

# The Origins and Evolution of Language – LING 2170

---

INSTRUCTOR Gareth Roberts

OFFICE HOURS By appointment

E-MAIL [gareth.roberts@ling.upenn.edu](mailto:gareth.roberts@ling.upenn.edu)

LOCATION TBD

TIMES Tuesday & Thursday 12:00–1:30

PREREQUISITES None

**COURSE DESCRIPTION** While communication is abundant throughout the living world, the human communication system we call language seems to stand out. Indeed, if humans themselves can be said to stand out among other species on Earth, it may well be language that played the crucial role in getting us here. So where does language come from? Some people have called this the hardest problem in science, but the last three decades have seen a real renaissance in scientific attempts to answer it. This seminar will examine both the results of this multidisciplinary endeavor and the tools that have been employed in it. It will involve discussions of the nature of language and its place among other communication systems and will touch on fundamental questions of what it means to be human.

**READINGS** There is no textbook, but there will be readings provided over the course of the semester. These will be made available on Canvas. Students looking for a good one volume book on the topic of the class are recommended to obtain a copy of W. Tecumseh Fitch's *The Evolution of Language* (2010; Cambridge University Press), from which some of the reading for the course will be drawn. However, owning the book is not required (and online copies are available from Penn Libraries).

**GRADE COMPOSITION** Your grade will be composed of two parts as follows:

<b>Short homework assignments, mini-quizzes, and small projects</b>	50%
<b>Final essay/project</b>	50%

That is, half of your grade will come from a variety of short offline quizzes, homework assignments, and small projects. Most of these will be collaborative; that is, you are not only permitted but strongly encouraged to work together (whether synchronously or asynchronously).

The remaining half of your grade will come from a larger project, which can also be collaborative (although the final write up has to be your own work). This project could involve a detailed experimental design, or an analysis of real data, or an essay arguing a position on a particular controversy in the field. You will start planning for this early in the semester in conversation with the instructor.

**CLASS STRUCTURE** The class will involve both synchronous (i.e., in person) and asynchronous activities.

## SYNCHRONOUS ACTIVITIES

- The class will meet from 12pm to 1:30pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the semester
- These classes will mostly involve interactive activities and discussions, both with the whole class and in small groups

## ASYNCHRONOUS ACTIVITIES

- Weekly preparation for synchronous classes, including readings, short videos, and similar
- Graded assignments
- You are encouraged (though not required) to collaborate synchronously or asynchronously on almost all graded work.