

Anthropologische Linguistik / Anthropological Linguistics
FS 2025

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Monday 14:15-16:00 in F013

Course description:

Anthropological linguistics is the study of human language in its social and cultural context. This course explores the ways in which language is shaped by cultural context and vice versa, and the mechanisms by which this occurs. We examine theories on universalism and relativism and discuss their impact on the study of language with a focus on endangered languages. The course covers core concepts in anthropological linguistics such as kinship, politeness, color, and space. Recent years have seen a new appreciation of the vast diversity of human languages and this has prompted renewed interest in the relationship of language and culture. We will engage with the hypothesis that human languages are shaped, at least in part, by the cultural contexts in which those languages have evolved. Further guiding questions concern the mechanisms by which culture might shape language, the universality of such processes and how much they can vary depending on context. The course requires active participation and students are encouraged to explore their own interests. The literature and most of the class content are in English.

Syllabus (subject to change!):

#	Date	Topics	Readings
1	17.02.	Introduction: outline of class and organization, anthropological roots of linguistics, 'anthropological linguistics' as a subfield	Foley 1997: Ch. 1 Boas 1904 Sapir 1921: Ch. 1
2	24.02.	Universalism and Structuralism: Universalism – the 'Chomskyan revolution' and UG, Structuralism from de Saussure to Lévi-Strauss	Foley 1997: Ch. 3 & 4 Evans & Levinson 2009
3	03.03.	Relativism: Boas, Sapir, Whorf and beyond	Foley 1997: Ch. 8 & 10 Enfield 2015
4	10.03.	Language Evolution: different theories of the evolution of language, animal communication, cultural context of evolution	Foley 1997: Ch. 2 Tamariz & Kirby 2016
5	17.03.	Color: Color categorization, 'basic color terminology', responses and challenges	Foley 1997: Ch. 7 Berlin & Kay 1969: Ch. 1, 2-2.4, 4 Saunders 2000
6	24.03.	Space: 'Universals' of Space, relativist understanding of space, deixis and the spatial lexicon	Foley 1997: Ch. 11 Levinson 1996 O'Meara et al. 2018
7	31.03.	Material culture and concepts: Classifiers, the	Foley 1997: Ch. 12

		environment and lexical categories; The “Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax”	Majid et al. 2007 Pullum 1989 Krupnik & Müller-Wille 2010
8	07.04.	Kinship: kinship systems, universalist and relativist approaches, kintax	Foley 1997: Ch. 6 Hale 1966 Goddard 2025
9	14.04.	Politeness and the linguistic construction of Personhood: Negative and positive ‘face’, cooperation principle, local conceptions of personhood	Foley 1997: Ch. 14 & 16 Stasch 2002 Watts 2003: Ch. 4
		Easter Break	
10	28.04.	Language and Gender: gender as a sociocultural construct, gender markers and deixis; beyond binaries	Foley 1997: Ch. 15 Lakoff 1973 Becker et al. 2022
11	05.05.	Literacy: consequences of literacy, literacy as a social and political force, impact of literacy on linguistic theorizing	Foley 1997: Ch. 21 Morais 2021 Linell 1988 Zamora Corona 2022
12	12.05.	Guest lecture by Drew Hancock: Language obsolescence and revitalization	Foley 1997: Ch. 19 Florey 1993 Grenoble & Whaley 2020
13	19.05.	Guest talk by Dr. Jocelyn Aznar: <i>Names and naming, with a special focus on Nisvai-Malesip, Vanuatu</i>	---
14	26.05.	Ethnopoetics and Verbal Art: genres and framing, functions of poetics and speech play Final discussion	Foley 1997: Ch. 18 Sherzer & Webster 2014 Blommaert 2006
	09.06.	TAKE-HOME EXAM DUE (6 ECTS)	

Requirements and evaluation for 6 ECTS:

- weekly reading responses (short posts in discussion forum; not required in week 1 and 13 and two weeks of your choice) – 20% of grade
- 1 short essay (free choice of topic/week; due one week after respective class) - 20% of grade
- take-home exam with essay questions (due two weeks after the last class) – 50% of grade
- active participation (attendance and contributing to discussions) – 10% of grade

Requirements and evaluation for 4 ECTS:

- weekly reading responses (short posts in discussion forum; not required in week 1 and 13 and two weeks of your choice) – 20% of grade
- 2 short essays (free choice of topic/week; due one week after respective class) – 70% of grade
- active participation (attendance and contributing to discussions) – 10% of grade

References

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