

Special Topics in Linguistics: Conlangs (LING 4940/6940) – Fall 2024

Prerequisites: LING 3060, LING 3150, LING 3150W, or LING 3250

Course meeting times

Class meeting time: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 2:20–3:35 pm

Class meeting location: Miller Learning Center 0368

Instructor information

Instructor: Prof. Steven Foley (any pronouns)

Email: srfoley@uga.edu
I'll respond to emails within 24 hours

Office hours: Mondays, 2:00–4:00 pm
and by appointment
Gilbert Hall 118A

Website: <https://stevenrfoley.github.io/>

Course description and details

Throughout history individuals have set out to construct languages with specific philosophical, political, and artistic goals. What are the abstract structural properties of those conlangs (like Elvish, Esperanto) that satisfy these design intentions? And how do they differ from the properties of natural languages (Estonian, Ewe), which evolve organically in speech communities? By interrogating these questions, this course introduces core concepts in linguistic theory and typology. This will be accomplished in two ways. First, through the grammatical analysis of linguistic data, drawn from diverse natlangs and conlangs. Formal theoretical tools will help us make precise what makes a language more naturalistic or alien. Second, the class will collaborate on our own conlang, derived from English by the application of many grammatical rules. The formulation and curation of those rules will be informed by our understanding of linguistic typology, and by our conlang design goals. This offers a unique sandbox in which to explore the space of possible grammatical systems, deepening students' appreciation for languages native to Earth and to imagined worlds beyond.

Learning outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course you should be able to:

- Use tools from theoretical linguistics to analyze constructed languages and compare them to natural languages
- Articulate how a conlang's grammar and lexicon have been designed to achieve particular expressive and political goals
- Design your own conlang derived from a natlang, using the 'Mega Pig Latin' technique

This course also fulfills the following University-wide learning outcomes:

- Students will be able to express ideas in writing with clarity and fluency.
- Students will have the ability to express, manipulate, and apply mathematical information, concepts, and thoughts using appropriate mathematical forms, including numeric, graphical, verbal, and symbolic forms for solving a variety of problems.
- Analyze the impact and role of artistic and literary production and achievement on our understanding of the human condition.

Course topics

- Defining characteristics of language and the taxonomy of conlangs
- Typological patterns in the phonology, syntax, and morphology of natlangs, and how conlangs hew to or deviate from them
- Origin and classification of writing systems
- Language as a manifestation of thought and of society

Required course materials

All readings will be posted on eLC.

Assessment and grading

Course assignments and requirements

<i>Attendance and active participation in lecture</i>	15%	Rolling
<i>Attend office hours</i>	5%	At least once
<i>Homework assignments</i>	40%	About six throughout the semester
<i>In-class presentation</i>	5%	Tentatively Oct 15 & 17
<i>Written midterm exam</i>	15%	Tentatively due Oct 4 by 11:59 pm
<i>Written final exam</i>	20%	Due Dec 10 by 6:30 pm

See eLC for more information about each course requirement.

Missed exams, late assignments, and regrading requests

Group projects, your individual paper, and your final paper, are due at 11:59 pm ET on their respective due dates, unless otherwise instructed. These items may be turned in after the deadline, but you will be eligible for fewer points once the deadline has passed: you will only be eligible for 95% of the total grade if it is submitted by 3 am that night, and you will lose an additional 10% from the total you are eligible to earn for every 12 hour period it is late thereafter. Papers more than three days late will earn a grade of 0.

Extensions will not generally be permitted, but if you think you are subject to an exceptional circumstance, please discuss it with me outside of class or by emailing me at least 24 hours before the original deadline.

Final grades

<i>A</i>	95–100	<i>C+</i>	76–79
<i>A–</i>	90–94	<i>C</i>	73–75
<i>B+</i>	86–89	<i>C–</i>	70–72
<i>B</i>	83–85	<i>D</i>	60–69
<i>B–</i>	80–82	<i>F</i>	<60

Final grades will be rounded to the nearest whole number (e.g. 89.5 to 90, and 89.4 to 89).

Course statements and policies

UGA honor code

“I will be academically honest in all of my academic work and will not tolerate academic dishonesty of others.” A Culture of Honesty, the University’s policy and procedures for handling cases of suspected dishonesty, can be found at honesty.uga.edu.

Honesty and transparency are important features of good scholarship. On the flip side, plagiarism and cheating are serious academic offenses with serious consequences. If you are discovered engaging in either behavior in this course, I will follow the procedures laid out in UGA’s Academic Honesty Policy. There you can also find more information about what counts as prohibited conduct.

I encourage you to work together on homework assignments and to make use of campus resources like the Office of Student Success & Achievement and the Writing Center. While collaboration is encouraged, *each student must submit a unique assignment* reflecting their own work.

If you have questions about my integration of the Student Code of Conduct into this course, please do not hesitate to ask: my aim is to foster an environment where you can learn and grow, while ensuring that the work we all do is honest and fair.

Accommodation for disabilities

If you plan to request accommodations for a disability, please register with the Disability Resource Center. They can be reached by visiting Clark Howell Hall, calling 706-542-8719 (voice) or 706-542-8778 (TTY), or by visiting <http://drc.uga.edu>.

Attendance & participation policy

Class participation is a very important part of the learning process in this course. Although not explicitly graded, you will be evaluated on the *quality* of your contributions and insights. Quality comments possess one or more of the following properties:

- Offers a different and unique, but relevant, perspective;

- Contributes to moving the discussion and analysis forward;
- Builds on other comments;
- Transcends the “I feel” syndrome. That is, it includes some evidence, argumentation, or recognition of inherent tradeoffs. In other words, the comment demonstrates some reflective thinking.

We will use our assessment of your participation to manage borderline grades. While your participation grade is subjective, it will not be random or arbitrary. And, clearly, more frequent quality comments are better than less frequent quality comments.

Use of AI in this course

UGA’s policy is that the use of AI for coursework is not permitted unless explicitly authorized by me (your course instructor) ahead of time. In this course, to ensure you develop and master the foundational knowledge and skills in this course, the use of generative AI (GAI) tools is strictly prohibited. This includes all stages of your work process, even the preliminary ones. This prohibition extends to AI writing tools like Grammarly and Wordtune, as well as GAI tools like ChatGPT, Copilot, Writesonic, Rytr, and Rtutor. If you are uncertain about using a particular tool to support your work, please consult with me before using it.

Well-being resources

UGA Well-being Resources promote student success by cultivating a culture that supports a more active, healthy, and engaged student community.

Anyone needing assistance is encouraged to contact Student Care & Outreach (SCO) in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-8479 or visit sco.uga.edu. Student Care & Outreach helps students navigate difficult circumstances by connecting them with the most appropriate resources or services. They also administer the Embark@UGA program which supports students experiencing, or who have experienced, homelessness, foster care, or housing insecurity.

UGA provides both clinical and non-clinical options to support student well-being and mental health, any time, any place. Whether on campus, or studying from home or abroad, UGA Well-being Resources are here to help.

- Well-being Resources: well-being.uga.edu
- Student Care and Outreach: sco.uga.edu
- University Health Center: healthcenter.uga.edu
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services: caps.uga.edu or CAPS 24/7 crisis support at 706-542-2273
- Health Promotion/ Fontaine Center: healthpromotion.uga.edu
- Disability Resource Center and Testing Services: drc.uga.edu

Additional information, including free digital well-being resources, can be accessed through the UGA app or by visiting <https://well-being.uga.edu>.

Disclaimer

The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

Course schedule and activities

Date	Topic	To do before class	To do after class
Th, Aug 15	Introduction		• Student survey
Tu, Aug 20	Defining language and conlang	• Read Hostetter 2006, Lo Bianco 2011 (optional: Fasold & Connor-Linton 2014)	
Th, Aug 22	Phonetics and phonology	• Read Ladefoged & Johnson 2011, Mihalicek & Wilson 2012	
Tu, Aug 27	Phonological typology	• Read Gordon 2016	• Start on HW1
Th, Aug 29			
Tu, Sept 3	Phonaesthetics	• Read Crystal 1995 • Submit HW1	• Start on HW2
Th, Sep 5	Language games and ciphers		
Tu, Sep 10	Sound change	• Read Hock 2021 • Submit HW2	
Th, Sep 12	Phonology committee		
Tu, Sep 17	Syntax	• Read Mihalicek & Wilson 2012	• Start on HW3
Th, Sep 19			
Tu, Sep 24	Syntactic typology	• Submit HW3	• Start on midterm
Th, Sep 26			
Tu, Oct 1	Syntax committee		
Th, Oct 3	Morphology	• Read Whaley 1996	• Submit midterm before Oct 5 • Start on presentation
Tu, Oct 8	Morphological typology	• Read Lander & Nichols 2020	
Th, Oct 10			
Tu, Oct 15	Morphosyntax fair	• Submit slides for presentation	
Th, Oct 17			
Tu, Oct 22	Morphology committee		
Th, Oct 24	Writing systems	• Read Daniels & Bright 1996	• Start on HW4
Tu, Oct 29			
Th, Oct 31	Orthography committee	• Submit HW4	

Tu, Nov 5	Lexical semantics	• Read Fiske 2019	• Start on HW5
Th, Nov 7			
Tu, Nov 12	Language and perception	• Read Okrent 2009 • Submit HW5	
Th, Nov 14			• Start on HW6
Tu, Nov 19	Language and society	• Read Foer 2012, Smith 2011	
Th, Nov 21		• Submit HW6	
Tu, Nov 26	Classlang review		• Start on final
Tu, Dec 10	Final due by 6:30 pm – Submit by email to SF		

Readings

- Adams, Michael (ed). 2011. *From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages*. Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, David. 2008. Phonaesthetically speaking. *English Today*, 11(2):8–12.
- Daniels, Peter T. and William Bright (eds.) 1996. *The World's Writing Systems*. Oxford University Press.
- Dawson, Hope and Michael Phelan (eds.) 2016. *Language files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*. The Ohio State University Press.
- Dryer, Matthew S. and Martin Haspelmath (eds.) 2013. *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online (WALS)*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. URL: <http://wals.info>
- Fasold, Ralph and Jeff Connor-Linton. 2014. *An Introduction to Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fiske, Alan Page. 2019. The lexical fallacy in emotion research: Mistaking vernacular words for psychological entities. *Psychological Review*, 127(1): 95–113.
- Foer, Joshua. 2012. Utopian for Beginners. *The New Yorker*, December 24 & 31 issue.
- Gordon, Matthew K. 2016. *Phonological Typology*. Oxford University Press.
- Hock, Hans Henrich. 2021. *Principles of Historical Linguistics*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- Hostetter, Carl F. 2006. Elvish as She Is Spoke. In *The Lord of the Rings 1954–2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder*, eds. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull: 231–255. Marquette University Press.
- Ladefoged, Peter and Keith Johnson. 2010. *A Course in Phonetics*. Cengage.
- Lander, Yury and Johanna Nichols. 2020. Head/dependent marking. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Lindstedt, Jouko. 2006. Native Esperanto as a test case for natural language. In *A Man of Measure: Festschrift in honour of Fred Karlsson*. 47–55.
- Lo Bianco, Joseph. 2004. Inventing languages and new worlds. *English Today*, 20(2), 8–18. Cambridge University Press.
- Mihalicek, Vedrana and Christin Wilson (eds.) 2012. *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*. Ohio State University Press. 11th edition.
- Moran, Steven and Daniel McCloy (eds.) 2019. *PHOIBLE 2.0*. Jena: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History. URL: <http://phoible.org>

- Okrand, Mark. 1992. *The Klingon Dictionary: The official guide to Klingon words and phrases*. Simon & Schuster.
- Okrent, Arika. 2010. *In the Land of Invented Languages: A Celebration of Linguistic Creativity, Madness, and Genius*. Spiegel & Grau.
- Payne, Thomas E. 1997. *Describing Morphosyntax: A Guide for Field Linguists*. Cambridge University Press.
- Peterson, David J. 2015. *The Art of Language Invention: From Horse-Lords to Dark Elves, the Words behind World-Building*. Penguin.
- Pogostick Man (ed). 2016. Index Diachronica. Version 10.2. Crowd-sourced database. URL: <https://chridd.nfshost.com/diachronica/>
- Rosenfelder, Mark. 2010. *The Language Construction Kit*. Yonagu Books.
- Smith, Arden. 2011. Confounding Babel: International auxiliary languages. In *From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages*, ed. Michael Adams. 17–47. Oxford University Press.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1983. A Secret Vice. In *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien.
- Whaley, Lindsay. 1996. *Introduction to Typology: The unity and diversity of language*. SAGE Publications.