THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICS

This semester we will examine a handful of generative approaches to studying politics through language, focusing on ordinary language use, speech acts, metaphor, linguistic relativity, and genealogy. What these approaches share is a recognition that language is constitutive of social and political reality. This starting point opens up exciting possibilities for studying politics by way of language.

We will engage the thought of an eclectic mix of authors that include writers, journalists, linguists, philosophers, psychologists, political scientists, an historian, a biologist, an anthropologist, a legal scholar and even a fire-prevention inspector. Some of these authors discuss politics explicitly. Others do not. For these latter authors it will be our job to figure out how their ideas are relevant to our interests in politics.

The main goals of this seminar are for you to (1) understand, put into dialogue, and critically assess the various approaches we encounter; (2) see how each approach has been or can be used to study politics, broadly construed; and (3) use the course materials and discussions as a starting point for writing a final paper on a topic of your own choosing.

Course logistics

Posting discussion questions

This seminar will be discussion-based, so the quality of our time together will depend, to a large degree, on the quality of the questions that we bring to the table. For this reason, I ask that each week by Wednesday 1 pm you post two questions to the Moodle online discussion forum that you think are most important for the class as a whole to discuss. Here are more specific instructions:

* Create a new post for each question and put the question itself in the title of the post.

* For each question that you pose, you should in your post (1) explain in a few sentences why you think the question is important for the whole class to discuss, and (2) include the page numbers from the reading(s) which you think are most relevant for thinking through an answer to the question.

* You should feel free, in crafting your questions, to put an author from the current week into conversation with authors we have already read.
You can pose whatever questions about the course readings that you like (as long as you think that they are the most important questions for the class as a whole to discuss). In the event that you ever feel stuck, here are some question-types that you might try out:

Comprehension questions

What does author A mean by ‘…’?

When author B states ‘…’ what do they mean?

Why is author C so concerned about/focus so much attention on ‘…’?

On page x author D states ‘…’ but on page y the author seems to contradict that statement by arguing ‘…’. How do these two statements fit together?

I think ‘…’ is the main takeaway from this reading by author F. Am I right?

Application questions

Author A doesn’t talk about politics at all, but how can their ideas about ‘…’ enrich or complicate our understanding of politics?

Does author B help us see our assumptions about language or politics in a new light?

When we try to apply author C’s ideas about ‘…’ to ‘[some current event]’ does it reveal any strengths or weaknesses in author C’s thinking?

Deep-thinking questions

Is author A correct to argue that ‘…’?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of author B’s claim that ‘…’?

Why do author C, which we are reading for this week, and author D, who we read for an earlier week, disagree about ‘…’?

Even though authors E and F seem to fundamentally disagree about ‘…’ they nevertheless seem to agree that ‘…’, why?

Author G argues that ‘…’ while author H seems to disagree by arguing that ‘…’, is there any way in which both authors can be right on this point?

Author J argues that ‘…’ while author K disagree by arguing that ‘…’. Might each author be partially right and partially wrong? How can I synthesis the best of each author’s arguments?

Final paper

The topic of your final paper is up to you, so choose one that grabs you or allows you to explore your own perplexities. The paper can be theoretical or empirical; it can directly engage the ideas of the authors we
read or take what you learn from this course as a springboard to investigate something else. Because the topic of the paper is so open-ended, I strongly encourage you to come see me so that I can help you develop and structure your ideas – the earlier in the semester the better.

On March 7th you will hand in a one-page description of your paper. This description should include the main question you are posing, an overview of the kinds of sources you will be using, and your initial thoughts or conclusions about the question you are posing.

I am available to read rough drafts of your paper, though you are not required to submit one. If you do want me to give you feedback, the last day to submit a rough draft to me is April 11th.

Your paper should be between 6,000 and 8,000 words in length (including the list of works cited), which is roughly the length of a journal article.

Grading

Your grade will be calculated as follows:

- Discussion questions posted to Moodle [Did you post two for each week? Did you post them by Wednesday, 1 pm? Did you explain why you think they are important for the whole class to discuss? Did you include page numbers?] (20%)

- Class participation (40%)

- Final paper (40%)

Winter break preparation

To (re)familiarize yourself with some of the main authors and themes of this course, you may find it helpful to (re)read my book: Frederic Charles Schaffer, *Elucidating Social Science Concepts*, New York: Routledge, 2016. In recent years this book has been a required text for Political Inquiry, the gateway course for graduate students in Political Science, so I am not assigning it as a required reading.

Class schedule

Thursday, January 24. Gardening outside the walls of academia

What questions about the nature of language, the purposes of language, and/or the relationships of language to power do these readings raise for you?


Thursday, January 31. A reference point

In this 1873 essay, Nietzsche posed questions about language, truth, metaphor, concepts, generalization, power, reality, and science that have since occupied many thinkers, including many of the authors we are reading this semester.

Thursday, February 7. Ordinary language analysis I: meaning/use


Thursday, February 14. Ordinary language analyses of “freedom” and “liberty,” of “cause” questions, and of “democracy” and “civilization” in translation


Thursday, February 21. Ordinary language II: Speaking as acting

*How to Do Things with Words* can be a bit tough to read the first time around. Here are a few questions to guide your reading.

1) What is the difference between a “constative” and a “performative” utterance?

2) Austin tries to find a way to distinguish cleanly the two types of utterances. Why, in the end, does he conclude that it is not possible to make such a clean distinction?

3) On page 91 Austin makes “a fresh start on the problem” by examining different ways in which saying is doing. What, in your own words, is a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act? Come up with an utterance and see if you can identify the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts it performs.

  1-7 (including footnote 2 on page 6)
  12-20
  47 (start with “We shall next consider...”) to 52
  53-59 (stop before “But maybe it is not impossible”)
  67-78 (stop before “We shall consider two...”)
  91-92 (stop before “It is time to refine...”)
  94-108
  133-47


Thursday, February 28. No class.

You should devote this week to working out the topic of your final paper.

Thursday, March 7. A look at some speech acts

One-page final paper description due

What are the range of illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts performed in/by uttering the N-word, “the American people,” “Trump, Trump, Trump,” and in/by bullshitting?


* “American Apparently” Daily Show segment, 2010 (9 minutes):
  

5


Thursday, March 14. No class. Spring break.

Thursday, March 21. Linguistic relativity: language, thought, and reality


Thursday, March 28. Language, thought, and political reality

Last day to submit a paper draft if you would like feedback on it from me.


* “Twelve Readings on the Power to Name, Unname, Rename” collected by Frederic Schaffer, pages 1-10.

Thursday, April 4. Metaphors we live by


Thursday, April 11. The metaphoric construction of politics, policy, and political science


Thursday, April 18. Using genealogy to study the relationship of language to power


Thursday April 25. Power-inflected language: “the state,” “work,” “development,” “democracy”


Tuesday, May 7. Papers due, 9 am.

* Put a hard copy in my mailbox (Political Science mailroom, 3rd floor of Thompson Hall)
Supplemental Bibliography

What is Language? What is Political Language?


Writing and Political Organization


Speaking as a Form of (Political) Action


**Diglossia, Codeswitching, and the Politics of Language/Register Choice**


The Whorfian Hypothesis and Other Views of Language, Culture, and Translation


Language, Culture, and Translation

*Africa*


**The Middle East**


**Asia**


Wells, Tamas. 2018. “Narrative and Elucidating the Concept of Democracy: The Case of Myanmar’s Activists and Democratic leaders.” *Democratization*.

The Soviet Union


The United States


Multiple locales


The Language of Domination


**The Language of Contention**


**The Languages of Domination and Resistance**

*Race, Ethnicity, and Migration*


*Colonialism*


*Sex/Gender*


*Communism and Authoritarianism*


Nazism and Concentration Camps


Peasants


Workers and the Working Class


The Courts


The Helping Professions


Political Correctness


Debates about Women’s Language


Lying


Machiavelli, Niccolo. The Prince


Jargon, Propaganda, Rhetoric


The Language of (Partisan) Politics in America


The Environment


The Languages of War and Terrorism

**The British “Cambridge School”**


**German Begriffsgeschichte**


**Spanish-language Begriffsgeschichte-inspired Conceptual Histories**

Foucauldian Genealogy


Bourdieuian Historical Reflexive Analysis


Historicized Ordinary Language Analysis


Other


The Language of Political (and Other Social) Science(s)

Blumer, Herbert. 1954. “What is Wrong with Social Theory?” American Sociological Review 19,1: 3-10.


Concepts, Categories, and Classification (this body of literature is large - here’s just a few starting points)


Narrative (just a few starting points)


Metaphor

Theories (just a few starting points)


Metaphors in Politics


**Metaphors in Science, Social Science, and Political Science**


**Framing**

**Theories**


**Framing in Politics**


**Journals**

*Contributions to the History of Concept*. [https://journals.berghahnbooks.com/contributions/](https://journals.berghahnbooks.com/contributions/)
*Mots: Les langages du politique*. [https://journals.openedition.org/mots/](https://journals.openedition.org/mots/)

**Podcasts**

*Lingthusiasm*. [https://lingthusiasm.com/](https://lingthusiasm.com/)

**Blogs**

*Language Log*. [http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/](http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/)

**Good for Procrastination**