

Lin 393 Linguistics of Signed Languages
Unique No. 41270
TT 12:30-2pm JES A217A

Instructor:

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Office hours: Tues/Thurs, 9-10:30am or by appointment

Course Description: One of the most important findings of the last 25 years of linguistic research is that the sign languages of the Deaf are natural languages with their own grammars. Moreover, the grammars of these sign languages are independent of whatever spoken language is used in the same community. The existence of sign languages provides an important testing ground for many claims about the nature of human languages: by comparing the structure of signed and spoken languages, we can gain insights into how languages are shaped by the particular transmission modality in which they are used. To what extent are spoken languages structured the way they are because they are spoken and heard? To what extent are signed languages the way they are because they are signed and seen? And, lastly, to what extent are all languages—signed or spoken—structured similarly because they all draw on the same linguistic and cognitive capacities?

Among the issues that we will discuss are: 1) How have sign languages been viewed over the last 200 years? 2) How have sign languages developed? Interestingly, sign languages may show some similarities to creole languages. 3) Non-signers are often impressed by the pictorial quality (i.e., the iconicity) of many signs in American Sign Language (ASL). Does iconicity have an important impact on the grammatical structure of sign languages? 4) How are the grammars of ASL and other sign languages structured? Do the structures of signed and spoken languages differ in interesting ways? 5) How are sign languages acquired by deaf children who are being raised in signing households?

Texts: Sandler, W. & Lillo-Martin, D. (2006) *Sign language and linguistic universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Klima, E. & Bellugi, U (1979) *The Signs of Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Groce, N. E. (1985). *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Various journal articles will also be used and provided in electronic format if they are available

Readings that are not in electronic format will be placed on reserve in the copy room of the Department of Linguistics (Calhoun 513). The copy room is normally open 9-5 M-F.

Requirements: Three 3-page discussion notes readings or journal articles, a 15-page research paper, and a class presentation of that paper. One good topic for a research paper would be cross-linguistic comparisons among sign languages (although the limited literature may pose some problems). However, even examinations of phonological inventory, as based on comparisons among dictionaries would be useful. If you wish to do a crosslinguistic topic, be sure you start getting the relevant lit. through interlibrary loan ASAP. Grading: Discussion Notes (30%), Research paper and related assignments (50%), 15-20 minute class presentation of paper (10%), Participation: (10%).

Academic dishonesty: Turning in work that does not represent your own efforts will result in an F (specifically, a zero) on the assignment in question.

Discussion notes: To foster your understanding and integration of the readings, you will be asked to turn in three “discussion notes.” The discussion notes will be two- to three-page critical commentaries on one of the papers from the period prior to (and including) the due date (or your notes may concern a closely related subset of those readings) or on instructor-approved journal articles that are related to your area of inquiry. These notes should not be a summary of what you have read. Rather, they should be evaluative: what’s right about the paper and why? What’s wrong with the study? Or, you might suggest an additional study/experiment that would help resolve the issues raised in the paper. Or, if you happen to know of literature not discussed in class that is of particular relevance to whatever paper you are commenting on, discuss that literature. Further details for this assignment will be provided in class.

Students with disabilities. For students with disabilities, I am available to discuss any appropriate academic accommodations that might be necessary for this course. Before course accommodations may be discussed, a student is required to provide documentation to the Office of the Dean of Students--Services for Students with Disabilities.

Tentative schedule (updates will be announced in class and posted on BlackBoard):

Orientation; What's a Language?

T 1/19 Orientation to the course

Th 1/21 How do we identify a language? Design features of language. Readings: Hockett. Modality effects. Readings: introductory chapter from Meier, Cormier, & Quinto-Pozos (eds.), 2002. Ch. 1 from Johnston & Schembri 2007 is an accessible introduction to the sign linguistics, with examples from Auslan. [These papers are available on BlackBoard.]

Deaf Communities

T 1/26 Padden & Humphries, pp. 1-70

Th 1/28 Groce, pp. 50-110. Lane, Pillard, & French 2000 (Sign Language Studies) on the differing genetics of three American Deaf communities.

Tu 2/2 Import of residential schools. An extreme example: Irish SL. Lane chapter on history of FSL & ASL, 207-254.

The Nature of Signed Symbols--Iconicity

Th 2/4: Linguistic symbols in sign and speech. What is a linguistic symbol? Arbitrariness & iconicity in speech. Iconicity and the nature of symbols in ASL. Reading: Saussure, Ch. 1 in K & B.

Tu 2/9 Historical change in ASL: K & B Ch. 3. **Discussion Note Due.**

The Nature of Signed Symbols—Phonological & Morphological Structure

Th 2/11 The internal structure of signs: “simultaneity”

K & B: Ch. 2

Notation system: Stokoe, Casterline, & Croneberg, *Dictionary of American Sign Language*

Tu 2/16 Psycholinguistic evidence for "sublexical structure: slips of the hand. K&B Ch. 5.

Th 2/18 Foreign vocabulary in ASL: Emmorey Ch. 2, pp. 13-42. Padden, "The ASL Lexicon."

Tu 2/25 Ion-morphs: Napoli & Fernald (SLL)

Th 2/27 The internal structure of signs: “simultaneity”. K& B’s analyses of ASL morphology & sign formation

K&B Ch. 8 "Rate of Signing"

K& B Ch. 12

Supalla & Newport, “How Many Seats in a Chair”.

Tu 3/4 Aronoff, Meir, & Sandler 2005

Th 3/6

Tu 3/9 The internal structure of signs: sequentiality. Liddell 1984; Brentari, 2002.

Discussion Note Due.

Pronouns & Verb Agreement

Th 3/11 McBurney 2002: The uniformity of sign language pronouns; the diversity of pronominal systems in spoken languages.

Tu 3/25 Deixis in ASL: Lillo-Martin & Klima 1990; Meier 1990.

Th 3/17 Is verb agreement pointing? Pro: Liddell 2000. It's not just pointing: Meier 2002.

Tu 4/1 Verb agreement and null arguments in ASL: Word order, verb agreement, and null arguments, Lillo-Martin 1986.

Sentence Structure

Th 4/3 Facial expressions as syntactic markers; word order: Liddell. Also: Baker 1980.

Tu 4/8 Auxiliaries & verb agreement. **Discussion Note Due.**

How is that sign languages develop?

Th 4/10 Home sign systems: the invented gestural systems of deaf children of hearing parents: Goldin-Meadow & Mylander in *Language*

Also: Singleton, Morford, & Goldin-Meadow, *Language* 1993

Deaf children whose input is Signed English: S. Supalla in Siple & Fischer

Tu 4/13 Nicaraguan Sign Language and Al-Sayid Bedouin Sign Language

Nicaragua Sign Language: Senghas & Coppola; Polich.

Sandler et al. 2005. PNAS

Acquisition of ASL

Th 4/15 Overview: Emmorey Ch. 5; Meier 1991.

Tu 4/20 Acquisition of verb agreement and classifier constructions

Th 4/22 Critical period effects: Newport; Mayberry; Emmorey ch. 6. Background: Lenneberg.

Tu 4/27 Adult acquisition of ASL as an L2 (both hearing and Deaf)

Th 4/29 Bilingual acquisition discussion; Pettito et al, 2001 **Draft of research paper due**

Tu 5/4: Neurolinguistics and its role in understanding signed languages

Th 5/6 class presentations and final discussions

Final version of research paper due on date of final exam.