

Department: Linguistics

Course No: 103

Credits: 3

Title: The Diversity of Languages

Contact: Harry van der Hulst

Content Area: CA2-Social Sciences

Catalog Copy:LING 1030. The Diversity of Languages

(103) Either semester. Three credits. Calabrese, van der Hulst

Overview of world languages and language families. Typological classifications of linguistic properties: what can we expect in the structure of a language? Unity and diversity of language systems. Mechanisms of language change and variation. CA 2. CA 4.

Course Information: a. This course provides an understanding of differences between languages, both linguistic differences and differences in terms of their status in multilingual human societies, thus helping the student to develop an educated view on the role that languages play as vehicles of cultural identity and cultural heritage. There are three exams (format: multiple choice questions). Reading consists of book chapters, articles and lecture notes. Weekly homework: essay questions, exercises, assignments to find relevant information (internet etc.). Topics/themes: clarifications of misunderstandings about language and its role in human societies, language families, minority languages, language change and variation, evolution of language, endangered languages, minority language, multilingualism, structural properties of language universals and differences, writing systems, literacy.

Meets Goals of Gen Ed: 1. Become articulate: Students are challenged to formulate and defend their opinions about the implications of living in a multilingual world Intellectual breadth: Students learn important factual information about human language and languages that every educated person should know.

Critical judgment: Students learn to recognize prejudiced views on language diversity and evaluate different points of view.

Moral sensitivity: Students gain insight into the fundamental equality of all human languages.

Awareness of era and society: The course provides a great deal of information concerning the current linguistic situation in the world.

Diversity: Insofar language is part of culture, linguistic diversity serves as an exemplar of cultural diversity.

Working understanding: The subject of the course is dynamic, i.e. the linguistic situation is changing (rapidly). The course will focus on the question of how to keep up with these changes.

CA2 Criteria: Theories and concepts of the social sciences: Based on empirical observations, linguistic theories represent hypotheses (i.e. models) of a particular kind of human behavior and human interaction, as well as the mental competence behind that behavior and interaction. Predictions about non-observed, new behavior can be tested by further observation.

Methods of the social sciences: Direct empirical observation of spontaneous behavior, as well as changes in this behavior over time, using experiments and elicited behavior. With a focus on loss in linguistic and cultural diversity, description and analysis may interfere with the interests of social groups for whom language is the primary marker of identity. Researchers need to establish a balance between scientific interest and the interest of the group, the cooperation and permission of which in collecting data is crucial. The matters raise important ethical issues concerning the role of the scientist with regard to the social and political forces that drive the loss of linguistic diversity. A linguist working in this area might easily become an activist. The focus on multilingualism, apart from being a topic of scientific study, involves fundamental issues concerning the status of minority and/or not officially recognized languages. In other words, the subject matter directly involves daily needs of people, in education for example. Issues of 'language rights' are inherently ethical in nature.

Behavior of individuals, groups etc.: At the group level, language is studied as a form of social interaction; at the level of the individual as a form of knowledge, a special part of human cognition. Languages (and their speakers) operate as competitive groups, i.e. they interact with each other and with the non-linguistic environment in a language ecology system. We see the emergence of 'big languages' (world languages such as English) and small languages (endangered languages), leading to language death. Researchers in this area have established significant correlations between linguistic diversity, cultural diversity and biological diversity. Students gain insight in the social processes that operate in the world (past and present) at all these levels. Policies of governments, educational bodies and international organizations impact these processes, but it is important to see that the behavior of individuals and social groups implement the changes (foreign language learning, language shift, attitudes towards dialects and minority languages) that can be observed, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes under pressure (political, social).

Tools: The facts that this course studies concern both language internal issues (the diversity in structure of grammars and vocabularies) and language-external issues (the 'behavior' of languages in the world; cf. 3.). In both areas, students are familiarized with, and work with, collections of facts in the form of databases, case studies and statistical studies. As also indicated in 3, in its focus on 'language ecology', this course is heavily loaded with a consideration of social issues and problems. With language being such a fundamental marker of identity (in addition to being a medium for communication), direct links exist between 'language rights' and 'language recognition' and the social status (and opportunities) of individual speakers and groups. National and international events directly influence the status of languages and their numbers of speakers. Every society has 'higher' and 'lower' (forms of) languages and speakers of one or the other experience discrimination or special rights as direct consequences. Linguistics

has played an essential role in recognizing the fundamental equality of all languages and dialects, thus undermining social stigmatization of ‘certain ways of speaking’ (cf. the discussion about Ebonics). Students learn that different social (incl. gender) groups make different uses of language and that this is both necessary (language being a marker of socio-cultural identity) and harmless.

CA4 Criteria:

Specific Criteria Diversity and Multiculturalism:

2. This course investigates the extent to which language is a cultural product.
3. This course investigates the similarities between human languages their differences, and the limits on diversity (imposed by innate constraint).
4. The course looks at the effects of human migration on the spread of languages, language loss and multilinguality.
5. This course deals with language globalization and domination (e.g. English as a global language)

International Requirement:

This course meets the international requirement because:

1. It deals with diversity/multiculturalism outside the US
2. It deals with diversity/multiculturalism over time and place