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### LING 478.01: Learner Language

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**Instructor information:**

- ✓ Dr. Tully J. Thibeau
- ✓ Office: Social Sciences Room 207
- ✓ Office Hours: M 1:00-2:20, T 8:40-10:00
- ✓ Telephone: 243-2693 (front desk phone)
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**Course Goals: or instructor's objectives**

Some instructor's objectives are suggested in the following sections titled COURSE PREVIEW & COURSE DESCRIPTION, for example, being able to define a minimalist position and illustrate how such accounts of language development must make reference to a mental grammar in support of its explanations, or, for example, being able to demarcate some critical period(s) intervening at developmental stages of older language learners (e.g., beyond pre-school ages) and provide evidence exemplifying interruptions in proficiency as well as identify conceivable sources for obstacles. Other examples include understanding and explaining the role of scientific theory and scientific thinking in studies of language development, how definitions of theoretical constructs lend themselves to formulation of hypotheses, and why the methodology used in collecting data functions decisively in ascertaining any hypothesis falsifications.

**Course Outcomes: or students' performance**

Among the variety of students' performance (cited in the section titled COURSE ASSIGNMENTS), please keep in mind the major difference between these activities and the instructor's objectives: The course goals are intended to instill a habit of mind that is applicable to most systematic and methodical scholarship (i.e., reasoning abilities transferable outside of this course; the course outcomes, however, concern the type of work involved in observing some behavior of a language learner in terms of linguistic properties judged to speculatively constitute a grammar of the individual.

- i. use word class/part of speech as a point of reference for further investigation of the behaviors observes
- ii. investigate these points to determine how they vary from proficient behavior and whether a pattern emerges
  - a. if no pattern emerges, then consider if this variability might be an artifact of the empirical method
  - b. if a pattern emerges, then consider if this systematicity may conditioned by a grammar or a method
- iii. employ the nomenclature of language analysis (linguistics) in recording your observations of relevant behaviors
- iv. summarize/report how a particular method is (un)justified in making strong claims about language development
- v. separate traits of a strong claim (e.g., THE CONTINUITY HYPOTHESIS) from weaker versions and contradictory claims

**Special accommodation:**

If you will need special accommodation in this course due to some learning challenge that has been verified by DSS, please see me early in the semester, and we can come up with some appropriate accommodation.

**Technology:**

You may, of course, take class notes on a laptop or iPad or the like. Aside from that, I expect that technology will not intrude during class time. Please turn your phones to “vibrate” or a similar setting that will not disturb the class.

**Academic Honesty:**

All students must observe academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to academic penalty by the instructor of the course and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. As a student in this course and at this university, you must be familiar with the [Student Conduct Code](#) (see URL presented below):

([http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student\\_conduct.php](http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php))

### **Course Withdrawal: POLICY**

To know more information about [withdrawing from a course](#), see the URL below:

(<http://www.umt.edu/withdrawal/AlternateOptions.aspx>)

### **Course attendance: POLICY**

Perfect attendance is desired but not expected; excessive absences typically intersect adversely with **late policy** and affect final grades. Students who miss the first two class meetings must drop the course (see URL presented below):

(<http://www.umt.edu/catalog/acad/acadpolicy/default.html>, under attendance/absence).

### **Coursework: LATE POLICY**

All activities, assignments or exams given to the instructor after its due-date are not guaranteed to be either graded (and entered into the grade record) or returned (i.e., students must keep track).

### **Coursework: WEIGHTING**

Performance Breakdown (provisional)

#### Exams

First-Quarter	15%	(available ca. week after 2 Feb. & due ca. week of 24 Feb.)
Mid-term	25%	(data set, article summary & position paper, week before Spring Break)
Final	35%	(in-class data sets; plus, take-home article summary, position paper, & short definitions)

#### Probable Data Sets

One	5%	(Sound Segments and Suprasegmental Units)
Two	6%	(Lexical Items and Vocabulary Organization)
Three	4%	(Negation Morphology and Sentence Distribution)
Four	3%	(Reflexive Pronouns and Antecedent Reference)
Five	3%	(Question Formation and Structural Changes)
Six	4%	(Adjunct Placement and Marked Distinctions)

### **Coursework: THE GRADUATE INCREMENT**

A most enduring facet in the history of second language development studies concerns a phenomenon that is defined in various ways, as *interlinguistic influencing* by Edward Sapir (1925), and *interference* by Uriel Weinreich (1953), each one an attempt at accounting for the impact of one language ( $L_1$ ) on another ( $L_A$ ) and vice versa, a consequence of the type of language contact ensuing in a given bilingual society and/or a bilingual individual.

Eventually, bilingualism became more prevalently construed as the non-native development of language by adults; meanwhile, these incidents mainly involved native language *transfer* (Lado, 1959), understood to entail permanence of habits established by learners' first languages ( $L_1$ ) during their performance on tasks designed to occasion uses of their non-native language ( $L_2$ ). Construing instances of transfer were grounded on *behaviorist* psychological theory and *structuralist* linguistic theory, both eventually acceding to Chomsky's *mentalist* generative theory (1957, 1965).

Graduates in Linguistics 478 are treated to a series of data sets to an extent reminiscent of occurrences in question. The types of languages that come in contact during the course of development are classified as subject-prominent, like English, and topic-prominent, like Chinese; moreover, developmental data exhibit not only phenomena related to the aforesaid cross-linguistic impact but also exhibit stages of variation of learners' grammars, or interlanguages, during learners' approaches toward the non-native language type (resembling some behaviors observed in children).

Students will apply to methods of linguistic analysis, one related to sentence-formation (syntax) and another related to text-formation (discourse), in order to try to ascertain some primary factor conditioning the affect of ( $L_1$ ) on ( $L_2$ ) in early stages of development and subsequent changes transpiring during intermediate stages (e.g., do conditions start discursive and grow syntactic?). Pertinent issues also implicate word-order typology, so additional data sets can provide information of cross-linguistic serialization of subject-verb-object (or SVO), which may be conditioned syntactically or discursively, as per one or two additional reading assignments that are included in the increment.

### **Course Grading:**

I assess students' final grades based on points they accrue from activities, assignments, and exams. I gauge points earned in several ways: according to percentages (points earned divided by total points), percentiles (points earned to be measured on a "curve"), and quartiles (points earned as separated in fourths, e.g., top 25%, bottom 25%, etc.). Based on these measures, I make assessments that are represented by traditional letter grades that might also include a distinction made between + / - .

If you are unsure what traditional letter grades represent, then please note these general descriptions:

A means excellent (above 90%)

C means competent (roughly 70% to 80%)

B means superior (roughly 80% to 90%)

D means below average (below 70%)

### **A Course Preview:**

Both children and adults are capable of developing human language, but the genesis of this capability breeds debate. Equally debatable are claims that adults and children share an essentially identical language-development capability (a MINIMALIST position) and claims that, as humans mature, the capability for becoming more proficient in a language becomes attenuated (CRITICAL PERIOD HYPOTHESIS): The latter position regards cerebral change, primarily lateralization, as the point when the course of language development no longer remains indistinguishable from its onset (infancy).

### **A Course Description:**

Some direct observations (empirical evidence gathered both naturally and experimentally) of LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT among learners indicate that their progress toward proficiency follows an (almost) identical path, despite other data indicating an incapacitation of learning language on entering the path at a point nearby adolescence (pre-adult age).

The course considers both the manner in which (i) the path toward proficiency (native capability) may be typified and (ii) the obstacle breaching that path (adult learners' prevailing non-native capability) is optimally characterized.

Focus is on several directly observable behaviors exhibited by adults and children who are undertaking *proficiency* in a target language, or TL (i.e., child native TL development and adult non-native TL development). Concentration includes abstracting what is indirectly observable, namely, learners' *grammars* that mentally represent and develop TL knowledge. Three assumed sources brace TL knowledge: experience of TL input, any mental representations which have already been established as an adult's native knowledge of language, or KoL (in a child's case, ostensibly *a priori* KoL, given innately), and general cognitive problem-solving procedures applied to attaining any skill-set(s).

In defining TL proficiency, these two emphases (on observed variations across time and inferred systems of mind), fuse two phenomena, communicative fluency (ability to function in terms of oral as well as aural comprehensibility) and grammatical accuracy (ability to perceptibly demonstrate the use of TL forms, or sounds, words and sentences).

These phenomena are distinguishable in TL production, typically in speaking, so fathoming speech-processes rises to a degree of relative significance for the course; however, tasks that involve speech (e.g., narrations/descriptions, oral interviews, recitations, etc.) have been shown to influence learners' rates of proficiency. Moreover, tasks elicit data that sometimes involve no production (i.e., comprehension), and others concern only grammaticality judgments (i.e., adult subjects usually intuit prearranged forms as target-like, grammatical, or non-target-like, ungrammatical). Any task demands attentional resources and thus influences measures of proficiency, this effort largely understood as a factor external to learners' mental grammars, to be contrasted with any factor construed to be grammar-internal (e.g., the reputed properties of sound-, word- and sentence-formation systems). The issue of task-demands becomes imperative when considering pre-school age subjects whose level of maturity precludes the hitherto described tasks and therefore requires more natural responses to linguistic stimuli (e.g., gaze at a TV screen, perform with figurines, and operant conditioning that includes a priming stimulus, like a toy monkey banging a drum, prior to a trial form).

The preceding paragraph's descriptive content seems to concern diverse matters of data-collection methodology, yet these varieties of observations present a way of generally educating students with no empirical-methods background in reasoning and conjecturing scientifically (i.e., **devising**, **testing** and **revising hypotheses** based on data collected specifically to assess the inquiry in an intelligible totality, or **theory**, including evaluation/selection among theories).

Scientific understanding entails finding (missed) generalizations, expressed such that they can be tested empirically, and, when possible, experimentally if theory affords precise definitions crafted into hypotheses that can be **falsified**.