

PHILO 26800: Mind, Language, and Cognition

Hunter College | Spring 2021 | Taught by Daniel Harris (danielwharris@gmail.com)

Course website: danielwharris.com/teaching/268/

Username and password for readings: ‘minds’ and ‘brains’

About the Course

What is it to be an intelligent being who can think and use language? These have been central philosophical questions for millennia. Since the 1950's, they have become the focus of cognitive science, which is an interdisciplinary research program drawing on philosophy, psychology, linguistics, computer science, cognitive neuroscience, anthropology, and other neighboring disciplines. In this course, we'll cover some of the most exciting ideas to come out of this research program, with a special focus on the human capacity for language.

Online, Synchronous/Asynchronous Hybrid

This is a fully online course: we won't have any in-person meetings. It will include a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous activities. The synchronous component will be a weekly zoom meeting in which we discuss the readings. The asynchronous components will include brief recorded lectures, readings, a critical-feedback assignment on each week's required reading(s), and three more substantial writing assignments.

Website and Readings

All of the recorded lectures, required readings, and assignments will be posted on the course website:

<http://danielwharris.com/teaching/268/>

To access some of the readings, you may need to use the following username and password:

username: minds

password: brains

The only book that we will read a lot of is Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (1994, William Morrow; reissued in 2007 by Harper), and if you prefer to read a physical copy, you may want to buy that. It is widely and inexpensively available both used and new. For example, you can currently buy a used copy [on Amazon](#) for about \$1 plus shipping, or a new copy for \$11.50.

Zoom Meetings

We will meet to discuss the required readings and your critical feedback on Tuesdays, 11:10–12:25 (which is one of our assigned class times). This zoom link will work for every session:

<https://uso2web.zoom.us/j/6020697760>

You are expected to attend every zoom meeting prepared to discuss that week's required reading, as well as your critical feedback on it. Your participation should be with your video and audio turned on unless you have talked to me beforehand and gotten explicit permission to participate in a different way.

Our Slack Workplace

Slack is a tool that is commonly used by teams in workplaces to communicate. We will use it as a place where you can post and comment on each other's assignments, have asynchronous discussions, and exchange direct messages with me and with other students. In general, I would prefer to be contacted with questions about the class via slack rather than email.

I have created a Slack workplace for the class. To get to it, you can open slack and join the room philosophy268-xqn5059.slack.com. You can also click [this link](#) to be taken there. Slack can be used in a web browser without downloading an app, but I highly recommend that you [download the Slack app](#) to your phone and/or computer, add the workspace, and turn on notifications so that you will get notified if I or someone else sends you a message or replies to one of your posts. (It's free!)

Grade Breakdown

Weekly Critical-Feedback Assignments: 40% (4% each)

Participation (both on zoom and on slack): 10%

Three writing assignments: 50% (10%, 15%, and 25% respectively)

Reading Requirements

The course is divided into 14 weeks. Each unit focuses on one or two required readings. I expect everyone to read these texts carefully and critically before completing the weekly critical-feedback assignments, and in order to pre-

pare for our zoom sessions. When I say that you should read the assignments critically, I mean that you should ideally take your time, and frequently stop to ask yourself whether you understand and find convincing what you're reading.

Critical-Feedback Assignments

Each week (except writing-assignment weeks), you will be expected to submit a critical-feedback assignment by 11:59pm on Monday night (the night before our Tuesday zoom session). You will submit it via Slack, in the appropriate channel for that week. For example, in Week 2, you will post it in the #week2 channel in our Slack workspace.

Your critical feedback should take the form of a paragraph or two in which you engage critically with the required reading. This could mean several things: you could pose a detailed question about something that confused you or that you found intellectually unsatisfying in the reading. You could raise an objection to something that you read. Or you could find and link to a piece of research that undermines or adds a further source of support to something in the reading, and explain what you take to be the connection. In general, I will evaluate these assignments by looking for evidence that you have carefully read and thought about the required readings, including what is confusing or unconvincing about them.

If you have submitted a critical-feedback assignment on time and it meets the required standards, I will mark it with a checkbox (✓) to indicate that you have completed the assignment and received full points. (If your assignment is below the standard to receive credit, I will let you know why privately.) I will sometimes respond with written comments, but the main venue in which you should seek responses to your critical feedback is during our zoom session.

Part of the purpose of the critical-feedback assignments is to encourage you to read in a critical way, frequently stopping to ask yourself whether you understand and are convinced by what you are reading, and to articulate whatever skepticism and criticisms you might have of it. It would be a good idea to take notes as you go. A second purpose of the assignment is to encourage you to show up to our zoom meeting prepared to raise questions about and criticisms of the reading. You should raise them on zoom, and if you don't do that on your own, I may call on you to do so.

There will be 11 of these assignments in total. Each one is worth 4% of your overall grade in the course. However, I will drop your lowest grade (so you can miss or fail one). In total they will make up 40% of your grade in the course.

Participation Grade

Your participation grade is 10% of your final grade. This will be based primarily on your participation in zoom meetings, but you can also help your participation grade by responding in constructive ways to others' critical feedback assignments, and by participating in general discussion of course content on Slack. In general, I will evaluate your contributions on the

basis of whether they seem aimed at deepening either your or other students' understanding of the ideas and issues that we study in the class.

Writing Assignments

Three weeks of the course will be devoted to writing assignments. The purpose of these assignments is to show you how to do research and apply it in order to critically evaluate something that we've read. The writing assignments will become more demanding as we go. For the first, worth 10% of your course grade, I will give you some articles to choose from, and you will choose one and write a short paper about how the article affects how we should interpret one of the readings from a previous week. For the second assignment, which is worth 15%, you will do the same as the first assignment, but you will also have to find your own article (I will teach you some skills for doing this). For the final assignment, which is worth 25%, you will do the same thing again, but this time you will have to do more extensive research and integrate a number of sources.

Blackboard?

We won't be using blackboard for this course.

How to contact me

Our main ways of communicating with each other will be the course website and Slack (both explained above). But there are several other options as well. You can email me at the address at the top of this page. You can also arrange (via Slack or email) to have a private videoconference with me. I will have time after class on Tuesdays, but I will often have time on other days, so please don't be afraid to ask.

It is important that you can regularly receive emails from me. When I email you, I will use whichever email address is listed for you in CUNYfirst. So it is very important that the email listed there is one that you regularly check. If you would like to change the email listed for you in CUNYfirst, it is easy to do so. Just click this link and follow the steps described there:

http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/cunyfirst/repository/files/CUNYfirst_Email_Address.pdf

This is your responsibility. If you are late with an assignment because an email from me went to the wrong address, you will not receive credit for the assignment.

Stay connected!

Since this is a fully online course, there is considerable risk that some students will fail because they fall out of the routine of participating in the course. Knowing this can help you to avoid a bad outcome. The most important thing for you to

do is to get into a weekly routine of doing the readings and assignments, and to make sure that you don't skip any. If you are having trouble doing this, or if you miss a week for any reason, please reach out to me to let me know what's going on. I will do my best to help you get caught up. I really don't want to lose track of anyone!

Late Assignment Policy

Assignments will lose 10% of their value for every day that they are late.

Tentative Schedule & Readings

Note: this schedule is subject to change. Always check the course website to see what is required in a given week.

Week 0 (29 January)

Introduction

No readings yet.

(Watch the introduction video, read the syllabus, log into slack and get familiar, begin preparing for next week.)

Week 1 (1–5 February)

Universal Grammar

Steven Pinker: *The Language Instinct*, Chs.1–2\

Week 2 (8–12 February)

Alternatives to Universal Grammar

Michael Tomasello: Language is not an instinct

Cecilia Hayes: "Language" (chapter 8 of *Cognitive Gadgets*)

Week 3 (15–19 February)

Innateness

Elizabeth Spelke: Core Knowledge

Justin Garson: Nature and Nurture

Week 4 (22–26 February)

Language and Thought

Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, Ch.3

Week 5 (1–5 March)

First Writing Assignment

This week, you will do your first writing assignment. I will give you a choice of articles to read and write about in connection to Pinker's Chapter 3. Detailed instructions will be posted.

Week 6 (8–12 March)

Syntax

Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, ch.4

Week 7 (15–19 March)

The mental dictionary

Pinker: *The Language Instinct*, ch.5 (excerpt)

Paul Bloom: How Children Learn the Meanings of Words (excerpt)

Week 8 (22–26 March)

Sentence Processing

Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, ch.7

Week 9 (5–9 April)

Language Acquisition

Pinker: *The Language Instinct*, ch.9

Week 10 (12–16 April)

Second Writing Assignment

This week, you will again write a short paper assessing some work that bears on one of the things we read in weeks 6–10. But this time, you will be responsible for doing research to find your own sources. Instructions on how to do this will be posted.

Week 11 (19–23 April)

Is language unique to humans?

Pinker: *The Language Instinct*, ch.11

Harris: What makes human communication special?

Week 12 (26–30 April)

Descriptive and Prescriptive Grammar

Pinker: *The Language Instinct*, Ch.12

Week 13 (3–7 May)

Cognitive Architecture

Pinker: *The Language Instinct*, Ch.13

Week 14 (10–14 May)

Third Writing Assignment

This week, you will write a longer (5 page) paper assessing some work that bears on one of the things that we studied in the course. This time, you will do your own research and incorporate at least three relevant primary sources into the paper. There will be an outline of the paper due in week 14 (5% of your course grade), followed by the full paper a week later (20% of your course grade). Instead of a regular

Academic Dishonesty

Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The College is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedures.

ADA Statement

In compliance with the ADA and with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Hunter College is committed to ensuring educational access and accommodations for all its registered students. Hunter College's students with disabilities and medical conditions are encouraged to register with the Office of AccessABILITY for assistance and accommodation. For information and appointment contact the Office of AccessABILITY located in Room E1214 or call (212) 772-4857 /or VRS (646) 755-3129.

Policy on Sexual Misconduct

In compliance with the CUNY Policy on Sexual Misconduct, Hunter College reaffirms the prohibition of any sexual misconduct, which includes sexual violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based harassment retaliation against students, employees, or visitors, as well as certain intimate relationships. Students who have experienced any form of sexual violence on or off campus (including CUNY-sponsored trips and events) are entitled to the rights outlined in the Bill of Rights for Hunter College.

Sexual Violence: Students are strongly encouraged to immediately report the incident by calling 911, contacting NYPD Special Victims Division Hotline (646-610-7272) or their local police precinct, or contacting the College's Public Safety Office (212-772-4444).

All Other Forms of Sexual Misconduct: Students are also encouraged to contact the College's Title IX Campus Coordinator, Dean John Rose (jtrose@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-650-3262) or Colleen Barry (colleen.barry@hunter.cuny.edu or 212-772-4534) and seek complimentary services through the Counseling and Wellness Services Office, Hunter East 1123.

CUNY Policy on Sexual Misconduct Link: <http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/la/Policy-on-Sexual-Misconduct-12-1-14-with-links.pdf>