**Language and Politics:**
*Perspectives on the Semiotics of Power*

Reed College
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**Course Description**

In this course, we will explore a number of the core issues of contemporary sociopolitical theory from a semiotic and linguistic anthropological perspective.

We begin with a close study of elements of Peirce’s semiotic architectonic, on the basis of which we will develop a vocabulary and a conceptual apparatus appropriate to an investigation of the semiotic (including, of course, linguistic) aspects of power and authority.

The larger part of the course is organized thematically, and moves, roughly, from the “lower” (micro) level of semiotic process to the “higher” (macro) level. During the first part of the course, then, we will be concerned with questions such as: To what degree is power a semiotic phenomenon? How is ritual interactivity implicated in the construction of authority? What makes political language effective? What are the semiotic and linguistic mechanisms through which novel political structures are instituted? How can language itself—and other semiotic modalities—emerge as a key political issue? In the latter part of the course, we will address questions such as: In what sense are “nations” and other political communities linguistically constructed? How might states be legitimated or authorized by particular discursive forms? Is a common language necessary (or sufficient) for forming a cohesive political community? What role do the institutions of linguistic standardization play in modern statehood? How does political rhetoric, or propaganda, “work”?

Students are responsible for writing a (very) short, weekly reaction paper; these might be one page, or five pages. It is important to note that reaction papers are not meant to be literature reviews; rather, you are asked either, to think (in writing) about one or more of the focus questions (I will generally hand out a detailed set of focus questions for each “Theme” [see Course Schedule, below], and I will make it a habit of discussing the relevant focus questions in the final minutes of each class period), or, to consider any topic addressed in the relevant reading that moves you, excites you, bothers, confuses, distracts, annoys, or otherwise touches you. Since reaction papers are due—and since I will read them—prior to class discussion, you are encouraged to write about both those aspects of the reading that you find interesting and those you find difficult or confusing (in short, to write about those topics you would like to see covered, in one or another way, in class).
GRADING

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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Percentage of Final Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-Class Essays</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Every so often, quite unannounced, I will ask you to write a short—10 to 15 minute—essay, in class, on a theme centrally relevant to the current topic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Essay</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>A 7-10 page essay on a topic chosen from a set of contenders I will provide (unless you have a better idea).</td>
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| Reactions/Participation | 50%                       | (i) Participation in conference is obligatory; satisfactory participation means—at a minimum—being prepared to address each of the relevant focus questions. I take participation very seriously (as reflected in the fact that it represents the larger part of your final grade): it is extraordinarily difficult, in fact, to earn an “A” in this class without contributing to conference.  
(ii) Note that “contribution,” should not be taken to mean “talking a great deal”; rather, it means engaging in class discussion in such a way that it is clear to me that you have (a) made a real effort to read (and understand) the assignments, and (b) spent some quality time with the relevant focus questions. Note that both conditions (a) and (b) may be nicely satisfied by posing questions to, or sharing confusions with, the conference at large; asking good questions about the more difficult or confusing aspects of the assigned reading—in a sense, that is, being able to express just what it is you don’t understand—can be a uniquely positive, productive way to contribute to class discussion.  
(iii) Participation in class and engagement with the assigned readings are mutually informing; it is a virtual certainty that you will not be able to keep up either with my mini-lectures or with class discussion if you are not, also, keeping up with the readings. Similarly, the assigned readings will likely remain opaque to you should you not actively engage in conference.  
(iv) Students are expected to email their weekly reactions/responses to me prior to the first class of the week; typically, this means they will be due on Sunday. Note that the reactions/responses are not “graded” as such, nor, as a rule, will I return them. Instead, I take the responses as a particularly significant measure of the degree to which you are engaging with, and also understanding, the assignments—and so, too, they help me determine which topics, themes, aspects of the assignments, etc., deserve the most attention in class. |
COURSE SCHEDULE

THEME 1  Course Introduction; Peirce’s Semiotic Architectonic and its Utility for SocioCultural and SocioLinguistic Theory and Analysis

(i) Goals of the course; what I expect from students, and what students can expect from me; review of this syllabus; (ii) Question: Why Peirce? Answer: Peirce’s semiotic theory provides an explicitly defined, philosophically/logically grounded, and logically principled conceptual and lexical apparatus that allows us to make the subtle distinctions necessary to make sense of meaningful human action, sociocultural and linguistic facts, processes and events, and the kinds of relations they contract one with another. In short, Peirce gives us a vocabulary with which we can say interesting things about socioculture in general, and power and authority in particular. (iii) The major trichotomies; the sign-relation as the locus of all modalities of representation. (iv) Students should be able to analyze, and typologically locate, anything in the universe (insofar as it represents (= acts as a sign)), with respect to the sociosemiotic vocabulary developed in this Theme.

❖ Peirce, What is a Sign?
❖ Chandler, Semiotics for Beginners: Signs [on disc as .pdf, .doc, and .html]
❖ Chandler, Semiotics for Beginners: Strengths of Semiotic Analysis
❖ Ransdell, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) [Entry in Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics]
❖ Hoffman, The 1903 Classification of Triadic Sign-Relations
❖ Hanks, Indexicality
❖ CSP Study Guide-I: Key Terms in Quotation
❖ CSP Study Guide-II: 76 Definitions of the Sign in Quotation
❖ Peirce Practice Handout (with exercises)

THEME 2  The Ground of the Political: on the Constitution of Human Collectivities-I

The notion of social/political power; on institutionalization and sociocultural typification; the linguistic and semiotic aspects of (arguably) the central problematics of sociopolitical theory, namely, the constitution of human collectivities—the construction of “groupness”—and the question of the legitimization of such collectivities, i.e., the naturalization of convention.

❖ Berger & Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (pp. 1-45 [skim, don’t skip]; 47-104 [read]; 105-128 [skim]; 129-183 [skim or skip]; 185-189 [read]) [Main 2-hour reserves: BD175.B4]
❖ Berger/Luckmann Study Guide with FQs
❖ Bourdieu Study Guide with FQs
THEME 3  

**Power in Linguistic Form?**

Can formalization—the strict ‘fixing’ of discourse genres—itself become a kind of power or coercion? Can we locate authority in the very words themselves? Or is the power that seems to inhere in words only the power of the speaker? On the conditions of production and reproduction of authorized language and its (unequal, class-grounded) distribution, and the ritual ground of authoritative discourse; on multiple discursive norms; the construal of power as the recognition of and familiarity with a repertoire of norms; why is the belief in the magical effectiveness of words so widespread?

*Bloch*, *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society* (Chapter 1, “Introduction”)

*Parkin*, *Political Language*

*Duranti*, *Grammar and Politics: Agency in Samoan Political Discourse*

*Tambiah*, *The Magical Power of Words*


*Hanks*, *Pierre Bourdieu and the Practices of Language*

THEME 4  

**On the Constitution of Human Collectivities-II: Poetics, Performativity, and Power**

On poetic effectiveness; “performativity” as explanation; the concept of “novelty” in contemporary North American culture and the concept of novelty in contemporary social theory (and contemporary linguistics); in what sense does the constitution of a “new” social group create something from nothing; the apparent social magic of political constitution; entextualization and decontextualization as fundamental semiotic processes; linguistic and semiotic anthropology and the language of the courtroom.

*Douglas*, *How Institutions Think* (Selections)

*Durkheim*, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Selections)

*Bauman & Briggs*, *Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life*

*Mertz*, *Legal Language: Pragmatics, Poetics, and Social Power*

*Honig*, *Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic*

*Turino*, *Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music*

THEME 5  

**Language: a Weapon of the Weak?**

On the linguistic consequences of oppression; dominance and the discursive manifestations of resistance; a (flawed) model of the role of language in political conflict, of power and the articulation of opposition to it; critical perspectives on that model.

*Scott*, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (Preface, Chapters 1-2)

*Mitchell*, *Everyday Metaphors of Power* (Review Essay)

*Gal*, *Language and the “Arts of Resistance”* (Review Essay)

*Kulick*, *Causing a Commotion: Public Scandal as Resistance Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*
THEME 6  

Language: a Weapon of the Strong? 
The Question of ‘Hate Speech’

Arguments in favor of the criminalization of “hate speech” (as variously defined; essentially, however, ‘hate speech’ is most often conceived as [effective] talk by the powerful directed at the powerless); how is it possible that these words are powerful? Speech-act theory and the performative effectiveness of “pornographic” representation; the potentially-liberating effects of “transgressive” speech and “transgressive” performativity in general; the state as neutral arbiter—the state and the establishment of appropriate meanings, and legislation with respect to the performative effects words and expressions. Mill’s classic arguments for a “fundamentalist” free-speech position and their contemporary reflexes.

❖ JS Mill, On Liberty (Chapter 1, “Introductory”; Chapter 2, “Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion”)
❖ Lawrence, If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus
❖ Lee, Legal Weapons for the Weak
❖ Matsuda, Public Response to Racist Speech
❖ Villanueva, Ethnic Slurs or Free Speech
❖ MacKinnon, Only Words [Main 2-hour reserves: KF4772.M33 1993]
❖ Butler, Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative

THEME 7  
The Politics of Language 
Rhetoric and Style; Propaganda and “Totalitarian Language”

Explicitly political language; rhetoric as the locus of sociopolitical ideologies; the politics of style and the stylistic/rhetorical characteristics of political communities; “our” propaganda and “theirs”; is there a specifically totalitarian (or authoritarian) language (of the rulers; of the ruled)? Return to the question of the discursive manifestations of oppression.

❖ Gal, Bartok’s Funeral: Representations of Europe in Hungarian Political Rhetoric
❖ Silverstein, Talking Politics: The Substance of Style from Abe to ‘W’
❖ Orwell, Politics and the English Language
❖ Wedeen, Acting ‘As If’: Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria
❖ Gross, A Note on the Nature of Soviet Totalitarianism
❖ Havel, The Power of the Powerless

THEME 8  

Language and the Political History of the United States: 
A Republic of Words?

Aspects of the construction of the United States of America as a language/speech community; the role(s) of language in racial, social, and class differentiation in the context of nation-making
in North America; the mediating function of language in ideologies of North American sameness and difference.


**THEME 9**  
**Hegemony and Ideology:**  
*Language as an Iconic Index (Emblem) of Nationhood*

Traditional approaches to the language/nation nexus and their critiques; discursive practices and the construction of specifically national identities; standardization—and ideologies of standard languages—as a key element in nation-making and state-formation.

- **Babadzan**, *Anthropology, Nationalism, and the ‘Invention of Tradition’*
- **Havranek**, *The Functional Differentiation of the Standard Language*
- **Milroy**, *Language Ideologies and the Consequences of Standardization*
- **Silverstein**, *Monoglot “Standard” in America: Standardization and Metaphors of Linguistic Hegemony*

**THEME 10**  
**Language and the Political History of the United States-**II:  
*War and Terror, American National Identity and the Contemporary “Propaganda State”*

Recent scholarly approaches to the discursive style of contemporary American governmentality; the discourse of terror and the language of war in the 21st century.

- **Mitchell**, *9/11: Criticism and Crisis*
- **Noon**, *Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, The War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory*
- **Graham**, et al, *A Call to Arms at the End of History: a Discourse-Historical Analysis of George W. Bush’s Declaration of War on Terror*
❖ Kellner, 9-11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: a Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics
❖ Chomsky, Collateral Language (Noam Chomsky interviewed by David Barsamiam)
❖ Smith, Bush’s Enthymeme of Evil: the Amalgamation of 9/11, Iraq, and Moral Values
❖ Butt, et al, Grammar: the First Covert Operation of War