



COGS280: Language in Action

Fall 2024 | Mondays & Wednesdays 1:30 – 2:45 PM | NE 106

“Words are events, they do things, change things. They transform both speaker and hearer; they feed energy back and forth and amplify it.

— Ursula K. Le Guin

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Office Hours: Tuesdays; 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM | Reserve an office hours appt [HERE](#)

Course Description

Language is more than a tool for basic communication. We use it to coordinate our behavior with others, shape people's attitudes and beliefs, plan for the future, and think through difficult problems. It can enhance (and distort) perception and memory, promote (or worsen) our mental well-being, and reveal hidden characteristics of a speaker or writer. In this multidisciplinary course, we will explore how language functions in everyday life, drawing on theories, concepts, and methods from a range of disciplines, including psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, philosophy, and applied communication. Coursework includes lectures, readings, discussions, and a variety of hands-on projects and activities that put language into action.

Learning Objectives

- Gain a deeper understanding of the cognitive science of language and how language impacts our individual lives, society, and culture
- Develop the ability to critically engage with challenging scientific concepts and empirical studies
- Gain experience designing and running behavioral language experiments and analyzing and reporting quantitative data
- Develop skills in qualitative and computational text analysis
- Gain practice reading, discussing, and critically appraising scientific research papers

Elements of the Course

Pre-class preparation. For most classes, I will post a selection of readings on Moodle. The readings will include chapters in academic and popular science books, research articles, essays, and short stories. Note: I always provide a written introduction to the readings and the topic of the day. Please click the link to the introduction on Moodle before doing the readings, and please complete the readings before the class that they are listed for. Readings will be posted at least a couple weeks ahead of time and will be available to download for free.

Course engagement (worth 20% of your final grade). Engagement takes many forms, including participating in discussions, asking questions, being attentive while in class, active participation in classroom activities, coming to office hours, sending me emails with links that are relevant to the course material, etc. If you are uncomfortable speaking up in class, that's totally fine! You can demonstrate your engagement in many other ways, including those listed above.

Assignments (80% of your final grade). You will complete a series of activities, assignments, and reflection papers throughout the semester. Some of this work will be done in class, some of it will be done at home; most will be done individually, but there is also one group project. Every assignment involves written work, and *you must turn in all written assignments to receive a passing grade*. A list of the reflections and projects is provided below.

Additional details about the assignments will be provided as we move through the course, and detailed instructions will be available on Moodle. If you are absent due to illness or another valid excuse and miss part of an activity, please speak with me ASAP about a possible alternative activity.

- **Reflection #1:** Language use in collaborative activities (worth 12% of your final grade)
- **Reflection #2:** How has language contributed to your social reality? (5%)
- **Reflection #3:** Writing your hero's journey (8%)
- **Reflection #4:** Talking to strangers (5%)
- **Reflection #5:** Final course reflections (5%)
- **Group Framing Experiment** (20% total)
 - Class presentation (5%); Final write-up (15%)
- **Political Speech Analysis** (25% total)
 - Qualitative analysis (10%); Computational analysis (8%); Integrative discussion (7%)

Class Expectations and Policies

Attendance policy. Regular attendance in class is important to the goals of the course since class time will often involve discussions and activities. However, please don't attend if you are feeling ill or observing a religious holiday. If you know that you are going to miss a class or you *have* missed a class, send me a quick email to let me know and explain what's going on.

Classroom etiquette. Please be mindful of how your classroom behavior impacts your peers. If you want to use a laptop or tablet in class, you are welcome to do so, but please keep it focused on class-related activities. Non-class related activities are especially distracting to your classmates who can see your screen. Phones should generally be silenced or off, but if you need to be reachable via phone during class meetings keep your phone on and let me know ahead of time.

Academic Integrity. Your work must accurately reflect your own intellectual contributions. When you borrow from others, attribution must be given. Using material without proper attribution is a serious violation of the academic policies of the college and can result in severe penalties. Please read through the college's guide on academic integrity and attribution, available at <http://libguides.vassar.edu/goingtothesource>.

Late submission / extension policy. I try to be purposeful with deadlines. For most of the assignments, the deadline is set for a particular reason, and so reaching the deadline is important for the sake of maximizing the learning benefit of completing the assignment. I hope that this will convince you to turn in everything on time, but of course things come up. If you need additional time on an assignment, please email me as early as you can before the assignment is due *and tell me when you will be submitting the assignment*. Depending on the request, I may be able to grant a couple extra days. If I don't hear from you ahead of time, late submissions will be penalized 2% per day.

Generative AI policy. Over the past few years, generative AI software has appeared that can generate fluid text, answer questions, write essays, and create stunning images (like the picture used at the top of the syllabus). In a sense, these AI systems represent a remarkable application of ideas developed in the field of cognitive science. However, these programs raise significant ethical issues as well, especially in an educational context.

In this class, you may use AI tools like ChatGPT as a tool to help you for certain specified tasks (e.g., help with creating framing stimuli), but you cannot have a large language model (LLM) do your work for you. Authorized uses include help with brainstorming, refining your ideas, and in certain cases checking your grammar and style. We will also be using ChatGPT for computational sentiment analysis later in the semester. Unauthorized uses of these tools include using the AI to solve problems for you or do your homework, using it to write drafts of your assignments, or even write sentences or paragraphs for you. If you aren't sure whether you can use an AI app to do something, please come talk to me and ask!

You are responsible for the information you submit based on an AI query; for example, your submission should not contain misinformation or unethical content. You must acknowledge your use of generative AI and must properly cite AI generated content in order to comply with [college policies](#) on academic integrity. Please consult these [MLA](#) / [APA](#) resources for guidance on citing generative AI. Any assignment that uses generative AI tools in unauthorized ways may be considered a violation of academic integrity, and will be addressed according to [College Regulations](#). When in doubt about permitted usage, please ask me for clarification.

How to Get Help and Succeed in the Course

The material, concepts, and readings we cover in this course will be challenging at times. There will likely be days or weeks when you are confused or have additional questions that are not addressed in class. That's OK! There are several ways to get help this semester and I encourage you to take advantage of them.

First, **please come talk to me!** I'm always friendly and often helpful. Office hours are a chance to come chat with me about the course material, assignments, cognitive science, or life at Vassar in general. You are welcome to use my office hours as much as you'd like. **My scheduled Office Hours are Tuesdays, 10:00 AM–2:00 PM in my office, NE109.** If these times don't work for you, please email me to find an alternative time.

You can book office hour appointments by clicking the link on our Moodle site or on the first page of this syllabus. The default appointment length is 20 minutes, but if you know you'll need more time you are welcome to book back-to-back slots. If you have a question that can be handled via email, I will do my best to respond quickly, though I generally do not reply to emails after 8PM unless it's an emergency.

Academic Accommodations. If you have obstacles (documented disabilities or undocumented challenges) that make doing coursework difficult, please let me know. This course is for you and can be tailored, to some extent, to your unique circumstances. Academic accommodations are available for students registered with the [Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity](#). Students in need of ADA/504 accommodations should schedule an appointment with me early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course that have been approved by the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity, as indicated in your AEO accommodation letter.

Campus Resources. There are a lot of people on campus who, like me, want you to succeed in this course (and all your courses). Some helpful places relevant to this class include: [The Writing Center](#) is part of the Learning, Teaching, and Research Center (LTRC). You can schedule an appointment for help with any part of the writing process. [The Dean of Studies Office](#) in Main Building is a crucial resource if you are experiencing any difficulties that are affecting your ability to succeed in class, and especially situations that are affecting multiple classes. Your class advisor can meet with you individually to discuss options to address your concerns.

Course Schedule

Note: the most up-to-date schedule of topics and assigned readings will always be posted on Moodle, as things might shift or change a bit as we move through the semester.

Week	Date	Topic	Readings	Notes
1	M 9/2	Labor Day — No Class		
	W 9/4	Introduction to the course		
2	M 9/9	What is language and what is it for?	Genetti (2018) excerpts	
	W 9/11	Communication games	Christiansen & Chater (2022) - Ch. 1	
3	M 9/16	Language, abstraction, and reality	Enfield (2022) - Ch. 1 Hayakawa (1991) - Ch. 8	
	W 9/18	Language as joint action	Herb Clark (1996) - Ch. 1	In class activity!
4	M 9/23	Creating (social) realities	Higgins et al. (2021); Wodak et al. (2015)	
	W 9/25	Political Rhetoric	Charteris-Black (2011) - Ch. 1	Reflection #1 due 9/29
5	M 9/30	Framing and persuasion	Flusberg et al. (2024) - 1st half	
	W 10/2	Varieties of communicative frames	Flusberg et al. (2024) - 2nd half	Reflection #2 due 10/6
6	M 10/7	Framing experiment	Choose from a selection of papers	
	W 10/9	Framing experiment		
	M 10/14	Fall Break — No Class		
	W 10/16			
7	M 10/21	Analyzing framing data	Data analysis walkthrough	
	W 10/23	Framing experiment presentations		Qualitative speech analysis due 10/25
8	M 10/28	Telling stories	Walsh et al. (2022)	
	W 10/30	Fictional worlds	Butler (1983); Chiang (1998)	Framing Project Due 11/1
9	M 11/4	Stories of ourselves	McAdams (2009) - Ch. 10	
	W 11/6	Language as a mirror?	Chung & Pennebaker (2019)	

10	M	11/11	Computational linguistic analyses	Jackson et al. (2022)	
	W	11/13	Language as a cognitive technology	Andy Clark (1998)	Reflection #3 due 11/15
11	M	11/18	Does language enhance memory?	Banks & Connell (2024)	
	W	11/20	Does language create categories?	Lupyan et al. (2007); Majid & Burenhult (2014)	
12	M	11/25	What happens when we label our emotions?	Torre & Lieberman (2018); Nook et al. (2011)	
	W	11/27	Should people talk to strangers?	Epley & Schroeder (2014)	Remote class + activity
13	M	12/2	Why are some words taboo?	Pinker (2007); Jay (2009); McWhorter (2021)	Computational analysis + integration due 12/1
	W	12/4	The functions of cursing	Stephens et al. (2009)	Reflection #4 due 12/6
14	M	12/9	The future of language in action		Reflection #5 due 12/13
	W	12/11	No Class		