

## Exploring Language (01:615:101)

---

**Time:** fully asynchronous and online  
**WWW:** hosted at `canvas.rutgers.edu`

**Instructor:** Peter Alrenga  
**Email:** `peter.alrenga@rutgers.edu`  
**Office Hrs:** Monday 3:30-4:30pm, Friday 10-11am (and by appt.)  
(online via Zoom)

---

### Course Overview and Learning Goals

This course is an invitation to explore language from multiple perspectives. We will work together to discover what it means to know a language; how we acquire and use our native language; how and why different languages vary, and what they also share in common; what it means to study language scientifically; and how these scientific results can shed light on some common misconceptions about languages and their speakers.

Questions that we will consider include:

- What is a language—a set of utterances, a set of sentences, or a set of cognitive abilities? And what does knowledge of a language consist of?
- Are some varieties of English better than others? Where did standard English come from, and how does it differ from non-standard varieties?
- How do children acquire language? Does our knowledge of language derive entirely from experience? Or do humans come “hardwired” with certain innate capacities for language?
- How does the human mind comprehend and produce sentences? Where is our knowledge of language physically realized in the brain?
- Are human languages fundamentally different from other systems of animal communication?
- How do our everyday views about languages and their speakers relate to scientific observations about our language abilities and use?

**Department learning goals:** Students will reason about language; identify how incorrect or irrational assumptions and prejudices distort understanding of language; demonstrate knowledge about language in the world including a sophisticated understanding of linguistic and cultural variation; and evaluate popular views on the nature of human languages and their speakers.

## Course Materials

The following book is required for this course:

Jackendoff, Ray. 1994. *Patterns in the Mind*. New York: Basic Books.

All other instructional materials, including supplementary readings, lecture videos, and additional resources, may be accessed via the course website.

## Course Requirements

**Attendance & Engagement:** Because all work will be completed asynchronously for this course, there is no formal attendance policy. Regular class engagement will be assessed through your online activity and discussion participation.

To be successful in this course, you should expect to spend roughly the same amount of time with the instructional materials, activities, and assignments as you would in a traditional in-person course, about 8 hours per week. Be sure that you are visiting the course website at least two times per week, including those weeks with minimal online course activity. (During most weeks you will probably access the course website many times.) If a situation arises that may cause you to miss an extended period of time, please contact me immediately.

**Quizzes:** Throughout the semester, you will complete six quizzes. The quizzes will be non-cumulative, and will serve to test your understanding of our recent course topics and materials. Quizzes will be administered via the course website, and will remain available up to the stated submission deadline. You will have a limited amount of time (e.g., 60 minutes) to complete a quiz once you begin. Each quiz will constitute 9% of your overall grade ( $6 \times 9\% = 54\%$  total).

During the final week of the semester, you will have an opportunity to re-attempt one of our previous quizzes. If you chose to do so, then the higher score from your two attempts will be counted towards your overall grade.

**Short-essay responses:** You will also submit two sets of short-essay responses. The writing prompts for these responses will ask you to reflect upon and synthesize the larger themes of our course. The writing prompts will be distributed via the course website, and you will have roughly one week to compose and submit your responses. Each set of short-essay responses will constitute 9% of your overall grade ( $2 \times 9\% = 18\%$  total).

**Discussion posts/replies:** Frequent interaction is vital to building an online learning community. In our course, these interactions will primarily occur in six small-group discussions. At times, your task will be to respond to specific questions that I pose, but we will also use these discussions for collaborative work, e.g., solving language-analysis problems. Your discussion posts should reveal thoughtful, sustained engagement with our instructional materials, and with your classmates' contributions. Each discussion will constitute either 4% or 6% of your overall grade ( $4 \times 4\% + 2 \times 6\% = 28\%$  total).

## Course Policies

**Academic Integrity:** You are expected to abide by the University's Academic Integrity Policy ([nbacademicintegrity.rutgers.edu](http://nbacademicintegrity.rutgers.edu)). If you have not yet reviewed this policy, then you should do so now. Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and its commonly accepted standards, ignorance of these standards does not suffice to establish lack of intent. If you are unsure of any aspect of this policy, please ask!

I encourage you to discuss the course material with each other. However, each student must complete their written work independently, without reference to the written work of any other student. In particular, you are required to:

- avoid working on quizzes together,
- avoid discussing quiz questions/answers during quiz availability periods,
- develop and write your own discussion posts and short-essay responses,
- cite your sources, including classmate whose thoughts have informed yours,
- avoid facilitating academic dishonesty by allowing your own work to be submitted by another student.

Collaboration on quizzes, plagiarism in any form (including from online sources), presenting someone else's work as your own, and fabrication of information or citations all constitute violations of the University's Academic Integrity Policy, and will not be tolerated.

**Late Work:** It is your responsibility to bring any potential scheduling conflicts to my attention promptly, so that alternative arrangements can be made. In the absence of any such prior arrangements, no credit will be awarded for late submissions. Please stay abreast of the availability periods and submission deadlines listed at the course website and plan accordingly.

**Discussion:** The following are my expectations for how we will communicate in our class discussions:

- While there is no need to compose your discussion contributions as if you were writing a formal research paper, please try to express yourself clearly and professionally. Please also refrain from using all CAPITAL LETTERS.
- Please cite your sources to back up any specific claims. For course readings, list the title and page numbers. For online sources, include a link.
- Let's maintain a supportive learning community where everyone feels safe and people can cordially disagree. (Remember that sarcasm doesn't always come across online!) Treat your fellow students, and your instructor, with respect at all times, and in all communications.

Above all, please remember to be respectful and considerate. You might also consider first composing your contributions in a word processor, where you can save and lightly edit your work, before posting it to the class discussion.

**Instructor Communication:** Please contact me via my Rutgers email address ([peter.alrenga@rutgers.edu](mailto:peter.alrenga@rutgers.edu)). I will reply to emails within 24 hours during weekdays. Emails sent over the weekend may not receive a reply until the following Monday, but I will try my best to communicate promptly. Weekly classwide announcements and updates will be distributed via the course website. I will also regularly follow, and occasionally post to, the class discussions.

**Technical Support:** For help with Canvas, please contact the Office of Information Technology (OIT) at <https://it.rutgers.edu/help-support>.

**Student Resources:** The faculty and staff at Rutgers are committed to your success. Students who are successful tend to seek out resources that enable them to excel academically, maintain their health and wellness, prepare for future careers, navigate college life and finances, and connect with the RU community. Resources that can help you succeed and connect with the Rutgers community can be found at [success.rutgers.edu](https://success.rutgers.edu), and nearly all services and resources that are typically provided in-person are now available remotely.

**Grading:** Your overall course grade will be assigned according to the standard undergraduate grading scale at Rutgers, which is listed here:

Grade	Range
A	90 – 100
B+	85 – 89
B	80 – 84
C+	75 – 79
C	70 – 74
D	60 – 69
F	Below 60

## Course Schedule

Weekly course topics, readings, and assignments are briefly described below. Instructional materials (supplementary readings, lecture videos, other resources) will be posted to the course website on a weekly basis. Detailed information about each assignment, including availability periods and submission deadlines, may be found at the course website. This schedule is only preliminary, and subject to change; please consult the course website for the latest version.

WEEK/DATE	CLASS TOPIC	READINGS	ASSIGNMENTS
1 Tu 1/19	Introduction: Course overview, logistics & requirements		<b>Introductory discussion post</b>
2 M 1/25	What is (knowledge of) a language?; Explicit vs. implicit knowledge	Jackendoff 1994, Ch. 1-3	<b>Discussion #1</b>
3 M 2/1	Prescriptive vs. descriptive rules of grammar; Standard vs. non-standard varieties	Simon 1980; <i>Lang. Myths</i> 8, 12; Pullum 1999	<b>Quiz #1</b>
4 M 2/8	Knowledge of speech sounds & sound patterns: Phonetics and phonology	Jackendoff 1994, Ch. 4-5	<b>Discussion #2</b>
5 M 2/15			
6 M 2/22	Knowledge of sentence patterns and constituent structure: Syntax	Jackendoff 1994, Ch. 6; Fromkin 2001	<b>Quiz #2</b>
7 M 3/1	Nature vs. nurture in language development	Chomsky 1988 excerpts; Anderson & Lightfoot 1999 (optional)	<b>Discussion #3</b>
8 M 3/8	What is Universal Grammar?	Baker 2001, Ch. 1-3	<b>Quiz #3</b>

## Course Schedule

WEEK/DATE	CLASS TOPIC	READING	ASSIGNMENTS
9 M 3/22	Milestones in children's language development	Jackendoff 1994, Ch. 8; Eimas 1985	<b>Discussion #4</b>
10 M 3/29	Language development: Learning vs. growth?	Jackendoff 1994, Ch. 9; Lenhoff et al. 1997	<b>Quiz #4</b>
11 M 4/5	Language comprehension and production: Garden paths and slips of the tongue	Whitney 1998, Ch. 7 (203-222); Fromkin 1973	<b>Discussion #5</b>
12 M 4/12			<b>Short essay response #1</b>
13 M 4/19	Neural substrates of language	Jackendoff 1994, Ch. 11; Hickock et al. 2001; Sacks 2005	<b>Discussion #6</b>
14 M 4/26	Is human language unique? Human vs. animal communication	Anderson 2004, Ch. 2 & 10; "The Honey Bee Dance Language"	<b>Quiz #5</b>
15 M 5/3	Pidgins and creole languages: Evidence for Universal Grammar?	Bickerton 1983; Senghas et al. 2004	<b>Quiz #1-5 re-attempt (optional)</b>
16 M 5/10	(Week of Final Exams)		<b>Quiz #6 + Short essay response #2</b>

## Readings List

- Anderson, Stephen R. 2004. *Doctor Dolittle's Delusion: Animals and the Uniqueness of Human Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Anderson, Stephen R. & David W. Lightfoot. 1999. The human language faculty as an organ. *Annual Review of Physiology* 62: 697-722.
- Baker, Mark C. 2001. *The Atoms of Language*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bauer, Laurie and Peter Trudgill. 1998. *Language Myths*. London: Penguin.
- Bickerton, Derek. 1983. Creole languages. *Scientific American* 249(8): 116-122.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1988. *Language and Politics*. (Carlos P. Otero, ed.) Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Eimas, Peter D. 1985. The perception of speech in early infancy. *Scientific American* 252(1): 46-52.
- Fromkin, Victoria A. 1973. Slips of the tongue. *Scientific American* 229(6): 110-117.
- Fromkin, Victoria A. 2001. Linguistics: The scientific study of human language. In *Linguistics: An Introduction to Linguistic Theory*, 3-21. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hickok, Gregory, Ursula Bellugi & Edward S. Klima. 2001. Sign language in the brain. *Scientific American* 284(6): 58-65.
- Jackendoff, Ray. 1994. *Patterns in the Mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lenhoff, Howard M., Paul P. Wang, Frank Greenberg & Ursula Bellugi. 1997. Williams Syndrome and the brain. *Scientific American* 277(6): 68-73.
- Pullum, Geoffrey K. 1999. African American Vernacular English is not Standard English with mistakes. In R. Wheeler (ed.) *The Workings of Language*, 39-58. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Sacks, Oliver. 2005, Oct. 31. Recalled to life. *The New Yorker*.
- Senghas, Ann, Sotaro Kita & Asli Özyürek. 2004. Children creating core properties of language: Evidence from an emerging sign language in Nicaragua. *Science* 305: 1779-1782.
- Simon, John. 1980. The corruption of English. In L. Michaels and C. Ricks (eds), *The State of the Language*, 35-42. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Whitney, Paul. 1998. *The Psychology of Language*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.