**Foundations of Language (LING 10 – 3 units)**

**Instructor**:          Richard Abend

**Email**:                   [rabend@mpc.edu](mailto:rabend@mpc.edu)

**Telephone**:          (831) 646-4112

**Office**:                  HSS123

**Office Hours**:       T/W/Th 10-11 am, W 1-3 pm, and by arrangement

**Required Text**:    *The Language Instinct*, by Steven Pinker, Harper Perennial, 2000

**The Language Instinct\***

       Have you seen the film “Wind-talkers”?  During the early years of WW II, in the South Pacific, the Japanese quickly broke every US military code. Then at the suggestion of Phillip Johnston, the US military enlisted Navajo Indians to translate messages from English into Navajo to keep military communications secure.   US efforts were successful and the Japanese were never able to break the Navajo “code”.

        Why was this Navajo “code” never broken?  Because Navajo is not a code for English.  The Navajos didn’t just change words or try to mask the form of English.  Navajo and English are radically different kinds of languages. On the one hand, there are many layers of differences between these languages: vocabulary, sounds, word forms, grammar, and word-order.  On the other hand, during these war years, the Navajos translated messages nearly instantaneously and extremely accurately, demonstrating that the languages must also be very similar.

        Phillip Johnston, who first suggested the Navajo “code-talkers”, was one of the few white people at that time who could speak Navajo.  How did that happen?  He grew up playing with Navajo children.  His parents were missionaries living on the reservation.   Children do this all the time in all languages.  In five years or less, children do what computer scientists haven’t been able to teach a computer to do in 50 years – speak a human language, which brings us to the question “how are children able to learn language so quickly and at such a young age?”  It is truly an incredible accomplishment.

       Cognitive scientists, who study how humans process information, believe children must have some head start on learning a language.  Children must prepossess knowledge of what languages are like.  They must have some innate knowledge about the structures all languages contain and must also have innate abilities to recognize those structures.  This head start was named “Universal Grammar”, by Noam Chomsky, the linguist who first suggested this hypothesis.   Steven Pinker renamed this “Universal Grammar” the “Language Instinct”.

       Of course, children are not born prepared to learn one specific language such as American Sign Language or English.  Instead, they must be prepared to learn the language of where they are.   In other words, Universal Grammar (UG) must equip children to learn all the possible human languages, all 10,000 of them.   “Any healthy child is able to learn any language if immersed in that language environment at an early age.”  This implies that all languages must have things in common, similarities.  They must be the same at some level.  “All languages must follow a finite set of innate principles, although they appear different because of innate finite options that they choose, parameters.”  This is the Principles and Parameters Theory.  Noam Chomsky writes, “If grammar were bread, then flour and liquid would be the universal rules and the parameters would be yeast, eggs, sugar, jalapenos, etc., which would yield a different product when added to the universals.”

*\* Summarized from Atoms of Language*

Using language is the most complex of human activities, yet we use it effortlessly all day long without ever realizing its true complexity.  However, the highly sophisticated nature of language becomes very apparent when we begin to learn another language, read a scholarly article or write an essay.  At these times language appears extremely difficult because many of us do not really understand how language works.  All languages work through the same series of interrelated aspects: sounds, words and rules for combining words into sentences are just three aspects, but these aspects seem to be so very different from each other in different languages.

Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct,* our class text, will provide us a clear look at these various aspects that all languages share and will introduce us to the Principles and Parameters Theory.   Pinker explains and illustrates that all languages follow the same principles but differ in how they apply those principles (their parameters).  We will be testing this Principles and Parameters Theory as we compare English to other languages, although our class activities focus primarily on describing English syntax (the rules governing the way words are combined to form sentences).  In addition, we will discuss Pinker’s hypothesis that language is an instinct which our minds are designed to create and process.

**Class Topics:**

**Week One**:                The three forms of every sentence

                                    The twenty X-words

                                    Finding the subject

                                    Online Introductions

**Week Two:**              Shifters and Predicates

                                Forum

                                Online Quizzes

**Week Three:**           Ties

                               Forum

                               Online Quizzes

**Week Four:**Review

                                Forum

                                Online Quizzes

**Week Five:**              M, Y, and the Six Phrases of English

                                Forum

                                Online Quizzes

**Week Six:**                Y = Verb, Particle, Object and Compliment

                                Forum

                                Online Quizzes

**Week Seven:**               "Wh-" Questions and Traces

                                   Forum

                                   Online Quizzes

**Week Eight:**               Review Lessons 1-8

                                  Forum

                                  Online Quiz

                                  Mid-Term Exam

**Week Nine:**               Adverbial Included Sentences

                                  Forum

                                  Online Quizzes

**Week Ten:**                 Nominal Included Sentences

                                  Forum

                                  Online Quizzes

**Week Eleven:**             Adjectival Included Sentences

                                  Forum

                                  Online Quizzes

**Week Twelve:**            Pre-head Modifiers

                                  Forum

                                  Online Quizzes

**Week Thirteen:**         Post-head Modifiers

                                 Forum

                                 Online Quizzes

**Week Fourteen:**        Coordinators and Compounds

                                 Forum

                                 Online Quizzes

**Week Fifteen:**           Ambiguity

                                 Forum

**Week Sixteen:**          Review Lessons 1-15

                                 Final Exam

**STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:**  Upon successful completion of the class, students will be able to:

* Analyze sentence structure in terms of grammatical relations and constituent structures.
* Recognize the typological similarity and diversity of syntactic phenomena.

**Class Activities:**

Discussions, Readings, Analysis of written language, Written assignments, Quizzes and Tests.

**Grading:**

Activities are assigned points, total points are assigned averages, and averages determine **L**etter **G**rades as follows:

           90 – 100%   = A

           80 – 89%     = B

           70 – 79%     = C

           60 – 69%     = D

This class may also be taken for **P**ass/**N**o **P**ass (70 – 100% = **P**ass).  Your choice for **P/NP** must be made within the first four weeks of class.  Otherwise, a **L**etter **G**rade will be awarded.

**Class grades are calculated on the following formula:**

**FORUMS = 15% of the total grade**

**PINKER CHAPTER QUIZZES = 20% of the total grade**

**LESSON QUIZZES = 25% of the total grade**

**MID-TERM EXAM = 20% of the total grade**

**FINAL EXAM = 20% of the total grade**

**Repeatability:** Students repeating a course in which they previously received a substandard grade of D, F, NC, or NP, and W will be limited to a total of three enrollments.  Students are advised to carefully choose their courses each term to ensure successful completion.  This new regulation is retroactive to Fall 1995.  Please see the 2012-2013 Catalog for more information.

**I hope this class will be interesting for you and helps you approach your educational goals.  Please contact me by email or phone as often as you like.**

**I look forward to working with you.  Best wishes for a great semester!**

**Richard Abend**