Topics in the Cultural Evolution of Language – LING 6170

INSTRUCTOR	Gareth Roberts
OFFICE HOURS	By appointment
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LOCATION	TBA
MEETING TIME	10:15am–11:44am Mondays and Wednesdays
COURSE DESCRIPTION	The observation that languages evolve, and that new languages evolve out of old ones, predates similar observations concerning biological species. However, while the study of biological evolution has flourished since the time of Darwin, the study of language change parted company from it, with less attention coming to be paid to the idea that language change can be understood in evolutionary terms. Towards the end of the twentieth century, things began to change. The scientific study of cultural evolution (i.e., the non-biological evolution of socially transmitted behaviors) became reinvigorated, as did the scientific study of the origins and biological evolution of language, accompanied by a realization that both biological and cultural evolutionary processes may be important to the question of how we came to have languages like those we observe today. The use of computational simulations (including experiments with robots) played an important role in this reinvigoration, a trend driven partly by a serious lack of data in some areas. Towards the very end of the century, and increasing dramatically in the first decade of the twenty-first, the dominance of computational simulations gave way to laboratory experiments with human subjects, in some cases based very closely on computational simulations, in others drawing on methods already in use in fields such as psychology and economics, and in a few cases producing quite original new paradigms. More recently, there has been a tendency towards more integration both between these approaches and with other approaches. The purpose of this course is to introduce you to research on language as a culturally evolving entity and to put you in a position to make a genuine contribution to it. Each semester the course is taught will focus on a particular topic.
SEMESTER TOPIC	The planned topic for the Spring semester of 2024 is language contact, although students in the class are invited and encouraged to play a role in influencing the focus of the course. As the semester progresses, readings will be increasingly dominated by papers relevant to the topics of the students' final papers.
COURSE ORGANIZATION	In a typical week we will discuss one or two (thematically linked) papers; typically one or more students will lead the discussion, which will include a brief presentation summarizing the material. Interspersed in these student-led meetings will be instructor-led classes, including lectures designed to set the scene and to introduce or brush up on skills such as experimental design and writing research reports. The papers chosen for discussion will all be relevant to the cultural evolution of language in some way; however, there will be considerable latitude for students to play a role in choosing which papers to discuss, and this will be increasingly the case in the second half of the semester as students develop their own projects.
ASSESSMENT	Assessment will be based on two things: 20% of the grade will be based on leading discussions of papers. The remaining 80% will be based on a final paper on some aspect of the material covered in the class. A good option for such a paper might be designing an experiment or other empirical project in detail and writing it up, with projected results, as an in principle publishable paper. Alternatively, theoretical papers are an option. Students are expected to come up with paper topic by the middle of the semester at the latest and to settle on a final topic in dialogue with the instructor.