

Instructor: **John Lawler** (jlawler@umich.edu)
 Web page: <http://www.umich.edu/~jlawler/370.html>

23187
 2:30-4p MWF, OM 480

In his seminal book *Language*, the American linguist Edward Sapir said:

“Everything that we have so far seen to be true of language points to the fact that it is the most significant and colossal work that the human spirit has evolved – nothing short of a finished form of expression for all communicable experience.

“This form may be endlessly varied by the individual without thereby losing its distinctive contours; and it is constantly reshaping itself as is all art. Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations.”

At about the same time (circa 1920), Krazy Kat said:



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True, all true. As Krazy suggests, this “massive and inclusive art” is also the information bottleneck of the human condition. A vast amount of our knowledge, including virtually everything we learn in formal education, comes to us **through** Language. Consequently, learning to analyze language, in ways that work for **all** languages, and to describe it objectively, is an indispensable tool for intellectuals, and one that stimulates in addition the habit of close attention to language, which is one of the things necessary for effective writing, not to mention clear thinking.

Further, an understanding of how language **really** works (in contrast to the linguistic mythologies taught in American schools) gives one a metaphorical place to stand that facilitates the study of **anything** that is described in language, which means just about everything.

Over the last century, linguistic scientists have amassed an array of analytic procedures, concepts, and findings that allow one to de-mystify speech, grammar, and language use, and to discover a number of surprising facts about one’s own and others’ languages. This course is an **intensive** introduction to the methods linguists use for describing languages (although general training in analytic thought is our ultimate goal).

Drawing on examples from a large number of the world’s languages, after a brief introductory unit we will devote roughly two weeks to each of the major areas of linguistic analysis, in order:

1. Morphology
2. Phonetics
3. Phonology (Midterm Exam: distributed 4/23, due 5/2)
4. Syntax
5. Semantics & Pragmatics (Final Exam: distributed 5/25, due 6/8)

There will be daily data analysis problems and occasional quizzes, which will form the context for our discussion. In addition, there will be comprehensive midterm and final take-home examinations, which may be done in groups.

Each exam counts for 30% of the grade; homework and class participation (including daily Blackboard usage) each count for 20%. Grades are cumulative and not curved.

Materials for daily analysis and handouts are in a coursepack. The textbooks are *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, by David Crystal and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, by the same author. No prerequisites except an interest in language and thinking.
