Language as Social Action

ANTH 070:514
Fall 2006

Professor Laura Ahearn
Office: 308 RAB
Phone: 732-932-5298
E-mail: ahearn@rci.rutgers.edu
Office hours: Tues., 11:30 – 12:30, at Au Bon Pain on College Ave.; Thurs., 2:00-3:00 in my office (or by appt.)

Class time: Fri, 12:35-3:35
WebCT website: http://webct.rutgers.edu
Faculty website: http://anthro.rutgers.edu/faculty/ahearn.shtml

“Linguistics without anthropology is sterile; anthropology without linguistics is blind.”
--Charles Hockett (1916 – 2000), Professor of Linguistics and Anthropology, Cornell University

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Linguists often study language as a closed, formal system, relatively autonomous from culture, social relations, and vectors of power. The purpose of this course is to explore a very different framework, one that places language within a social, cultural, and political matrix of relations. **Linguistic anthropologists view language as a form of action through which social relations, cultural forms, ideologies, hierarchies, and identities are constituted.**
EXPECTATIONS

The reading load – I’m warning you right off – will be quite heavy. Please complete at least the required readings, if not the recommended readings, before the class for which they are assigned. Let me know if the reading load seems too heavy, but since this is a graduate seminar, I am assuming you all are willing and able to get through (whether by meticulous word-for-word analysis or quick skimming) copious amounts of material. There will be times when we will split the readings among class members in order to reduce the reading load, and I always list the readings in order of importance so that you can prioritize them accordingly.

The readings are organized around key topics, any one of which could be the subject of a course in itself. Many of the topics have spawned enormous literatures of their own but are represented only minimally in the reading assignments. Other equally interesting and important topics (e.g., translation, metalanguage, semiotics) are virtually absent here because of time constraints. I would be happy, however, to guide you toward supplementary reading materials on topics that interest you.

The backgrounds of the students in this class will be extremely varied, which will present us as a class with both a resource and a challenge. Don’t assume that you don’t belong in the class just because you have never heard of a theorist other students or I mention. By the same token, when you do mention a theorist not assigned for the course, do more than just name-drop; be generous with your knowledge and clarify who the person is, what relevance s/he has for our discussion, etc. In this way, we can all learn from one another.

REQUIREMENTS

(1) Every week you will be required either to post a one- to two-page commentary on the readings or respond to other students’ commentaries before our class meets. The class will be split in half, and each group will alternate writing commentaries and responses. Commentaries should be posted by Thursday at 5:00 p.m. each week, and responses should be posted by 10:00 a.m. on Friday (but ideally even earlier) each week on WebCT’s Discussion Board (http://webct.rutgers.edu). I will be telling you exactly how to do this in class. The benefits of this are multiple. First, you will have read the assignment and will have digested it enough to generate some questions and reactions. Second, you will be able to read and/or respond to your classmates’ commentaries before you come to class each week, thereby jump-starting discussion. Third, you will have your commentaries and responses (and everyone else’s) to look back on as you work on your papers. A good commentary summarizes the main points of the reading, compares and contrasts it to other works the class has read, and then offers the reader’s own assessment, reactions, and questions. These are not formal papers, so feel free to write them in an informal, first-person register. Each of you will find a comfortable “voice” in which to write your commentaries; don’t worry if there is significant variation in tone and content among the commentaries – that’s a good thing!

(2) In pairs, you will facilitate three class discussions. I mean ‘facilitate’ in its most basic sense, ‘to make easy.’ Thus, I expect the facilitators to prepare discussion questions and activities that will engage and instruct the other class participants. I do not expect or desire mini-lectures.

You will also be expected to contribute to discussions in class on a weekly basis. As this is an advanced seminar, a large part of the responsibility for making it work will fall on each of your shoulders. Make sure, therefore, that you come to class having done the reading carefully. This does not mean, however, that you need to understand the readings fully before class starts; I urge you to ask (or start new discussion threads on WebCT’s Discussion Board) about any uncertainties you may have. Also feel free to bring up any relevant readings or observations from outside the class assignments, as long as you explain these fully. Because this class explores language in its social contexts, you all will have plenty of opportunities to enrich the class by observing and commenting upon linguistic interactions in your everyday lives.

I hope we will all work toward creating an atmosphere in which everyone will feel comfortable contributing their thoughts and questions, but if you are the type of person who rarely speaks up during
discussions, please come to see me early on in the term, and we can devise some other way(s) of allowing you to participate, either in writing, or by meeting with me individually.

(3) An exercise in conversation analysis will involve tape recording a naturally occurring conversation (with the permission of the participants, of course), then transcribing a thirty-minute segment of it. The transcript of this exercise is due October 30th. No written analysis of the transcript will be required, but some of you may choose to analyze a larger portion of the conversation for your final paper.

(4) Your final paper will require an extended analysis of a body of linguistic data – your own from previous fieldwork, the conversation recorded for the initial class exercise, or data from another linguistic anthropologist. Further information about the paper will be provided early in the semester. A two-page prospectus for a final paper, along with a bibliography, will be due on November 6th. I urge you all to come in to talk to me about your final papers well before then, however. The earlier you start on the project, the better. A first draft of the final paper will be due November 21st. You will make a fifteen-minute presentation on your topic at a special class session sometime during the week of November 27th, and the final draft will be due in my box by 4:00 p.m. on Friday, December 15th.

Your grade will be determined as follows:

- Conversation transcription: 15%
- Oral presentation of final paper topic: 20%
- Class participation, including discussion facilitation, commentaries, and responses: 25%
- Final paper (including prospectus and draft): 40%

(Penalties will be applied to all assignments that are handed in late.)

Due dates to put on your calendar right now:

- Weekly commentary or response: Post commentary every Thursday by 5:00 p.m. and response by Friday, 10:00 a.m.
- Transcript due: Monday, October 30th, 4:00 p.m.
- Prospectus due: Monday, November 6th, 4:00 p.m.
- Draft of final paper due: Tuesday, November 21st, 4:00 p.m.
- Oral presentation on paper topic: Week of November 27th at time and place TBA
- Final paper due: Friday, December 15th, 4:00 p.m.

Required Texts


**Recommended Texts**


Duranti, Alessandro (ed.). 2001. *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader.* Malden, MA: Blackwell. [Required articles from this volume will be scanned and posted in case you choose not to buy the whole book.]

Course texts are available for purchase at the Co-op Bookstore (1-800-929-2667) on the Douglass campus and are also on reserve at the Douglass Library. All readings not in these books are available through the library’s electronic reserve service. They will also be available through WebCT. To gain access to the electronic reserves, go to IRIS (http://www.iris.rutgers.edu), click on the “Reserves” button on top of the screen, type in “Ahearn,” and click on “Instructor.” If you have any problems gaining access to the readings, please let me know. **You will be expected to have read the assignment listed for each class period before class begins.** Be prepared to discuss the reading assignment, ask questions about it, or debate the issues raised in it.

**READING ASSIGNMENTS**

* Asterisks denote readings not in any of the course texts but available through library reserve and on WebCT.

Week 1 (September 8) – **INTRODUCTION**

Week 2 (September 15) – **SOME APPROACHES THAT TREAT LANGUAGE AS SOCIAL ACTION**

**Required reading:**


* Ohio State University. 1998. “What do you know when you know a language?” In Ohio State University Department of Linguistics, *Language Files*, pp.8-11.

**Recommended reading:**


Week 3 (September 22) – **LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY; THE SO-CALLED “SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS”**

**Required reading:**


**Recommended reading:**


*Martin, Laura. 1986. “‘Eskimo words for snow’: a case study in the genesis and decay of an anthropological example.” American Anthropologist 88:418-23.


Week 4 (September 29) – **METHODS, INCLUDING CONVERSATION ANALYSIS**

**Required reading:**
Duranti, LA, Ch. 8, “Conversational exchanges” and Ch. 9, “Units of participation”; also skim Ch. 5, “Transcription: from writing to digitized images,” and Appendix, “Practical tips on recording interaction”


**Recommended reading:**


Week 5 (October 6) – **LANGUAGE AND POWER I: BAKHTIN**

**Required reading:**
Bakhtin, DI, 259-422. [Read 259-331 with care, skim rest.]
And either:


or:


Recommended reading:


Week 6 (October 13) – **LANGUAGE AND POWER II: BOURDIEU**

**Required reading:**


**Recommended reading:**

Week 7 (October 20) – **LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES** [I will be in Madison at a conference this week; Chelsea Booth has agreed to help facilitate the discussion.]

**VIDEO IN CLASS: “AMERICAN TONGUES”**

**Required reading:**


**Recommended reading:**


Week 8 (October 27) – **LANGUAGE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY**

**Required reading:**


**Recommended reading:**


**MONDAY, OCTOBER 30** – **TRANSCRIPTS DUE IN MY BOX BY 4:00 P.M.**

Week 9 (November 3) – **LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY**
Required reading:


Recommended reading:


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MONDAY, NOVEMBER 6TH – PROSPECTUS FOR FINAL PAPER DUE IN MY BOX BY 4:00 P.M.

Week 10 (November 10) – LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND SOCIALIZATION

Required reading:


*Jacobs-Huey, Lanita. 2006. “ ‘We are like doctors’: socializing cosmetologists into the discourse of science.” In L. Jacobs-Huey, From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women’s Hair Care, 29-46.

Recommended reading:


Week 11 (November 17) – LITERACY PRACTICES

Required reading:

Ahearn, IL, Ch. 1, “Invitations to love,” Ch. 3, “Key concepts and their application,” Ch. 7, “Developing love: sources of development discourse in Nepali love letters,” Ch. 8, “The practices of reading and writing,” and Ch. 9, “Wearing the flower one likes: Sarita and Bir Bahadur’s courtship”

Recommended reading:


TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21ST – DRAFTS OF FINAL PAPER DUE IN MY BOX BY 4:00 P.M.

**ORAL PRESENTATIONS ON FINAL PAPER TOPICS AT SPECIAL MEETING, WEEK OF NOV. 27TH **
(TIME, DATE, AND LOCATION TBA)

Week 12 (December 1) – AGENCY, RESISTANCE, AND ACCOMMODATION IN LANGUAGE

Required reading:

Duranti, Alessandro. 1994. FGP. Read Chapters 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 closely; skim 3 and 4.

Recommended reading:


Week 13 (December 8) – PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY; DOING THINGS WITH WORDS

Required reading:
Duranti, LA, Ch. 7, “Speaking as social action”


Recommended reading:


**FINAL PAPER DUE IN MY BOX BY 4:00 P.M., FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15**