COURSE DESCRIPTION

Humans communicate in ways quite different from those found in any other animal. Which aspects of the human communication system have close parallels in nonhumans? Which aspects are continuous or analogous with, but greatly modified from, nonhuman antecedents? Which are entirely new evolutionary innovations? In this course, we will examine animal communication with a focus on topics of particular interest to social scientists, culminating in a treatment of recent debates about the evolutionary origins of language.

This course lies at the intersection of several traditional academic fields: evolutionary biology, behavioral ecology, psychology (experimental cognitive and comparative psychology), linguistics, and (of course) biological anthropology and communication studies. This means that some intellectual versatility will be necessary to get the most out of the material. Whatever your background, you will almost certainly need to expand beyond your academic “comfort zone.”

COURSE COMPONENTS

READINGS:
Some of the course readings will be posted as pdf files on the course website, listed under the week for which they are assigned. Other readings will be available as a compilation of book chapters and articles from UCLA Course Reader Solutions. Most of the readings describe older, “classic” studies which will provide contexts for understanding the newer findings to be presented and discussed in class meetings. In designing lecture material, discussion questions, and pop quizzes, I will assume that you’ve done each reading assignment before its associated class meeting.

CLASS MEETINGS will be a mix of lecture and discussion. I will post outlines of each lecture on the course website (organized by week) during the 24 hours after the lecture. The rationale for this is to leave some questions unanswered for you to grapple with in discussions during the class meetings.
GRADES will be based on a midterm (30%), your best five scores on seven pop quizzes (10%), class participation (“live” and/or in the online forum) (15%) and a final exam (45%). The pop quizzes will cover the day’s reading assignment and the two preceding lectures. Quizzes will be all multiple choice; the midterm and the final will be a mix of multiple choice and short essay questions.

COURSE OUTLINE

PART I: INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Week 1:


Week 2:


PART II: WHAT DO ANIMALS COMMUNICATE ABOUT?

Week 3:


Week 4:

PART III: FEATURES OF NONHUMAN ANIMAL COMMUNICATION THAT ARE RELEVANT TO THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE


Week 5:


(10) Feb. 6. MIDTERM EXAM (Covering material through Jan. 28).

Week 6:


Week 7:


Week 8:


Week 9:


PART IV: THE EVOLUTION OF THE HUMAN COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

Week 10:


Final Exam: Monday Mar. 17, 8:00am-11:00am

COURSE MECHANICS AND COURSE POLICIES

Readings

With a few exceptions (e.g. the readings for Jan. 9 and Jan. 14), the readings are from the primary scientific literature – not textbooks. This means that they are written for specialists, and they contain quantitative data and statistical tests of hypotheses. When reading them, don’t get bogged down trying to memorize numbers (or, worse yet, the specific kinds of audio equipment used in playback experiments). Focus on (1) the basic concepts (e.g. for the Owren & Rendall article, what is their “Affect Induction Model”?) the theoretical/conceptual background (what were the researcher’s questions/hypotheses, and why are they thought to be important?); (2) the general methodological approach and why the researcher used it (for example, several of the articles describe playback experiments; you should be able to explain the logic of these procedures); (3) the results, in a qualitative sense (e.g. one result of the Seyfarth & Cheney article about vocal development in vervets was “In response to alarm calls, older infants were less likely to run to their mothers, and more likely to respond in an adult-like fashion, than younger infants” – but I wouldn’t hold you responsible for knowing the numbers on the axes of
the graphs in Figure 5 of their article); and (4) the implications of the results for the general issues that motivated the study in the first place.

**Class Meetings**

I will lecture for part of each class meeting, but I will also open the floor for discussion by asking focused questions. If no one cares to answer a question, I may randomly select someone to call on. The questions will usually (starting in Week 2) be based on research results that I’ll present in PowerPoint. So, I will typically describe the methods used in a published study (one that you haven’t read about), show graphs or tables of the results, and then ask, “Based on what you’ve read for today, and what we’ve gone over so far in today’s meeting, how would you interpret these results?” After that topic has been treated sufficiently, I might ask “What questions remained unanswered by these results?” and “What other kinds of data could answer those questions?”

15% of your course grade will be determined by class participation. In the time we have available for discussion, it would be impossible to hear from all of you. Fortunately we live in the Internet Age. I will be setting up online forums for each major topic of the course. You can find these from the course web site:

https://moodle2.sscnet.ucla.edu/course/view/14W-ANTHROM127-1

They will be listed under the appropriate week. The first forum is listed under Week 1 (so it’s due at the end of Week 2) and titled “Human/Nonhuman Animal Communication Similarities & Differences: A ‘Pre-Test.’” All forums will be set up in “Q and A” format, which means that you won’t be able to see others’ postings until you’ve posted your own comment.

I will post a file of PowerPoint slides from each class meeting during the 24 hours after it.

I will show some video clips during class meetings. Some of these will be from YouTube. I will post the titles of these videos on the class website, so you’ll be able to view them again at your leisure.

Please don’t text, surf the web, or divert your attention in any other way during class meetings.

**Office hours**

I will have two regularly scheduled office hours each week: Tuesday 11:00-11:50 and Wednesday 10:30-11:50. You are more than welcome to stop by (Haines 389) during those times; don’t worry that you’re “bothering” me – those hours are your time. You are also welcome to email me to set up an appointment at other times.
Quizzes

There will be seven surprise quizzes scattered throughout the course. These will each consist of 6 multiple choice questions. These questions are designed to be easier than those on the midterm and final. Each of your best five quiz scores will count as 2% of your total course grade. This best-five-of-seven system is meant to accommodate competing demands on your time and energy, as well as the inevitable unexpected setbacks (car breakdowns, sick pets, etc.) that prevent you from attending class or studying. But beyond this, there will be no special dispensations (see below for my understanding of fairness). If you tell me that you were unable to prepare for a quiz because your cat needed emergency surgery, I’ll answer with “Well, that’s one of the two quizzes that I’ll drop when calculating your grade.”

Exams

The midterm will consist of 30 multiple choice questions plus one short essay question (your choice from among three possibilities) that should be answerable on one side of one page. The final exam will contain 30 multiple choice questions plus three short essay questions (your choices from among five possibilities).

I will provide fairly detailed study guides before the midterm and before the final exam. These study guides will be your only indication of “what’s going to be on the exam.”

No make-up exams will be given. If you know that you will not be able to be present at the midterm (Thurs. Feb. 6, 12:30-1:45) or the final (Mon. Mar. 17, 8:00am-11:00am), this course isn’t for you.

Grading

Course grades will be based entirely and exclusively on exam and quiz scores and class participation. These tasks are meant to measure your knowledge of, and engagement with, the subject matter. Final grades are intended to reflect your mastery of the course material – not the amount of effort you put into the course. A few moments of reflection should clarify why I cannot assign grades based on students’ work effort. First, I cannot measure it. Self-reports of effort are obviously unreliable. Remote monitoring of students’ study habits is obviously not feasible, either ethically or practically. Second, when grade reports are used in decisions made both inside and outside the university (e.g. admission to an impacted major, or to graduate school), the decision-makers presume that a high grade signifies mastery of the subject matter – not merely a high level of effort.

When I review the transcript of an applicant to UCLA Anthropology’s graduate program, I trust that the applicant’s undergraduate professors assigned grades based on knowledge, not just effort. As a matter of integrity, I must abide by the same standard.

I will assign grades based on percentage of total course points earned (i.e. there’ll be no “curve”). The cut-offs are:
Students rightly expect grading to be fair, but what constitutes fairness is not always clear. Here’s what I mean by fairness: *every student’s work is graded using the same criteria*. You may not like these criteria in all cases, but you can be sure that I’m applying the same criteria to every other student. This standard of fairness has several implications.

For one thing, I do not allow “extra credit” work. If only those who asked for such work were allowed to do it, this would be unfair to the students who didn’t ask. But if every student in the class were given the opportunity to do “extra credit,” it would no longer really be “extra” – it’d be just another course assignment. And I have already determined that I’m assigning the proper amount of work for this course.

Furthermore, in assigning grades I cannot take into account a student’s personal circumstances (e.g. the “need” for a particular grade to keep a scholarship or get into a graduate school, or a distracting family crisis or financial crisis) – however much I may personally sympathize with a student’s difficulties. (If you are having personal problems that interfere with your academic work, I can refer you to appropriate on-campus counseling and other resources.) If I were to consider one student’s personal circumstances in assigning his or her grade, to be fair I would need to consider every student’s personal circumstances – again, an ethical and practical impossibility. (Actually this is a moot point, because the UCLA Faculty Code of Conduct prohibits basing grades on any consideration other than course work).

Course policy regarding re-grades of the essay portion of the midterm also reflects this standard of fairness. Re-grade requests are strongly discouraged. They must be submitted in writing. The regrading process will consider only whether the standards for grading the question were correctly applied in the exam being re-graded. Under no circumstances will the grading standards themselves be retroactively changed – this would be unfair to some of the students who did not receive full credit for their answer yet did not request a re-grade of that question. More details on re-grade requests will be provided at the time of the midterm. Requests for re-grades of the final exam are even more strongly discouraged. The likelihood of such a request being granted is very close to zero.

Also, I will not change the course grading scheme (e.g. the relative weights of the midterm and the final in determining the final grade) for particular students.
Academic integrity

If you haven’t already, I suggest that you visit the Dean of Students’ website, which includes a guide to academic integrity:

http://www.deanofstudents.ucla.edu/integrity.html

Instances of suspected academic dishonesty (e.g. consulting notes during exams) will be immediately reported to the Dean of Students. UCLA’s rules require this.