Chomsky is known primarily for his work in politics (his libertarian socialism and advocacy of policies and principles that move towards this political vision) and linguistics (his science of Universal Grammar, a theory of what the mind gives humans that enables them to think and speak). One issue we will try to speak to in this class is whether – and if so, how – his political work integrates with his science of language. I will suggest that his philosophical work – and especially those aspects of it that provide a broad outline of his view of the nature of the human mind – offers ways to integrate his linguistic and political views.

In his philosophical-scientific work Chomsky offers a biologically based version of the human mind and – more broadly – of what makes us humans the distinctive creatures we are. His view lies in a rationalist and romantic tradition that Chomsky identifies with (among others) Descartes, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Ralph Cudworth. This rationalist tradition contrasts with an empiricist one that Chomsky associates with John Locke, the psychologist B.F. Skinner, and most contemporary philosophers (e.g., Putnam, Foucault), psychologists, and cognitive scientists. The science of language supports the principles of the rationalist-romantic view of humans, and – I will argue – that view in turn offers key insights into the moral and political questions of how best to live one's life.

We’ll begin with Chomsky's challenging *Cartesian Linguistics*, which offers a historically based outline of his approach to language, mind, and the ways we use language to understand ourselves and our world. Underlying his approach, we will find out, is a set of simple observations concerning human creativity ("the creative aspect of language use") and human learning (the "poverty of stimulus" facts); these observations are one focus of *Cartesian Linguistics*, and they show why Chomsky holds many of the views that he does. Discussing these observations will also launch us into a discussion of the differences between common sense and scientific understanding. These differences are reflected in a contrast between the social sciences, such as sociology and economics, and the naturalistic, such as molecular chemistry and linguistics.

*Cartesian Linguistics* also provides an early version of Chomsky’s linguistic work. That work has undergone several significant changes; we will see a more contemporary version when we read *Language and Problems of Knowledge* and some parts of *Perspectives on Power*. We will focus not on any of the details, but on the assumptions and presuppositions of Chomsky’s biological approach to language. The midterm will focus on this issue; you will be provided the questions before the exam so you can prepare answers.
The integration of linguistics with biology is important for those who want to explore the connections between Chomsky’s work in linguistics and that in philosophy and politics: it points to a way to provide a naturalistic, scientific foundation for a conception of a moral and political ideal for human society. Specifically, it indicates how human biology supports Chomsky’s view of an ideal form of social organization. Among the many political issues that Chomsky takes up, we will discuss the character of political ideals, the nature of democracy, the role of the intellectual, the function of media, and economic-military imperialism.

A little over a third of the course will focus on Chomsky's view of mind and human nature, considerably less than a third on what he takes a science of language (linguistics) to be, and the remainder on his political views and their justification. The first two topics are closely related to each other, and are discussed together. The understanding of linguistics you will get from this course will be limited to the issues relevant to understanding why Chomsky thinks linguistics is a natural science. That is needed to understand how what Chomsky has to say about language bears on his view of human mind and human nature.

Books and other reading materials:

*Cartesian Linguistics* (third edition, ed. McGilvray; Cambridge)
*Power and Prospects* (1996: South End; possibly Fernwood in Canada)
*Hopes and Prospects* (2010 Haymarket)

Course pack

Requirements: 1) Two short papers (max 5 pp.) on assigned topics; 35% each. One paper will be on Chomsky’s view of mind and human nature, the other on his politics.

2) Midterm (in-class examination on Chomsky’s view of the nature of language; 30%). The questions will be distributed ahead of time and you may prepare answers. At the exam (no notes, no books), the questions to which you must provide answers are chosen by random means.

This class will be – in part – sectioned. During the first two weeks, there will be no discussion groups. Thereafter, discussion groups will – with some exceptions – meet on Thursday of the third week, and after that, Thursday of every other week.

The class reading schedule appears below; it is approximate. A more detailed and exact version will appear on WebCT’s calendar. This is a WebCT course.

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*McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).*

**Week 1**  
**Introduction. The centrality of language; rationalism and empiricism.**  
**The creative aspect of language use.** Read the Chomsky introduction (not necessarily mine) and then the first section of *Cartesian Linguistics* (CL). You will find the notes to be valuable.
Week 2  The nature of language and its study.  Read through CL “Description and Explanation…”
The poverty of the stimulus and the problem of learning.  Read through to the end of CL.

Week 3  Common sense and science; language and human nature.  Read first chapter of Language and Problems of Knowledge (LPK).
Discussion sessions on Thursday

Week 4  Language redefined.  Read second chapter of LPK.
What the mind is.  Read LPK chapter 5.

Week 5  Towards biology.  Read Perspectives on Power (PP), chapter 1.
Film:  Learning the Human Language
Discussion sessions; turn in first paper (electronically to mcpapers@gmail.com)

Week 6  Summary:  language, mind, and human nature; overcoming empiricism.  Read PP, chapter 2.
Language, freedom, and a foundation for political morality.  Read course pack (CP) selections 1, 3, and 2

Week 7  Justice and Justification  Read CP section 4
Midterm

Week 8  Political goals and programs.  Read CP selection 5 and PP “Goals and Visions.”

Week 9  Film:  Manufacturing Consent (first part).
Film:  Manufacturing Consent (second part).

Week 10  Orwell’s Problem and the use of authority.  Read CP selection 6.
The nature of current democracies.  Read PP, “Democracy and Markets…”

Week 11  Israel, Palestine, and the US (part I)  Read PP, “ and Hopes and Prospects (H&P), chs
Discussion session.

Week 12  The US and the Western Hemisphere  Read H&P, chs.
Discussion session

Week 13  Hopes?  Read H&P chs.
Conclusion.  Turn in second set of papers (electronically to above address)