The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

UG Course Syllabus (Fall 2026)

Introduction to Language

HUMA1010

3 credits

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Course Description

You will be introduced to the uniqueness of human language as a communication system. You will examine how language is learnt and the way our mind stores meaning and organizes information. Your understanding will be reinforced with examples taken from a wide range of languages and interdisciplinary perspectives from psychology, sociology, computer science and communication studies.

We will cover content that can be broadly divided into two sections – "mind" and "meaning".

i) Mind: How is language represented in our brain? Language is one of the most distinctive characteristics of humans, but what makes it a unique communicative system?

ii) Meaning: On-line linguistic processing requires fast mapping between the forms and meaning. Incoming words need to be structured into phrases, sentences, and ultimately discourses to be properly interpreted. How is meaning organized and stored in the mind to allow this?

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Examine the scientific nature of language
2. Describe the distinctive characteristics of the human communicative system
3. Demonstrate fundamental knowledge of the biological foundation of human language
4. Analyze languages by employing conceptual framework of meaning representation

Assessment and Grading

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
In-class quiz 1	25%	23/9
In-class quiz 2	25%	9/10
In-class quiz 3	25%	4/11
In-class quiz 4	25%	27/11

* Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be released within two weeks of the due date.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

[add to/delete table as appropriate]

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
In-class quizzes	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3. ILO4	The in-class quizzes directly evaluate students' ability to i) examine the scientific nature of language, ii) describe the distinctive characteristics of the human communicative system, iii) demonstrate fundamental knowledge of the biological foundation of human language, and iv) analyze languages by employing conceptual framework of meaning representation

Grading Rubrics

Rubrics for In-class Quizzes

Criteria	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Marginal	Fail	Mapping to Course ILOs
Overall conceptual accuracy	Consistently accurate understanding of core concepts with no or negligible errors.	Mostly accurate answers with a small number of errors that do not indicate systematic misunderstanding.	Basic understanding with several errors or inconsistencies.	Frequent errors suggesting weak or fragmented understanding.	Answers are largely incorrect, indicating minimal or no conceptual understanding.	ILO 1, 2
Knowledge of biological foundations of language	Accurately answers relevant questions, demonstrating solid grasp of concepts	Mostly accurate responses with minor gaps in knowledge.	Basic awareness of biological foundations but with multiple inaccuracies.	Shows limited knowledge of biological foundations of language.	Demonstrates little to no knowledge of biological foundations of human language.	ILO 3
Knowledge of meaning representation frameworks	Accurately answers relevant questions, demonstrating solid grasp of concepts	Mostly accurate responses with minor gaps in knowledge.	Basic awareness of meaning representation but with multiple inaccuracies.	Shows limited knowledge of meaning representation	Demonstrates little to no knowledge of meaning representation	ILO 4

Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of subject matter, expertise in problem-solving, and significant creativity in thinking. Exhibits

		a high capacity for scholarship and collaboration, going beyond core requirements to achieve learning goals.
B	Good Performance	Shows good knowledge and understanding of the main subject matter, competence in problem-solving, and the ability to analyze and evaluate issues. Displays high motivation to learn and the ability to work effectively with others.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Possesses adequate knowledge of core subject matter, competence in dealing with familiar problems, and some capacity for analysis and critical thinking. Shows persistence and effort to achieve broadly defined learning goals.
D	Marginal Pass	Has threshold knowledge of core subject matter, potential to achieve key professional skills, and the ability to make basic judgments. Benefits from the course and has the potential to develop in the discipline.
F	Fail	Demonstrates insufficient understanding of the subject matter and lacks the necessary problem-solving skills. Shows limited ability to think critically or analytically and exhibits minimal effort towards achieving learning goals. Does not meet the threshold requirements for professional practice or development in the discipline.

Course AI Policy

The use of Generative AI tools is generally encouraged as a learning support. Students may use GenAI to revise lecture content, clarify concepts, explore examples, and support independent study outside of assessments.

However, GenAI tools are strictly not permitted during in-class quizzes, which are designed to assess individual understanding under controlled conditions. Any use of GenAI during these quizzes constitutes a breach of academic integrity.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Feedback on assignments will include [specific details, e.g., strengths, areas for improvement]. Students who have further questions about the feedback including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Resubmission Policy

In general, resubmission or reassessment is not applicable.

Required Texts and Materials

Required weekly readings will be provided on Canvas.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.

[Optional] Additional Resources

Rowe & Levine. 2012. Concise Introduction to Linguistics. Pearson.

Aitchison, J. 2003. Words in the Mind: An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon. 3rd edition. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Bates, E., & Elman, J. 1996. Learning rediscovered. Science, 274, 1849-1850.

Pinker, S. 1994. The Language Instinct. NY: Harper Collins.