Languages of the World
Linguistics 23900/33900, Winter 2016

Mondays and Wednesdays 1:30 - 2:50
Cobb 115

Instructor: Tamara Vardomskaya
Email: vardomskayat@uchicago.edu
Webpage: http://home.uchicago.edu/~vardomskayat
Office: Rosenwald 229
Office hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 3:00-4:00 or by appointment

Course assistant: Robert Lewis
Email: robertlewis@uchicago.edu
Office hours: By appointment

Course description:

This course aims to equip you with some basic and not-so-basic facts about the world’s languages, a fundamental prerequisite to understanding the nature of human language. We will be looking at the diversity of languages across space and time, their fundamental similarities, and other puzzles. We will address a range of questions about language through an exploration of the following areas: language families and historical relationships, language contact and change, linguistic typology and language universals, sound and structural features of the world’s languages, and writing systems, among others.

Course objectives:

At the end of the course, students will be able to

- use the comparative method to identify relationships between languages
- identify different types of writing systems
- identify the world’s major and selected minor languages
- compare language typologies
- analyze and discuss the different roles language plays, and different possible relationships between languages

Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites to enrollment in this course; this course presupposes no background in linguistics. I will strive to keep the discussion nontechnical, though familiarity with traditional grammatical terms (e.g., transitive verb, high vowel, declensional class, genitive case, inanimate subject, etc.) will be helpful.

Course requirements

- Attendance and participation in the class - 10%
- Assignments (homeworks) and short in-class quizzes - 20%
- Final quiz - 30%
- Final project - 40%

See end of syllabus for final project description and extra credit option.
Policies

Take notes however works for you, but be respectful of your neighbors. Make sure all speakers on all electronic devices are silenced, and if you're taking notes on a laptop or tablet, do not visit websites with videos or moving gifs that may distract others sitting nearby.

Homework solutions must be stapled AND with your name on every page. (You don't want homework to be incomplete because a page goes missing.)

Textbooks

Lyovin, Anatole. *An Introduction to the Languages of the World.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. This is an excellent book that is unfortunately out of print. I have put the Regenstein's copy on two-hour reserve, or you may find a used copy on Abebooks, Amazon or other used-book sources.

Pereltsvaig, Asya. *Languages of the World: An Introduction.* Cambridge University Press, 2012. I have also put this book on reserve, although this is also available new from Amazon and other places. It has more up to date speaker data, and fills in some gaps in Lyovin (like more detail on languages of the Caucasus).

Comrie, Bernard. *The World's Major Languages.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. This is mainly optional, but goes more in depth, language by language, of those with more than a million speakers. If you're interested in doing a language sketch as your final project, read at least five of the sections to see how to do it.

Additional readings to be determined.

Course schedule (subject to change)

Before class starts: take the survey on languages and dialects you know.

Week 1: Introduction and Writing Systems

Day 1: What is (a) language? Natural vs. artificial languages. Typological vs. historical (genetic) relatedness. Genetic relationship and language families. Some basic facts about language(s). How many languages do you know?

Day 2: Writing systems

Reading: Lyovin chs. 1 and 2; Pereltsvaig ch. 1; Comrie Introduction.

Homework 1, due Monday 1/11:
1. Exercise II on p. 42 in Lyovin ch. 2 (classifying scripts).
2. Make a map of Europe showing approximate location of all the languages mentioned in Pereltsvaig ch. 1 and 2, and Lyovin ch. 1. Exclude the regions east of the Urals and southeast of the Bosporus (i.e., don't map the Indo-Iranian languages yet).

Week 2: Language Interaction

January 11: Language contact and language spread

January 13: Language extinction and endangerment
Week 3: Languages of Europe: Indo-European, Uralic, Basque

Reading: Lyovin ch. 3; Pereltsvaig ch. 2, 3.1, 3.2

Quiz 1 (Wednesday 1/20).

Homework 2, due Monday 1/25:
1. Exercise 2 on p. 102 in Lyovin ch. 3 (comparing Finnish, Turkish and Indo-European)
2. Map of the Caucasus

(Because of MLK Day, I will try to arrange an alternate time for one of the lectures this week)

Week 4: Languages of Asia Minor and the Caucasus

Reading: Pereltsvaig Ch. 4, 5; Lyovin Ch. 5 Section I & Sketch of Modern Literary Arabic;
Wednesday 1/22: guest lecture by Ksenia Ershova on Caucasian languages.

Homework 3, due Monday 2/1:
1. Exercise 3 on p. 173 of Lyovin ch. 4 (Altaic typological traits)
2. Map of Asia;
3. Map of Afghanistan

Week 5: Languages of Asia

Day 1: Central Asia, the Silk Road, and India

Day 2: Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, and Austroasiatic

Lyovin Ch. 4; Pereltsvaig 3.3, 7.1-7.3
Comrie 1990 ch. 43 [Japanese], 26 [Pashto].

Homework 4, due Monday 2/8:
1. Exercise 6 on p. 176 of Lyovin ch.4 (Japanese translation)
2. Map of Oceania, including Australia

Week 6: Languages of Oceania and Austronesian

Quiz 2 (2/8)
Reading: Lyovin ch. 6; Pereltsvaig Ch. 8,9

Wednesday, February 10: Guest lecture by Dorothea Hoffmann on Australian languages.

Homework 5, due Monday 2/15:
1. Exercise 2 (Tagalog) on p. 302 on Lyovin ch. 6
2. Map of Africa: Use different colors for the four language families, and a fifth color for Bantu languages; include at least six languages from each group, and indicate roughly where the following languages are spoken: Arabic, Hausa, Amharic, Maasai, Swahili, Zulu, !Kung
Week 7: Languages of Africa

Languages of Africa.

Reading: Lyovin ch. 5; Comrie 1990 ch. 48 [Niger- Kordofanian languages]; Pereltsvaig Ch. 6.

Homework 6, due Mon 2/22:
1. Exercises 1 and 2 (Swahili text and !Xu) on pp. 236-240 of Lyovin ch. 5.
2. Map of the Americas
3. Map of your home state/province if you're from North or South America; if you're from the Eastern Hemisphere, choose Illinois or British Columbia.

Week 8: Languages of the Americas

Wednesday, February 24: Guest lecture by Cherry Meyer on Ojibway and Robert Lewis on Potawatomi

Lyovin Ch.7: Sketch of Yup’ik Eskimo & Sketch of Quechua; Pereltsvaig Ch. 10.

For exercise 2, do the following; give a morpheme-by-morpheme breakdown for the words given, and gloss all the pieces (like on the Swahili handout, for example). In doing so, you should also be able to answer the following questions: a. What is the word order of the language? b. How are grammatical relations (subject, object, possessor, etc) signaled? c. How does the verb inflect? Does it show subject agreement? Object agreement? Tense information?

Week 9: Pidgin, Creole, and signed languages.

Wednesday, March 2: Guest lecture by Dr. Jordan Fenlon on signed languages.

Reading: Lyovin ch. 8; Pereltsvaig, ch. 12. Mufwene 2015; Jackendoff 1994, chapter 7 [ASL]

Week 10:

Typology and universals. Reading: Greenberg 1966, Dryer 1992

Wednesday, March 9: Final quiz (3/5)

Final project due the last day of class.

Final project:

You’ll be required to write an original paper on a topic related to the course. Your paper should be about 10 pages in length (double-spaced, 12 point font, with 1” margins). All paper topics should be cleared with me by the end of the 7th week of class. The final paper is due on the last day of class, submitted to me as PDF file (preferred) or Microsoft Word document by email to vardomskayat@uchicago.edu no later than 5pm.

A typical paper should include an introduction describing your sources of evidence, a section presenting your data, a discussion of the models or theories other have used to understand the data, a section presenting your own stance and new insights confirming or challenging other’s models that have resulted from your investigation, a conclusion and a list of references cited (in a standardized format).
Wikipedia is not acceptable as a source, but I encourage you to improve the Wikipedia article on your topic, citing your sources; see the Extra Credit section.

Some sample paper topics are given below:

Language sketch: Choose a language not described in Comrie’s book *The World’s Major Languages*. Using a range of resources (a minimum of one book, one journal article, one web site plus Ethnologue and WALS - *Wikipedia is not acceptable*), identify the name (or names if applicable) of the language, the family that it belongs to, where it is spoken, the number of speakers reported in the most recent census, a comparison of this number with the numbers given in the Ethnologue, and provide a typological and/or (semi-)formal description of (some aspects of) its grammar and phonology.

Interview: You will have to choose someone who is a native speaker of another language to interview about their attitudes towards their languages. You must plan out your interview in advance (I will be happy to look at questions for the interview if you wish), and write up the interview in an interesting and engaging way, telling the reader about the person, their background, their attitudes towards their languages, their work on their languages (if any), their day-to-day language use, and so on. The report should focus on a particular theme and should begin with an introduction to that theme. (N.B. Before you do an interview, you will have to discuss with the person whether they are willing to have their interview read by other people.)

Problem set creation: You may construct a problem set on a language of your choice. It can deal with any topic that we deal with in the course. It should be self-contained, in the sense that it could be given to a linguistics student to solve with just the data that you present in it. The write-up should be organized into sections (i.e. at least three sections). In the first section, you present the data. The second section should provide the instructions. The last section should include the solution to the problem and a discussion of why you think this problem set is interesting and what its educational value might be. If you decide to pursue such a paper, I would like a brief statement by email from you by Week 4 regarding what language you will use, and some initial thoughts on what is interesting about it. By week 7, I would like a first draft including at least the first section, and by week 9 I would like a first draft of the whole project. The final version will be due on the last day of class.

Other paper topics:

“Why is Navajo endangered?”
“English and the politics of language in Pakistan”
“Breton: an endangered European language”
“The effect of Spanish on the indigenous languages of California”
“How the “English Only” debate impacts linguistic minorities”
“Can a language be brought back from extinction? The case of Modern Hebrew”
"Haplogroups and the spread of the Bantu language family"

Feel free to pursue a topic of your own, but it’s probably a good idea to run it by me first.

Extra credit
Don’t use Wikipedia as a source, but improve it instead. For up to 3% in extra credit, submit before-, during- and-after screen shots, with brief commentary and a visible date, of substantial edits you’ve made (at least three paragraphs, with good references) of 3 *Wikipedia articles* related to topics in this course. These can be on a language, a writing system, your final project research topic, etc.. This will be submitted along with your final project.