

Language as Human Nature

CORE S119
Section A

Instructor Info —



Forrest Davis (he/him)



Office Hours T: 3:00-6:00PM



Office Hours Bernstein 331



fdavis@colgate.edu

Course Info —



Class: T, R



1:20-2:35PM



114 Bernstein

Overview

Why are humans the only animals with language? In this course, we begin with the hypothesis that we have language because of an innate capacity. We will investigate the nature of this capacity and how it relates to the form, meaning, and use of language. Drawing on the linguistic diversity of the world's languages, we will search for recurring patterns and structures as evidence for a universal, underlying structure to human language. Along the way, we will consider sounds, gestures, words, utterances, meaning, language change and use, the ways language is used to encode social identity, and how computational tools apply to human language. Ultimately, we will actively engage in the scientific process to build an understanding of how scientific theories frame our understanding of both natural objects in the world and ourselves.

Material

Required Text: We will draw on various primary and secondary linguistic texts, with PDFs provided.

Course Website: You can find the course website where course materials, assignments, readings, and the schedule will be posted at <https://forrestdavis.github.io/cores119>.

Coursework

Assignments

The course will have around 6 written reports. These reports will take the form of a brief (2-3 page single spaced) scientific analysis of some language data. **I may ask you to meet to discuss your written reports and your grade may change based on the conversation.**

Pre-Class Quizzes

There will be pre-class quizzes based on the course readings and content. **Pre-class quizzes must be completed before the start of each relevant class period.** Answering these questions will help ensure you are ready to engage in deeper learning and problem solving for the class meeting. There will be more pre-class quizzes offered than are required for full credit in this grading category, so you can still earn full credit even if you do not complete a few.

Midterm Exam

There will be one midterm exam in the course. The exam is designed to test your understanding of the core concepts covered in class, and your ability to apply them in different contexts. **No discussion of exam questions or possible solutions is permitted from the time the exam is first administered until exams have been completed by all students and returned.**

- **Midterm Exam:** October 23

Please let me know in advance if you will be unable to take one of the exams on the scheduled date.

Final Project

A core component of the course is the final project. You will be asked to work on a *squib*. A squib is a traditionally a short article in linguistics that explores “a pattern of facts that you find interesting along with an exploration of their possible significance. You might discover these facts yourself, as you sit in class, talk with friends, or read the newspaper - or you might read them in a reference grammar or linguistics book.” As part of the final projects, you will write a squib on a topic of your choice. You will also create a presentation for the class, which outlines your phenomenon of interest, aspects of a formal account of it, and argues for its significance. There will be milestone throughout the semester to help scaffold your progress on the final project.

Grading Scheme

Your course grade is based on your assignments, exam, and final project. The table below defines the proportion of your final grade which is determined by each category. Note that, within each category, each item is weighted equally. A plus (+) or minus (-) will be added to your grade based on your attendance and completion of pre-class quizzes. **You must regularly attend class and complete quizzes reflection for a plus (+).** A minus (-) will be added to your grade if you fail to regularly attend class and complete quizzes.

+/-	Regular Attendance and Pre-class Quizzes (pass/failed)*
50%	Assignments
20%	Midterm Exam
30%	Final Project

*You need to earn $\geq 60\%$ to pass a quiz and you must pass 85% of quizzes to qualify for a plus (+).

Grading is on an absolute scale (i.e., no curve). Letter grades will be assigned as shown below. However, I reserve the right to make adjustments; any such adjustments will only raise your grade, never lower it. A grade of A+ is awarded when the student demonstrates truly exceptional performance and is not simply determined by having a high final grade.

F	D-	D	D+	C-	C	C+	B-	B	B+	A-	A	A+
< 60	60 - 62	63 - 66	67 - 69	70 - 72	73 - 76	77 - 79	80 - 82	83 - 86	87 - 89	90 - 92	≥ 93	*

Policies

Attendance and Engagement

Attendance to class is expected and contributes to your final grade. However, I do not expect you to attend if you are feeling unwell. Additionally, if you have athletics, scheduled commitments, or other issues please let me know. If you miss a class, you can make up the credit by performing a **check-in** email. For a check-in, consult with a classmate and/or review the materials, and **within 48 hours** of the class send me an email containing:

1. a brief summary (2-4 sentences) of what was covered
2. any thoughts/questions you have

Check-ins are not a substitute for attending class regularly. While in the class, you are expected to engage with the material and the other students in the course. You should aim to be a **good participant**: raising your hand, respecting others, actively listening, and making sure to leave space for others to speak. There are no bad questions, and I would always rather you contribute than avoid doing so.

Deadlines

I will be reasonably flexible on deadlines. If you need some extra time due to illness, your workload in other classes, and/or personal matters, please let me know. As long as you have made a good faith effort to complete learning activities by the original deadline, I am willing to offer a reasonable extension. I will be less willing to grant an extension if you wait to start a assignment until the day before it is due (when you've had a week to work on it), repeatedly ask for extensions, etc.

Any assignment that is turned in late without prior approval will automatically be given a 0%

Academic Honesty & Collaboration

You are expected to abide by Colgate's academic honor code. The overarching policy of this course is that the work you turn in should represent your own thinking. You should be accountable to its content (e.g., be able to explain what your code does). **I may ask to meet with you to discuss your work. Your grade may change based on the conversation.**

Collaborating with peers in the class

You may discuss course concepts and work through the logic of something you don't understand with your peers. However, you should not share your work. Your submitted work should be your own. Here are some concrete rules that exemplify this (but are not intended to be comprehensive):

Do NOT:

- Ask a peer in either this section of the course or others (past or present) to check your work.
- Ask a peer for how they analyzed the provided data for an assignment.

You CAN:

- Ask clarification questions about the fundamentals of linguistics (e.g., "What are syllables?")
- Ask for conceptual clarifications (e.g., "What is the difference between an allophone and a phoneme?")
- Try to work through the logic of something you don't understand (e.g., "How do I check whether something is a syntactic constituent?")
- Ask for help to pointers about resources (e.g., "Where did you find information about conversational implicatures?")

Using generative AI tools

In this course, you can use generative AI systems to learn about concepts iteratively through a interaction and to help direct you to resources. However, you cannot ask these systems to directly give you answers to assignments or write all the text for your work. Ultimately, I want you to be able to work through the problems on this course because they are important in learning both how language works, but also how to do science. These tools should extend your abilities not supplant them. When you include output from some generative AI system in your work **you must include attribution and a brief – no more than 15 words – description of what you wanted it to do. Note, attribution is not sufficient to avoid claims of cheating.** Here are some concrete rules that exemplify this (but are not intended to be comprehensive):

Do NOT:

- Give the model a problem description with data and ask it to describe the linguistic rule
- Give the model the assignment data and ask it to organize it for you (e.g., find meaningful pairs)
- Give the model an assignment and ask it to produce a solution

You CAN:

- Ask clarification questions about the fundamentals of linguistics (e.g., "How does language change relate to social categories?")
- Ask for conceptual clarifications (e.g., "What is the difference between arguments, specifiers, and heads in syntax?")
- Try to work through the logic of something you don't understand (e.g., "How do minimal pairs help linguists identify meaningful rules?")

Remember: Policies around the use of Generative AI tools, like any other course policies, vary across different courses both within and outside the department.

Anonymous Feedback

Your feedback on this course is important for helping me improve the learning environment. You can provide anonymous feedback at any point in the semester via this form. *Note, you must be accessing the form from a Colgate account, but your email is not recorded.*

Getting Help

A key to your success at Colgate is figuring out what resources are available and using them to help you achieve your goals. There are several options for getting help with this course:

1. Drop in during my office hours (noted at the top of the syllabus) or if no office hours times work, arrange an appointment with me – just send me an email with a few times you are available, and we will find a time that works well for both of us. If my door is open to my office (322 Bernstein), you may (occasionally) knock and ask a quick question.
2. Form a study group with other students in the class and work together on a regular basis (note the Academic Honesty & Collaboration policy above).

I also encourage you to reach out to many great resources at Colgate that can assist you with academic, personal, or other needs, including:

- **Administrative Deans** (<https://www.colgate.edu/about/offices-centers-institutes/dean-college/administrative-advising>) help you understand policies and procedures, navigate personal challenges, work with faculty, and engage with parents.
- **Counseling Center** (<https://colgate.edu/counseling>) staff are trained to help students manage a wide array of emotions. The counseling center meets with over half the student body for clinical services at some point during their four years at Colgate. You can arrange an appointment online or by phone (315-228-7385). For emergencies, a counselor is available 24/7 by calling campus safety at 315-228-7333 and asking for the counselor on call.
- **Haven** (<https://colgate.edu/haven>) is a sexual violence response center that provides confidential care, support, advocacy, and trauma-informed clinical services for survivors of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, child/family abuse, stalking, and/or harassment. You can call (315-228-7385) or visit during business hours. You can also contact the Help Restore Hope Center (855-966-9723).
- **Student Health Services** (<https://colgate.edu/offices-and-services/studenthealthservice>) provides accessible, convenient, cost-effective, non-judgmental, and confidential care for all students.
- **Information Technology Services** (<https://colgate.edu/its>) help desk consultants assist all students with problems concerning email, Portal, Moodle, or your personal laptop. Contact me if problems with your personal computer are affecting your ability to get your work done.
- **Chaplains** (<https://colgate.edu/campus-life/religious-life/officeofthechaplains>) provide the community with a dynamic, friendly, and supportive place.
- **The Writing and Speaking Center** (<http://www.colgate.edu/writingcenter>) is a free resource for all Colgate students that is staffed by friendly, well-qualified Peer Writing and Speaking Consultants from a range of disciplinary and linguistic backgrounds. All writers and speakers benefit from the opportunity to talk about their ideas and to receive constructive feedback. Meetings are private, and you may visit at any stage of your process, from clarifying your initial ideas to polishing a final draft or presentation.