FALL 2023 | Th 11:45–1:45 | CUNY GRADUATE CENTER

HUMAN COMMUNICATION & COGNITIVE ARCHITECTURE

TAUGHT BY DANIEL HARRIS | danielwharris@gmail.com

course website: danielwharris.com/teaching/fall23/

username: cuny   password: communication

ABOUT THIS COURSE

This course will investigate the cognitive underpinnings of human communication. Here are some of the questions that we'll address: Does human communication normally take the form of revealing our intentions to others, as Grice and lots of others have thought? If so, why would we communicate in such a cognitively demanding way? How do humans customize both what we communicate and how we communicate it for our addressees, and what advantages does this give us? To what extent is human communication a deeply cooperative activity, and why would cooperativity make us better communicators? To what extent does normal human communication rely on mindreading (a.k.a. theory of mind, or metarepresentation)? How should our answer to this question be constrained by evidence about young children, neuroatypical adults, and our proto-human ancestors? Is human language the product of a modular system of the mind? If so, how does this system interact with our capacities for belief, planning, and mindreading, and why do we seem to have so much top-down control over what we say? To what extent are the mechanisms that we use to organize communicative exchanges specialized for that purpose, and to what extent are they applications of domain-general cognitive capacities? Should we think of language as a tool for communicating, for thinking, or both? In addressing these and other related questions, our readings will be interdisciplinary, drawing on the philosophies of language, mind, action, and cognitive science, linguistics, cognitive, developmental, and comparative psychology, and cognitive ethology. Among other things, we will read material from a book manuscript that I have been working on.

WEBSITE AND READINGS

All of the required readings will be available on the course website:

danielwharris.com/teaching/fall23/

username: cuny
password: communication

OUR DISCORD SERVER

I have created a Discord server for our class, which you can get to by clicking on this link:

https://discord.gg/N5YCYk4p

I recommend installing the Discord app on your computer and/or phone and turning on notifications for our server.

Discord is a free tool for group communication. We will use it as a place where you will submit assignments and communicate with me and other members of the class. You must have access to Discord in order to participate in the course.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Participation (in class and on discord): 20%

Weekly writing: 20%

Three Paper Pitches: 10%

Term Paper Outline: 10%

Term Paper: 40%

PARTICIPATION

I am hoping that this class can be collaborative, in the sense that we will all be learning things from each other. To this end, I would like to encourage everyone to get to know each other, to make themselves heard in class and on discord, to share the fruits of their extracurricular research, and to think of term papers as projects that we can all help each other with.

WEEKLY WRITING

You will be expected to submit a short piece of writing two nights before each class meeting (normally no later than Tuesday night before Thursday's class). You will submit it via Discord, in the appropriate channel for that day. For example, for the class on September 14th, you should post your weekly writing no later than the night of September 12th in the #W2-Sept12 channel on our discord server. These assignments should be concise enough that we can all read all of them rel-

atively quickly when preparing for class! Please aim for ~250 words or less.

This writing assignment should take the form of a paragraph or two in which you engage critically with one of that week's readings. The main thing I am looking for here is something that I can incorporate into class discussion, and that will help us all to learn something interesting about that week's topic. Here are some examples of things you could write:

1. A criticism of one of the arguments in a reading.

2. An argument against the conclusion in a reading.

3. An argument in favor of one of the conclusions of a reading that isn't in the reading.

4. A summary of some empirical evidence for or against a reading's conclusions that the reading doesn't discuss.

5. A question about something in a reading that is unclear or confusing, along with an explanation about why it is hard to understand.

Whichever of these you do, you should cite whatever source(s) influenced you (if any) and try to summarize the key argument or evidence in enough detail that we can usefully discuss it in class. These short writing assignments are also great places to start trying out ideas that could eventually form the basis of a term paper.

TERM PAPER

You've heard of term papers. Defend a thesis with evidence and arguments, citing sources where appropriate. I am not going to set a length requirement for everyone in the class because different students are at different stages and so writing different-length papers would be appropriate. For example: If you have a QP1 coming up next year, you might want something around 4000 words so that you can perhaps rework it for that, but if your QP2 is coming up, or if you will be needing a writing sample to apply to graduate school, you might want to write a paper that's an appropriate length for that. I will ask only that you propose a specific length and explain why in your pitch for the paper (see below), and then stick to it. The paper will be due **no later than Monday, December 18th**.

PAPER PITCHES

A paper pitch is a ≤250-word proposal for a term paper. It should specify a thesis that you're going to defend, the basics of an argumentative strategy for defending it, some research on which you're planning to draw, and a target length. You should submit this via the #pitch-a-paper channel on discord, so that I and others can give you feedback on the feasibility of the pitch and suggestions about how you could write the paper. I am also happy to meet with you about the paper.

You should submit at least three of these pitches before Thanksgiving break (let's make the **due date Monday, November 20th**). The idea behind submitting three of them is to get you in the mindset of considering various topics that you could write about throughout the semester. To that end, I encourage you to write up one of these whenever a paper idea comes to you, rather than waiting until the deadline. Try submitting one in week 2 or 3!

PAPER OUTLINE

Once you choose which of your pitches to develop into a term paper, you should write an outline and submit it **no later than Friday, December 8th**. The outline should walk through the thesis, argument, and some of the bibliography in greater detail than in the pitch, but it's okay if the outline is still in bullet-point form. It should be between one-quarter and one-half of the proposed length of the paper. You can submit these to me privately, by attaching a PDF to a DM in Discord.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE OF TOPICS
(This is subject to change. For the most up to date schedule and readings, see the website.)

August 31: Introduction

September 7: No Class (Dan will be out of town)

September 14th: Intention Recognition and its Psychological Underpinnings

September 21: Designing Communicative Acts

September 28: Planning Conversations Together

October 5: Mindreading in Communication

October 12: Visit from Elmar Unnsteinsson

October 19: Visit from Paula Rubio Fernandez

October 26: Background Information and Common Ground

November 2: Keeping Track of What We're Talking About

November 9: Semantics and Cognitive Architecture

November 16: Polysemy, Language, and Thought

November 30: Visit from Karen Lewis

December 7: Verbal Working Memory

December 14 (Makeup class?): The Evolution of Language