

Foundations of Language (LING 10 – 3 units)

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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

GENERAL EDUCATION OUTCOMES:

MPC Area C, Humanities:

Upon successful completion of this area, students will have demonstrated an ability to analyze and interpret human thought, achievement, and expression relevant to such branches of knowledge as philosophy, literature, and/or the fine and performing arts, and to communicate the results.

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.

Course Objectives: Upon completion of this course, students have demonstrated the ability to:

1. Restate and discuss ideas from the class text.
2. Formulate examples to illustrate ideas from the text.
3. Diagram sentences.
4. Analyze and name the sectors and constructions in an English sentence.
5. Construct verb phrases according to orientation, relationship, and aspect.
6. Evaluate and revise sentences to eliminate ambiguity.
7. Compare and contrast English and other languages in terms of syntax and structure.
8. Summarize and explain differences between English and a target language.
9. Assemble and disassemble words.
10. Choose explanations for language use and correctness.
11. Judge whether language is a learned behavior or innately based.

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 Letter Grades as follows:

90 – 100% = A

80 – 89% = B

70 – 79% = C

60 – 69% = D

This class may also be taken for **Pass/No Pass** (70 – 100% = **Pass**). Your choice for **P/NP** must be made within the first four weeks of class. Otherwise, a Letter Grade 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.

Online Course Structure

This is a fully-online course. All course activities and resources can be found through our course website on MPC Online. All of the learning activities are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. However, each activity has a time frame which is listed in the course. Please stay on schedule with the class.

MPC Online Access & Technical Assistance

Visit the [MPC Online login page \(http://mpconline.mpc.edu\)](http://mpconline.mpc.edu) and follow the instructions to login. To access this course on MPC Online you will need access to the Internet and a supported Web browser (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari). Visit the MPC Online Student Orientation & Support link for information about accessing MPC Online, tips to help you get started, and information about how to [Contact the MPC Online Help Desk](#) for support.

Course Communication: My first choice of communication with you is through email rabend@mpc.edu. I respond to emails seven days a week, usually within 12 hours. My second choice of communication is through my on-campus office phone (831) 646-4112. Leave a message and I will respond within a day, seven days a week. If you don't hear back from me within a day, please email or call me again.

Participation

Students are expected to participate twice weekly in online forum activities.

Build Rapport

If you find that you have any trouble keeping up with assignments or other aspects of the course, make sure you let your instructor know as early as possible. As you will find, building rapport and effective relationships are key to becoming an effective professional. Make sure that you are proactive in informing your instructor when difficulties arise during the semester so that we can help you find a solution.

Complete Assignments

All assignments for this course will be submitted electronically through MPC Online unless otherwise instructed. Assignments must be submitted by the given deadline or special permission must be requested from instructor *before the due date*. Extensions will not be given beyond the next assignment except under extreme circumstances.

All discussion assignments must be completed by the assignment due date and time. Late or missing discussion assignments will lower your grade.

Drop Policy: The number of times a student may attempt a class is limited to three times per class by the California Community College system. To prevent any future problems, if you have not completed at least one forum or quiz during the first two weeks of class, you will be dropped without any record of you having registered for the class. Beginning in the third week of the semester, a drop from the class is noted by a **W** on your official college transcript. The last day to drop a class is the 12th week of the semester. It is your responsibility to drop the class after the second week of the semester.

Incomplete Policy

Under emergency/special circumstances, students may petition for an incomplete grade. An incomplete will be assigned if the only assignment missing is the Final Project. All incomplete course assignments must be completed within one year.

Inform Your Instructor of Any Accommodations Needed

If you have a disability and would like to request accommodations, please contact the instructor during the first week of the semester so that your accommodations may be provided in a timely manner. [Supportive Services & Instruction](#) (SS&I) provides assistance in determining and facilitating appropriate accommodations for students with verified disabilities. The SS&I office is located on the first floor of the Student Services building (STS 115).

Monterey Peninsula College's Academic Honesty Policy & Procedures

From the [MPC Academic Catalog](#): Academic honesty is a cornerstone of the educational community; therefore, students are expected to understand the standards of academic honesty as they pertain to students' behavior in the classroom.

Plagiarism

It is important for students to acknowledge sources that are used for completing classroom assignments. Plagiarism is a form of academic dishonesty.

Plagiarism may be any one of the following:

1. Verbatim copying without proper documentation of the source(s).
2. Paraphrasing without proper documentation of the source(s).
3. Unacknowledged appropriation of information or ideas from someone else.

If students have any questions about these forms of plagiarism or about an assignment they are preparing, they should ask their instructor for clarification rather than risk unintentional plagiarism.

Cheating

It is important for students to act in an honest and trustworthy manner. Work performed on examinations or other forms of evaluation must represent an individual's own work, knowledge and experience of the subject matter. Students are expected to follow the classroom rules established by the instructor.

Cheating may be any one of the following:

1. Unauthorized looking at or procuring information from any unauthorized sources or from another student's work during an examination or from any work that will be graded or given points.
2. Unauthorized acquiring, reading or learning of test questions prior to the testing date and time.
3. Changing any portion of a returned graded test or report and resubmitting it as an original work to be re-graded.
4. Presenting the work of another as one's own for a grade or points.
5. Knowingly assisting another student in cheating.

This list is not all-inclusive and the list itself is not meant to limit the definition of cheating to just these items mentioned.

Consequences of Academic Dishonesty

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