

PL353: Language and Power

Seminar Leader: Dr. Gilad Nir

Email: g.nir@berlin.bard.edu

Office Hours: Tuesday 11:00 or by appointment

Course Description

Language is a means of communication and a vehicle of mutual understanding. Yet the use of language also involves an exercise of power, and language is a central battleground in the struggle for social justice and representation. Our aim in this seminar is to develop an understanding of the variety of mechanisms that are at work in language and which enable it to convey, reinforce and alter the power relations that shape our lives. The seminar will lead up to the discussion of these political and ethical issues by first inquiring into two sets of preliminary questions.

First, we will ask how language fits into the natural-historical and social dimensions of human life. How is human language different from animal communication? Which aspects of language are innate, and which aspects must be acquired? How does language affect cognition? Do differences between languages entail differences between their speakers' ways of thinking? Are all languages mutually translatable? Or must something get lost in translation?

Second, we will attempt to isolate the purely descriptive functions of language. How do words reach out to the world, and enable us to make claims about it, which can then count as true or as false? Does the structure of language reflect the structure of the world? What difference does the use of synonyms and metaphors make to the meaning of a descriptive claim? Are there limits to what can be meaningfully said?

Finally, turning to the pragmatic and performative dimensions of language use, we will consider the idea of free speech and the various ways in which speech may be repressed and silenced. We will analyze the phenomena of insinuation, implicature, and dog whistles; distinguish between hermeneutic and testimonial injustice; and ask how ideology is perpetuated by means of generalizations, slurs and hate speech.

Readings include texts by Frege, Russell, Austin, Grice, Chomsky, Pinker, Hurford, Tomasello, Whorff, Wierzbicka, Fricker, Stanley, Haslanger, Tirell, Langton, Saul, Leslie, Cappellen and Dever, Anderson and Lepore, Baldwin and Derrida.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week

courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Absences beyond that may be excused as long as the student communicates with the instructor and submits proper documentation.

Each unexcused absence will incur a penalty, equal roughly to 2% of the final course grade.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assessment

Assignments

1. **Reading log**, 100-150 words in length, submitted online, due before each class. Students may skip up to four responses during the semester. Responses will consist of reflections and questions concerning the assigned readings.
2. **Midterm paper**, 1000 words, due by October 25, 2025.
3. **Final paper**, 3000 words, due by December 18, 2025 (Graduating students: December 8).

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Final paper, 40% of the final grade.

Midterm paper, 15% of the final grade.

Weekly responses, 15% of the final grade.

Participation: 30% of the final grade, broken down into 15% for weeks 1-7 and 15% for weeks 8-14.

Readings

All readings will be made available in a course reader or on Classroom.

It is recommended that you purchase the following books:

J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*

Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever, *Bad Language*

Schedule

Week 1: The Nature of Language

- a) Chomsky - *Knowledge of Language* (Excerpt)
- b) Hurford "Animal Syntax?" (Ch 1 of *The Origins of Grammar*, 2012)

Week 2: Innate or Acquired?

- a) Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, chapter 2
- b) Tomasello "The Social Bases of Language Acquisition"

Optional reading:

Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch (2022) "The Faculty of Language: What Is It, Who Has It, and How Did It Evolve?"

Pinker and Jackendorf - "The faculty of language: what's special about it?"

Week 3: Language and Cognition: Linguistic Relativity?

- a) Whorf, The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language
- b) Deutscher, "Does Language Shape How You Think?"

Optional reading:

Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, chapter 3

Week 4: Language and Cognition: Linguistic Relativity?

- a) Anna Wierzbicka – “Different Cultures, Different Languages, Different Speech acts”
- b) Maria Reines and Jesse Prinz (2009) “Reviving Whorf: the return of Linguistic Relativity”

Optional reading:

Phillip Wolff and Kevin Holmes (2011) “Linguistic Relativity”
Peter Carruthers (2012) “Language in Cognition”

Week 5: Semantics, Truth and Meaning (1)

- a) G. Frege, “On Sense and Reference”, excerpts from “The Thought”

*** Friday, Oct 3 is a Federal holiday ***

Week 6: Semantics, Truth and Meaning (2)

- a) Frege, continued.
- b) B. Russell “Descriptions”
- c) B. Russell, excerpt from “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description”

Optional reading:

P. F. Strawson, “On Referring,”
B. Russell, “Mr. Strawson on Referring”

Week 7: Semantics, Truth and Meaning (3)

- a) Russell, continued.
- b) Keith Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Descriptions”
- c) H. Putnam – “Meaning and Reference”

*** Fall Break ***

*** Midterm paper due by October 25, 2025 ***

Week 8: Pragmatics (1)

- a) P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation"
- b) J.L. Austin: "Performative Utterances"

Optional reading:

Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever (2019) *Bad Language*, Chapter 2

Week 9: Pragmatics (2)

- a) Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (selections)

Optional reading:

John Searle, "The Structure of Illocutionary Acts" (pp. 146-156)

Week 10: The use and abuse of language (1): Speaking and Silencing

- a) Rae Langton, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts"
- b) Fricker, "Hermeneutical Injustice"

Optional reading:

N.P. Adams (2020) "Authority, Illocutionary Accommodation, and Social Accommodation"

Week 11: The use and abuse of language (2): Hate Speech

- a) L. Tirell, "Genocidal Language Games"
- b) Rae Langton, "The Authority of Hate Speech" (2017)

Week 12: The use and abuse of language (3): Ideology and Generics

- a) Haslanger, "Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground"

Optional reading:

J. Saul, "Are generics especially pernicious?"

Sarah-Jane Leslie (2017) "The Original Sin of Cognition: Fear, Prejudice, and Generalization"

Week 13: The use and abuse of language (4): Slurs

a) Anderson and Lepore (2013): Slurring Words

Optional reading:

Cappelen and Dever (2019) *Bad Language*, chapter 8

Week 14: Language, discrimination, and the Other

- a) James Baldwin (1979) "If Black English Isn't a language, then Tell Me, What Is?"
- b) Derrida, *The Monolingualism of the Other* (excerpts)

*** Final paper due by December 18 (Graduating students: December 8) ***