
IAH 206: Self, Society, and Technology (D)

Language and Our Lives

Spring 2024

Instructor: Dr. Patti Spinner

Office: B-258 Wells Hall

Office Hours: Email anytime to set up a meeting

Classroom: varies

Website: d2l.msu.edu

Teaching Assistant (sections 1,2,3): Yongqing Ye

Office: Wells Hall B320

Office hours: Tuesdays 12-1pm (on Zoom), Fridays 9-10am (in person) and by appointment.

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Office: Wells Hall B320

Office Hours: Wednesdays 2-4pm or on Zoom by appt.

Course description: This course explores the language that is all around us and invites students to question their assumptions about its nature and its use in our lives. We will consider the forms of language, its purposes, its power and its limitations. We explore what about it is particularly human and how it shapes the ways we view our world.

Course goals: Students will reflect on the way language is used in their own lives and apply their knowledge and understanding of the role of language in our individual lives and in society through interaction with and analysis of a variety of readings, films, presentations, and other experiences. These analyses will take place in accordance with the following goals:

- Analytical Thinking: Synthesizes and applies the information within and across disciplines
- Effective Citizenship: Applies knowledge and abilities to solve societal problems in ethical ways
- Integrated Reasoning: Uses a variety of inquiry strategies incorporating multiple views to make value judgments, solve problems, answer questions, and generate new understandings
- Effective Communication: Engages in effective communication practices in a variety of situations and with a variety of media

Course text: Okrent, A. (2009). *In the Land of Invented Languages: Adventures in Linguistic Creativity, Madness, and Genius*. New York: Random House. (Any edition is ok; used copies are often available online for around \$5.)

Mission and Goals of Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities

The mission of Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities is to help students become more familiar with ways of knowing in the arts and humanities and to be more knowledgeable and capable in a range of intellectual and expressive abilities. IAH courses encourage students to engage critically with their own society, history, and culture(s); they also encourage students to learn more about the history and

culture of other societies. They focus on key ideas and issues in human experience; encourage appreciation of the roles of knowledge and values in shaping and understanding human behavior; emphasize the responsibilities and opportunities of democratic citizenship; highlight the value of the creative arts of literature, theater, music, and art; and alert us to important issues that occur among peoples in an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world. The goals of IAH courses are to assist students to

- Cultivate habits of inquiry and develop investigative strategies from arts and humanities perspectives;
- Explore social, cultural, and artistic expressions and contexts;
- Act as culturally aware and ethically responsible citizens in local and global communities;
- Critically assess, produce, and communicate knowledge in a variety of media for a range of audiences; and
- Recognize and understand the value of diversity and the significance of interconnectedness in the classroom and beyond.

Scheduling requirements: Students must include at least one “N” course and one “I” course in their program. A “D” course may meet either an “N” or an “I” requirement, but not both. This requirement is intended to increase cultural understanding in ways that empower students to act as engaged, well-informed citizens as they meet the challenges and opportunities of a complex, interconnected world in the 21st century. In addition to the academic benefits of diverse perspectives, employers increasingly seek out college graduates who are skilled in communicating to varied audiences and making decisions that reflect broad historical, social, and cultural knowledge. Overall, fulfilling the IDN designations prepare students to respond constructively to opportunities connected with our pluralistic society and global community.

This course is designated as a Diversity (D) course and has been approved toward meeting the University Diversity Requirement. Courses designated as “D” emphasize intercultural and diversity issues, ideas, and perspectives unconnected to geography or nation. The “D” designates a connection between intercultural and diversity topics that emphasizes the intersectionality of diverse identities and critical approaches to dominant narratives, institutions, and practices. Overall, courses with “D” focus on themes and questions that transcend time, space, and location. The learning objectives and outcomes of the course will emphasize this designation and provide a guide for how this course furthers understanding of diversity at MSU and beyond.

Statement on Academic Honesty: The Spartan Code of Honor states, "As a Spartan, I will strive to uphold values of the highest ethical standard. I will practice honesty in my work, foster honesty in my peers, and take pride in knowing that honor is worth more than grades. I will carry these values beyond my time as a student at Michigan State University, continuing the endeavor to build personal integrity in all that I do." In addition, Article 2.III.B.2 of the Student Rights and Responsibilities (SRR) states that "The student shares with the faculty the responsibility for maintaining the integrity of scholarship, grades, and professional standards." The College of Arts and Letters adheres to the policies on academic honesty as specified in General Student Regulations 1.0, Protection of Scholarship and Grades; the all-University Policy on Integrity of Scholarship and Grades; and Ordinance 17.00, Examinations. (See Spartan Life: Student Handbook and Resource Guide and/or the MSU Web site: www.msu.edu.)

Online evaluation policy

Michigan State University takes seriously the opinion of students in the evaluation of the effectiveness

of instruction and has implemented a system to gather student feedback. You will receive an e-mail during the last two weeks of class asking you to fill out the web form at your convenience. In addition, participation in the evaluation system involves grade sequestration, which means that the final grade for this course will not be accessible on STUINFO during the week following the submission of grades for this course unless the online form has been completed. Alternatively, you have the option on the website to decline to participate in the evaluation of the course. We hope, however, that you will be willing to give us your frank and constructive feedback so that we may instruct students even better in the future. If you access the online website and complete the online form or decline to participate, you will receive the final grade in this course as usual once final grades are submitted.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities. Michigan State University is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services and activities. Requests for accommodations by persons with disabilities may be made by contacting the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities at 517-884-RCPD or on the web at rcpd.msu.edu. Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined, you will be issued a Verified Individual Services Accommodation ("VISA") form. Please present this form to me at the start of the term and/or two weeks prior to the accommodation date (test, project, etc.). Requests received after this date may not be honored.

Interruptions. If there is some reason you are unable to complete the work for a given week, including religious observations, mental health challenges, or murder hornets, contact your TA or the course instructor immediately. Do not wait until later.

Participation/electronic policy: We will learn a great deal in this class from group discussion and in-class activities. Participation in these discussions and activities is crucial. Your participation grade is based on your active work during discussions and group activities. Additionally, you should demonstrate that you have read/watched the material before class.

Students are expected to put away all electronic devices during class, including laptops, tablets and cellphones. These devices are not only a distraction to you; they are a distraction to your fellow students and they degrade the atmosphere of learning and attention. If you're wondering why we have this policy, check these articles (outside of class, of course):

<http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-case-for-banning-laptops-in-the-classroom>,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/08/05/high-school-teacher-im-banning-laptops-in-class-and-not-just-because-they-are-distracting/>

Teaching Assistants. Your TA is your first point of contact for questions and concerns. They will get to know you because of the recitations. Please talk to them first if you are unsure of how to complete an assignment, can't make class, etc. However, you can feel free to contact Dr. Spinner, as well.

Requirements. The d2l site will be organized each week into three categories: To read/view, Part 1 Online, and Part 2 online. Each week you need to read or view the materials, complete the Part 1 tasks, complete the Part 2 tasks, and then attend recitation.

To read/view: These are usually short articles, films or book chapters. You can find them posted on d2l, linked from d2l, or use your course text. They are listed on the syllabus and on d2l.

Part 1 Online: These are quizzes or discussion board comments that refer to the readings. They

must be completed by Thursday at 10pm. See the section on online quizzes and the section on discussion boards for more information.

Part 2 Online: This will often consist of a video that further develops and explores the ideas from the readings/videos. Often this will be a video from Dr. Spinner, but there will be guest speakers, as well. Most weeks there will be a few tasks to go along with Part 2 Online. Materials will always be available by the Sunday before the start of the week. Part 2 Online must be completed by Thursday at 10pm.

Recitation: This is the in-person part of the course. The goal of the recitations will be to answer questions that arise during the week and discuss the material. We'll also complete some "hands-on" activities to understand the issues more completely.

Technological requirements. You will be required to watch videos for this course. You can stream them on a computer, either your own or at a computer lab on campus. All videos (except *Arrival*) are available electronically at the library, so if you have trouble, contact the library for assistance. If they can't help you, let me know.

Online quizzes. You will only have one chance to take each quiz, but they are untimed and you can take as long as you like. The answers are never intended to be "trick" answers or catch you out. Their purpose is to make sure that you get the main ideas from the texts, not to find details to grill you with. Any questions refer specifically to what's contained *in the current text*. (There may be differing opinions elsewhere.)

Online discussion boards. Your discussion group will be your recitation group. You can post a new comment or respond to someone else's, but everyone must post something to earn the credit for participating (although you can post as many times as you like). You should contribute an idea to the discussion. Generally a short paragraph (3-5 sentences) is an appropriate length. You are encouraged to respond to each other when possible. All postings must be friendly, professional and PG-rated. The deadline for these posts is Thursday at 10pm. It is a hard deadline so that everyone can participate in the discussion and we don't need to stay up all night reading posts. We do read them. Crucially, the point of these boards is to explore **your** ideas. Please do not use websites/AI/etc. to answer them. Your post is not graded on how much information you can spit back, but rather whether you are reflecting on the material yourself.

Papers/projects. This course requires three papers that summarize your thoughts about a particular topic we have covered. You can choose between several topics (provided on a separate handout). You will integrate material from the readings, films and discussions, plus discuss your own ideas. Each paper will be between 750-1000 words of text (not including any titles, etc.) and will be submitted in the online dropbox by Thursday at 10pm on the due date. (Some alternative projects may be available, too, but any project will be due at the same time.) These papers should be clear, organized, and thoughtful. Feel free to ask questions beforehand, but I cannot read drafts before submission. For grading criteria, see rubric (provided separately). Again, we are looking for **your** ideas.

Paper #1 revision. Your first paper will undergo a revision process and be resubmitted for a final grade. This process will help you understand what is required for the second and final papers. You will "swap"

papers with a peer in your recitation section and use a rubric to provide constructive criticism for a second draft. Further information will be provided on how to complete this revision.

Course text. *In the Land of Invented Languages* or ItLoIL for short. We will skip around in this book a bit, but it's much more fun to read it straight through. It's up to you. Any online quizzes pertaining to information in the book will refer specifically to what's contained in the book, so googling answers may lead you astray.

Attendance/participation. You can miss two recitation sessions with no penalty. This includes absences for any reason, including illness, participation in sports, or a marathon of *The Office*. The one exception is absences for religious observations, which are never included in the absences tally (but make sure you contact me ahead of time about these absences). You do NOT need to show documentation or explain your absence. Please save these absences and plan ahead, because once you run out, you will lose 10% of the attendance grade per absence. (If you must miss more than two recitations for illness, academic reasons, or other unavoidable issues, contact your TA.) Arriving to class late and/or leaving early will count as an absence or half attendance at the discretion of the instructor.

Late Work. To receive credit, all work, including online work, must be submitted by the appointed deadline unless an extension has been arranged at least 24 hours beforehand. In some cases I will accept late work, at a penalty of 10% (one letter grade) per day. A waiver of the grade penalty will only be considered for students who have documentary evidence of an "excused" absence.

Grades

- 5% Paper #1 draft: Due 2/8, 10 pm (week 5)
- 10% Paper #1 revision: Due 2/15 (week 6)
- 10% paper #2: Due 3/21, 10 pm (week 10)
- 10% paper #3: Due 4/22, 10 pm (week 15)
- 50% Online activities (all averaged, lowest grade dropped)
- 15% Attendance/participation

93% or above	4.0	Student met all requirements for the course, performed exceptionally , and exceeded expectations .
88% to 92%	3.5	Student met all requirements for the course and performed very well .
82% - 87%	3.0	Student met most requirements for the course and performed reasonably well .
76% - 81%	2.5	Student met some requirements for the course and performed adequately .
70% - 75%	2.0	Student met only a few requirements for the course and performed at a less than satisfactory level.
65% - 69%	1.5	Student did not meet requirements for the course and performed at an unsatisfactory level.
60% - 64%	1.0	Student did not meet requirements for the course and performed poorly .
Below 60%	0.0	Student failed the course

Course schedule. (Changes may occur.)

Note: All readings and assignments for each week, including online work such as quizzes, must be completed by 10pm on Thursday. Do not plan on completing all the tasks later; they will not count. Plan ahead. You will often be able to work ahead if you choose.

Part I. The nature of language

Week 1: 1/8-1/12: Introduction.

To read/view: Course syllabus.
Intro video (Watch me first!)
Week 1 introduction video

Part 1 Online: None this week

Part 2 Online: None this week

Week 2. 1/16-1/19. Meaning in language

To read/view: Language File 1.3 *Arbitrariness in language*
Chapters 1-7 *ItLoL*. + pages 184-188
Article: *Why 'Mom' and 'Dad' Sound So Similar in So Many Languages*

Part 1 Online: Quiz on File 1.3
Quiz on article *Why Mom and Dad Sound So Similar*
Discussion board: Chapters 1-7 *ItLoL* + pages 184-188

Part 2 Online: Meaning in language: How does language convey meaning?
Week 2 activities

Week 3: 1/22-1/26: Human and animal language

To read/view: Alex the talking bird. *NYTimes*, Oct 9, 1999.
Animal language: *Animals Like Us*. 2004. St Thomas Productions, Marseille, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur: St Thomas Productions, 2004), 52 mins.
Article: Did Kindness Prime Our Species for Language? Michael Erard, Catherine Maticic. *Science* 3 Aug 2018.

Part 1 Online. Quiz on *NYTimes* article
Quiz on *Science* article
Discussion board: *Animals Like Us* video.

Part 2 Online: What is the difference between animal and human language?
Week 3 activities

Week 4: 1/29-2/2: Written language

To read/view: How Spelling Keeps Kids from Learning. Mike Segar. 2/9/15. *The Atlantic*.
Chapter 15 *ItLoLL*. Those queer and mysterious Chinese characters.
When Chinese Children Forget How to Write. C. Hatton. 8/27/14. BBC News.

Part 1 Online: Discussion board: Atlantic spelling article
Quiz: Chapter 15 *ItLoLL*.
Quiz: BBC News article.

Part 2 Online: Writing systems. Spoken versus written language.
Week 4 activities

Week 5: 2/5-2/9. Structure of language. *Paper 1 draft due Thursday 10pm*

To read/view: The world's most efficient languages. 6/29/16. J. McWhorter, *The Atlantic*.
ItLoLL p. 266-270 (description of Klingon)

Part 1 Online Quiz: The world's most efficient languages.

Part 2 Online: What is grammar?
Week 5 activities

Week 6. 2/12-2/16: Learning language. *Paper 1 final draft due Thursday 10pm*

To read/view: Do language learning apps really work? MSU profile page, August 2019.
McWhorter: Will Translation App Make Learning Foreign Languages Obsolete?
NYTimes July 25, 2023.

Chapter 13 *ItLoLL*.

Part 1 Online: Quiz: Chapter 13 *ItLoLL*.
Quiz: Translation apps
Discussion board and Duolingo experiment.

Part 2 Online: How are languages learned?
Week 6 activities

Part II. Language and Culture

Week 7: 2/19-2/23. Varieties of language.

To read/view: Film: Do You Speak American? Up North. MacNeil/Lehrer Productions 2005.
What's a Language Anyway? J. McWhorter, 1/19/16. *The Atlantic*.
Why Does Written Language Have to Be So Particular? McWhorter. *NYTimes*
April 6, 2023

Harvard Dialect Survey.

Part 1 Online: Harvard Dialect Survey: click around and see some of the results.
Quiz: What's a language, anyway?
Quiz: Why does written language have to be so particular?
Discussion board: Do you speak American?

Part 2 Online: Varieties of English, language versus dialect.
Week 7 activities

Week 8: 3/4-3/8. "Correct" and "incorrect" language

To read/view: Language is Alive. Ch. 2 in *A World Without Whom*, E. Favilla, 2017
Could Black English mean a prison sentence? J. McWhorter, *The Atlantic* 1/19/19
Sometimes Proper Speech isn't correct speech. J. McWhorter, *NYTimes* 6/17/22

Part 1 Online: Quiz: Language is alive.
Quiz: Could BE mean a prison sentence?
Quiz: Proper speech.
Discussion board: the use of 'like'

Part 2 Online: How do we decide what language is correct?
Week 8 activities

Week 9: 3/11-3/15: Gender-inclusive language.

To read/view: Opinion column on 'they'. J. McWhorter, *NYTimes* 11/29/23.
Call Them What They Wants. J. McWhorter, *The Atlantic*, 9/4/18
Washington Post, 2019. Gender in languages.

Part 1 Online: Quiz: McWhorter on 'they'.
Quiz: Call Them What They Wants.
Discussion board: Washington Post 2019 article.

Part 2 Online: Should the language we use be inclusive?
Week 9 activities

Week 10. 3/18-3/22: Language and identity. *Paper 2 due Thursday 10pm*

To read/view: Chapters 8-12 *ItLoLL*.
Language and identity comic. Mayya Agapova. *Washington Post* 8/4/2019

Part 1 Online: Quiz: Chapters 8-12 *ItLoLL*.
Discussion board: Language and identity.

Part 2 Online: How do different languages make us feel about ourselves?
Week 10 activities

Part III: Language and the mind

Week 11: 3/25-3/29. Language and thought part 1.

To read/view: Chapters 18-22 ItLoLL
Arrival or “The Story of Your Life”
Language and Thought. Bernard Comrie, n.d. Linguisticsociety.org/resource

Part 1 Online: Quiz: Chapters 18-22
Discussion board: *Arrival* or “The Story of Your Life”

Part 2 Online: How does language influence thought?
Week 12 activities

Week 12: 4/1-4/5. Language and thought part 2.

To read/view: The grammar of happiness. Green Planet films. 2015.
Language Files 7.5: Color terms.

Part 1 Online: Quiz: Language files: Color terms.
Discussion board: The grammar of happiness.

Part 2 Online: How does language influence thought (part 2)?
Week 13 activities

Week 13: 4/8-4/12. Invented languages

To read/view: Chapters 23-26 ItLoLL.
David Peterson on Dothraki. TED talk 2013.

Part 1 Online: Quiz: Chapters 23-26 ItLoLL.

Part 2 Online: Why do people invent languages? Why do they nearly always fail?
Week 14 activities

Week 14: 4/15-4/19. Language and psychology.

To read/view: 3 short counseling videos. See d2l.

Part 1 Online: Discussion board: language and psychology

Part 2 Online: Visit from Jon Ritz: “linguaging” in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
Week 14 activities

Final Paper due: 4/22 (Monday) 10:00pm in online dropbox