

LING315: Languages of the World

Winter 2025
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:05–2:25
ADAMS 211

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1 Course content

Overview

This course is a hands-on exploration of language typology. Each student will work with a different endangered language to help us, as a class, answer typological questions across various domains of language (sounds, words, sentences, etc.). Along what lines do languages vary? How much can languages differ from each other? Are any linguistic properties shared across all human languages, and if so, how do we explain them? How do “new” languages fit into this picture, and what’s the big deal about Pirahã? In answering these questions, we will build and engage with various models and theories of language variation.

Class Time

We will have two 90 minute classes per week, divided among the following three types:

- **Lecture:** Introduction of new concepts and material, review of basic linguistic concepts.
- **Workshop:** In-class work on your endangered languages, at various times individually, in small groups, and with the whole class.
- **Discussion:** Critical thinking and conversation about course material

Course Goals

- ⇒ To give you a big-picture appreciation of linguistic diversity and an intuitive understanding of what varies across languages, and what is universal.
- ⇒ To teach you how to approach the grammar of a language you’ve never heard of before, and start cracking the code.
- ⇒ To introduce you to some of the major research questions of linguistic work over the past sixty years, as well as the results of investigations into these questions, brought to light by studying under-documented languages.
- ⇒ To enable you to critically engage in current debates about language universals (or the lack thereof) that have made their way into pop culture—including an understanding of deep vs. surface universals.

- ⇒ To explore the ways in which surface complexity and variation in language arises from much simpler underlying properties.
- ⇒ To entice you to learn more about language and linguistics, whether through more courses at McGill, language blogs, or casual observations and day-to-day awareness.

2 Materials

Readings

You are not required to purchase any books for this course; all readings will be posted on MyCourses.

Your grammar

Throughout this course, you will work closely with a (written) grammar of a language of your choice. This will enable you to immediately apply the course material to a real language, and will allow us as a class to explore language (non-)variation within our own unique sample of languages.

Many grammars of endangered languages are available in digital format through the McGill Library. You are also welcome to pick up a hard copy of a grammar from the stacks. No two students can work on the same grammar.

Course website

Readings, lecture notes/slides, assignments, and general announcements will be posted on MyCourses—you are encouraged to visit the site frequently.

3 Assessment

MyCourses reports (total):	55%
Brainstorm (2×2%)	4%
Workshop prep (5×4%)	20%
Grammar work (5×5%)	25%
Reflection (2×3%)	6%
Final project (total):	35%
Final project proposal	5%
Final project presentation	5%
Final project submission	25%
Participation:	10%

MyCourses reports

Throughout the semester, you will complete a series of assignments via MyCourses. These will involve:

- thinking critically about course material (listed on the syllabus as ‘brainstorm’ or ‘reflection’)
- preparing for in-class language work (‘workshop prep’)
- writing short language reports (‘grammar work’)

All assignments will be due by 11:59pm on the date indicated, unless otherwise specified.

Final project

Your final project will relate to your language and integrate some of the ideas and concepts that you learned about in this course. This can deal with *any* aspect of your language—something you discovered in class, a topic that we discussed, or something that you found out about your language and the people who speak it that we didn't get to talk about. This may relate to the grammar of your language, but in that case it must go beyond the material already covered in class. (For example, you might choose one aspect of the grammar and investigate it in depth.)

Your project can be a paper, or it can be in an alternative format or medium—a podcast episode, a cartoon, a comic, a short movie, etc.—so long as it engages substantively with your language and with the course content.

If you choose, you may work on your final project *in pairs*. In that case, both your languages must be represented, and there must be an obvious reason why you chose to unite them into one project.

Start thinking about the topic of your paper early. You will need to submit a proposal by March 11. (There is no midterm, so I expect this proposal to be fully worked out.) Near the end of the term, you will give a brief in-class presentation (5–10 mins) on your project. Your finished project will be due by the end of the final exam period.

Participation

Active participation is crucial for the success of this class, especially on Workshop days. If you are not attending due to an excused absence, but you have completed your Workshop prep, please share it with the students in your group. That way your language can still be discussed.

Participation will be evaluated based on the following rubric:

	Outstanding (10 pts)	Meets expectations (5 pts)	Below expectations (0 pts)
Attendance	Almost always on time	Usually on time (50%–75% of the time)	Often late or absent (more than 50% of the time)
Preparedness	Almost always prepared with assignments/readings	Usually prepared with assignments/readings (50%–75% of the time)	Often not prepared with assignments/readings (over 50% of the time)
Engagement	Proactively contributes to class by offering ideas/asking questions (at least once per class)	Sometimes contributes to class by offering ideas/asking questions	Rarely contributes to class, and only when directly prompted by others

Lateness policy

Due to the time-sensitive nature of the MyCourses assignments, late submissions will not be accepted and will receive a zero. Academic considerations for assessments that are missed or late for valid reasons will be provided at the instructor's discretion. As per Quebec guidelines, medical notes are not required for absences of less than 5 days. If you add the course late, please email me to arrange an extension on the first brainstorm assignments.

4 Communication

Email

You can expect the instructor to respond to your e-mail questions and comments. However, please do not expect instant replies. I will try to respond within two working days (though I will be more vigilant close to due dates).

Office hours

The instructor is available for in-person office hours at the fixed times stated above. For appointments at other times and/or over Zoom, please reach out by email.

5 Other course policies

Land and people acknowledgement

McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous people whose footsteps have marked this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.

Academic integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offenses under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures (see <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity> for more information).

Right to submit in French

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Course materials and copyright

© Instructor generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions, etc.) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

General respect

Classroom dynamics affect all of us. While discussions and conflicting opinions are welcome, personal attacks, disrespectful comments, or sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, or other discriminatory remarks are not tolerated. Since disruptive behaviors are not always explicit and immediately apparent, everyone is encouraged to think critically and self-reflexively about listening and communication strategies and to take responsibility for group dynamics, in order to create an environment conducive to respectful dialogue.

Electronics

Electronic devices may be used for taking notes and accessing information directly related to class content. Out of respect for the group, electronic devices should not be used for any other purpose.

Use of generative AI

The written work you submit in this class should represent your own research, thinking, and writing. Using AI tools to produce written work limits your learning as a student and misrepresents the skills and achievements that are being assessed in this course. While you may use AI to check your grammar, you may not use it to create prose.

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Extraordinary circumstances

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the control of McGill University, assessment tasks in a course are subject to change, provided students are sent adequate and timely communications regarding the change.

6 Getting additional help

Tutors

If you need more individual attention than the instructor is able to provide, I encourage you to contact either the Student Tutorial Service (<https://www.mcgill.ca/tutoring/>) or Lingua (the society of Linguistics undergraduates at McGill; slum.linguistics@mail.mcgill.ca). Of course, it is understood that tutors help with the content of the course but do not help directly with assignments. Make sure that your tutor is knowledgeable about the course content, which can change from term to term.

Inclusiveness

As instructor of this course, I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Student Accessibility and Achievement, (514) 398-6009.

Schedule

(subject to possible revision; optional readings in *italics*)

WEEK 1		
1/7	Introduction	BRAINSTORM 1 (DUE 1/8)
1/9	What is language?	BRAINSTORM 2 (DUE 1/13) FR&H, ch. 1
WEEK 2		
1/14	Typology & diversity	PICK A GRAMMAR (BY 1/16) Whaley, ch. 1 Dialect vs. Language
1/16	Overview: speech sounds	GRAMMAR WORK 1 (DUE 1/17) FR&H chs. 6–7; Maddieson
WEEK 3		
1/21	☆ Workshop: consonants	WORKSHOP PREP 1 (DUE 1/20)
1/23	☆ Workshop: vowels	
WEEK 4		
1/28	Summary: sound systems	GRAMMAR WORK 2 (DUE 1/27) Hyman (2008)
1/30	Ingredients of words	Whaley, chs. 7–8
WEEK 5		
2/4	☆ Workshop: affixation	WORKSHOP PREP 2 (DUE 2/3) Language Files 4.3
2/6	☆ Workshop: morphological processes	
WEEK 6		
2/11	Summary: morphology	GRAMMAR WORK 3 (DUE 2/10)
2/13	Ingredients of phrases & sentences	Whaley, chs. 5, 9
WEEK 7		
2/18	☆ Workshop: word order	WORKSHOP PREP 3 (DUE 2/17)
2/20	☆ Workshop: case & agreement	WORKSHOP PREP 4 (DUE 2/19)
WEEK 8		
2/25	Summary: syntax	GRAMMAR WORK 4 (DUE 2/24) Atoms of Language, chs. 1–2
2/27	Language families	Proto-languages
READING WEEK		
WEEK 9		
3/11	Form & force	WORKSHOP PREP 5 (DUE 3/12) Whaley, ch. 14; Sadock & Zwicky (1985)
3/13	☆ Workshop: clause types	PROJECT PROPOSAL (DUE 3/14) König & Siemund (2010)
WEEK 10		
3/18	Understudied languages	GRAMMAR WORK 5 (DUE 3/17) Chung (2008) or Blevins (2007) or Cable (2011)
3/20	Language endangerment	Harrison (2007); Leonard (2017) <i>We Still Live Here</i>
WEEK 11		
3/25	Theories of language (in)variance	REFLECTION 1 (DUE 3/24) Evans & Levinson (2009)
3/27	Case study 1: Warlpiri	Baker (2001)
WEEK 12		
4/1	Case study 2: Pirahã	Everett (2005); Harbour (2012); Nevins et al. (2009)
4/3	“New” languages & universals	REFLECTION 2 (DUE 4/4) Cecchetto (2016) or Daval-Markussen & Bakker (2017)
WEEK 13		
4/8	Student presentations	
4/10	Student presentations	
FINAL EXAM PERIOD		
4/25	FINAL PROJECT DUE BY 5:00 PM	

References

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- Baker, Mark C. 2002. *The atoms of language: The mind's hidden rules of grammar*. Basic Books.
- Bergmann, Anouschka, Kathleen Currie Hall, and Sharon Miriam Ross, eds. 2007. *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 10th edition edition.
- Blevins, Juliette. 2007. Endangered sound patterns: three perspectives on theory and description. *Language Documentation and Conservation* 1.
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- Chung, Sandra. 2008. How much can understudied languages really tell us about how language works? Invited plenary lecture at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America.
- Cox, Patrick, and Nina Porzucki. 2017. Dialect versus language – what’s the big deal? The World in Words (podcast). URL <https://theworld.org/stories/2017/06/21/when-orange-becomes-red>.
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