

Carnegie Mellon University

From the SelectedWorks of Adam Hodges

January 2012

Language in the USA (Prospective Syllabus)

Contact
Author

Start Your Own
SelectedWorks

Notify Me
of New Work



Available at: <http://works.bepress.com/adamhodges/41>

LANGUAGE IN THE USA

Adam Hodges

(Prospective syllabus for undergraduate course)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Americans grapple with a number of issues related to language in the areas of education, civil rights, and government policy. In this course, we will explore some of the language issues that have arisen in American society with emphasis placed on the way language itself has become the object of focus in social and political debates. One such case is the decision by the Oakland School Board in 1996 to recognize Ebonics as the primary language of its African American students. This decision created intense nationwide controversy, and illustrates the way race and socioeconomic issues intersect with language attitudes. Another contentious issue is bilingual education. The Bilingual Education Act was passed in 1968; but since 1998 several states have passed ballot initiatives to eliminate bilingual education programs from their public schools. These efforts are often related to the thorny question of whether English should be designated the official language of the United States, as well as immigration issues. Maintaining the languages of linguistic minorities takes on a whole new meaning when discussing Native American languages. When European colonization began, around 300 languages were spoken in North America. Around 150 of those languages remained at the beginning of the 21st century with most being moribund (i.e. no longer being learned by children) or beyond endangered (i.e. having between 10 and 100 mostly elderly speakers remaining). As we dissect issues such as these, we will bring to bear a (socio)linguistic perspective in an effort to consider how such a perspective might inform the debates Americans have about language policy. The goals of the course are (1) to gain an understanding of the (socio)linguistic view of language, (2) to explore the social perspectives that have arisen around language issues in American society, and (3) to critically consider the socio-historical circumstances that surround language policy debates in the United States.

SAMPLE BOOKS

Crawford, James. 2000. *At War with Diversity: US Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety*. Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters.

Finegan, Edward and John R. Rickford (eds.). 2004. *Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schmidt, Ronald. 2000. *Language Policy and Identity Politics in the United States*. Temple University Press.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. **Seminar participation (20%)** – Seminar participation includes:

Coming to class prepared to contribute to discussions: All seminar participants are expected to come to class fully prepared to discuss the readings assigned for that day. Preparation entails taking notes and jotting down thoughts, ideas or questions that came to you while reading. Be sure to have at least one written comment or question in hand at the beginning of class (e.g. a piece of insight you found useful or a question you would like the class to discuss) so that you have something ready to contribute.

Organizing/facilitating discussion for two class sessions. Each seminar participant is required to choose one day before mid-semester and one day after mid-semester to take the lead in organizing and facilitating discussion of the readings for that day. Discussion facilitators should compile a handout that outlines key terms, topics and/or questions to help structure and instigate class discussion.

2. **Written responses to class readings (40%):** Seminar participants are required to turn in written responses for ten days of readings. The class will be divided into two groups—a Tuesday group and a Thursday group—so that participants in the Tuesday group are responsible for responding to readings assigned for Tuesdays and participants in the Thursday group are responsible for those assigned on Thursdays. Written responses need to be submitted electronically before class on the day the readings are to be discussed. The first responses should be turned in during week 2 and thereafter through week 13 until a total of ten written responses have been submitted (this leaves two “free” weeks when responses aren’t necessary).
Written responses should be about 400-600 words (no more than two double-spaced pages). The responses are expected to succinctly engage with the readings for that day. They should *not* simply be summaries of the day’s readings; instead, they should demonstrate your thoughtful, considered reflections on the topic. This should give you a chance to organize your thoughts on paper before you come to class to discuss the readings. As the semester progresses, you are encouraged to draw connections between the themes discussed from week to week.
3. **Final Paper and Class Report (40%):** For the final paper, seminar participants should choose a particular language issue to examine in detail. Please consult with me on your topic by the end of week 12 (earlier is encouraged). The recommended paper length is 10-15 double-spaced pages. Please use in-text citations and gather your references at the end. On the last day of class, you are expected to provide an informal summary of your paper-in-progress to the class.