meaning" (packet). | Implicatures: Do we mean much more than we say? |
| R | 2 Mar | Read "More on Implicatures" (online). | Implicature quiz. What did Pres. Clinton mean, anyways? |
| 9 T | 6 Mar | Read "Politeness and Interaction" (packet). | Politeness: How do we communicate our (dis)respect for each other? |
| R | 8 Mar | Do the ethnography homework. Read "About Greetings" (online). | Greetings: How do we create relationships as we start to talk? |
| SPRING BREAK | | | |
| 10 T | 21 Mar | Read "Field Methods" (packet). | About the final project. An example: Grice's Maxims & Instant Messaging. |
| R | 23 Mar | Meet with your group and prepare your posters. | Poster session: Politeness in different settings. |
| 11 T | 28 Mar | Read "About Speech Acts" (online). | Speech Acts: How do we do things with words? Commands, requests, "beggings." Accusations, complaints, concerns. |
| R | 30 Mar | Read "What is apologizing?" and "Clinton's apology" (packet). Read "More about Speech Acts" (online). Prepare your grade complaint homework. | More speech acts: Defenses: refusals, denials, excuses, apologies. Did Clinton apologize? |
| 12 T | 4 Apl | Review the Unit Two case. Figure out what topic & people you want to work on/with for the final project. | Last day to sign up for Final Project topic and group. We'll discuss the Unit Two case and review for the exam. |
| R | 6 Apl | Study for the exam. | Unit Two exam. |
| 13 T | 11 Apl | Work on your final project. | Some sample final projects. |
| R | 13 Apl | Work on your final project. | No class; group meeting time. |
| 14 T | 18 Apl | Work on your final project. | No class; group meetings w-instructor. |
| R | 20 Apl | Work on your final project. | No class; group meetings w-instructor. |
| 15 T | 25 Apl | Prepare to present your project. | Final project poster session. |
| R | 27 Apl | Work on your final project. | Summary of whole class. Course evaluations. NOTE: ATTENDANCE REQUIRED subject to one step grade penalty. |
| 16W | 3 May 9:45-11:45 (tent.) | Finish your final project. | Optional final exam. Final project due. |

Last Semester's Student Comments

At the end of the course, I'll ask you to say a few words to future students, which I will put in the syllabus exactly as you write them. Here are all the responses from last semester.

Group work is very important, so even if you don't like your group listen to their ideas.

Be able to work well in groups. You have to be able to interpret concepts in your own way.

Study, do papers instead of essay, take good notes, study with group.

Take this class if you want to learn about language through class activities and group work. To succeed, prepare for exams throughout each unit, both individually and with group members.

Find a good group to work with, you'll need it!

Take full advantage of group work it's the best way to understand, comprehend, and apply course concepts for the tests.

In order to do well in this course, you must apply yourself and be able to think outside the box.

The course deals, in a in-depth fashion, with the way language is used to convey meaning. It will give definitions to things you would normally not notice in everyday conversation.

If you aren't good at taking essay exams or doing short answer questions....don't take this class. The tests are all like that & they are a big portion of your grade!

Jean is a great instructor, not of the normal professors. She cares about student progress and helps when you ask for it.

This is not too challenging of a course if you do the assignments & take good notes! Make sure you explain all of your answers.

Learn to think "course concept-wise." Use the course concepts to discuss whatever point it is you're trying to make.

If you take this course, stick with it and just go with the flow. It may sound confusing, but eventually it will all come together. Also, with all the group work, you'll make new friends.

Jean is open to many ways to help you learn. Go talk to her if you don't understand.

Work with your group. If you don't understand—just ask—Jean wants to help you & wants you to do well! This is a fun class!

Seek out Jean's help if you are ever wondering what to do with a paper or an assignment.

You'll be asked to think outside the box, so be prepared for that.

Find a good group.

Get a good group. Write a paper for the essay question on exams.

Be able to work in groups well and be able to allot a fair amount of outside class time for homework & projects.