

LING 3050 - Communication Across Species (Spring 2026)

Instructor: Dr. Konstantia Kapetangianni

Email: Konstantia.Kapetangianni@unt.edu

Time: Tu/Th 11:00AM - 12:20PM

Location: Wh 314

Instructor's Office Hours: Wednesday 4:00pm - 5:00pm on Zoom and in person by appointment

Course Description

This course explores animal and human communication systems using insights from several different fields, including linguistics, physics, psychology, neuroscience, and cognitive science. Animals communicate using a wide range of visual displays, vocal calls, songs, chemical signals, and more. While humans “communicate” via some of these paralinguistic channels as well, we also have Human Language, which is structurally unique, and which allows us to communicate far beyond the *here and now* of any known non-human, animal communication system. This course surveys the widely diverse forms of communication used throughout the animal kingdom, from insects, to frogs, to birds, bats, monkeys, and apes, and it considers how or if the classic Hockettian design features of Human Language can be used to describe them. The course also considers a variety of theories and research, and we will see that there is a great deal of both controversy and legitimate points to be made on both sides of the issues. A significant part of the course will thus require students to utilize critical thinking, and evaluate empirical and quantitative evidence, in drawing and communicating conclusions.

This course assumes no knowledge of linguistics. During the course, we will learn more about phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax and how these aspects of human language apply to the types of communication used by non-humans.

Learning Objectives

Critical Thinking: Analyze claims in original research and develop students’ own arguments based on evidence.

Communication: Present claims, conclusions, and controversies found in original research, as well as student evaluations of these, in both individual and group projects.

Empirical and Quantitative: Identify, process, interpret, and evaluate various kinds of empirical and quantitative data in original research studies.

Teamwork: With group partners, students collaborate on and prepare a project on a descriptive, analytical topic provided by the course instructor.

Required Textbook (reserved at UNT Willis library)

Anderson, Stephen. (2004). *Doctor Dolittle's Delusion: Animals and the Uniqueness of Human Language*. Yale University Press.

Other Recommended Textbooks

Fouts, Roger & Stephen Tukul Mills. (1998). *Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees*. Harper.

Grandin, Temple. (2005). *Animals in Translation*. New York: Scribner. Harvest Books.

Hauser, Mark. (2000). *Wild Minds: What Animals Really Think*. Henry Holt and Company.

The password for accessing the e-reserved materials at the library for the course is: LING3050S26. The direct link is posted on Canvas.

Course credit requirement and grading

Participation and discussion	20%
Group presentation (Signature)	20%
Written assignment 1	25%
Written assignment 2 (Signature)	25%
Quizzes	10%

Communication

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While I want to make ourselves as available as possible to each of you, I do have to place some limitations on when we can be contacted. I would prefer that most general questions go through the General Questions Discussion forum in the Discussion Board area. If you have a general question about the course or assignments, please post it there. Either I will answer it, or one of your classmates will. This way we can all benefit from questions asked, and they can be answered in a venue that the whole class can see. You may also want to find someone in class to be a "buddy" with. This will give you at least one other person who you can email with questions.

If you have a private question, please contact me via email and I will respond within 24 hours on weekdays (usually sooner). Please do not expect a response over the weekend.

Normally, I will return feedback on all written assignments within 1 week of the due date. However, if I see that I will be unable to return your feedback that quickly, I will post an Announcement to let everyone know when it can be expected. You can expect to see me participate in the discussion board after all student original posts have been posted - usually on the Friday of the first week of the module.

Attendance & Participation

Attendance in class is expected :-)! Absences will be excused and not counted toward the grade only in the case of illness, accident, personal tragedy, or travel for academic functions and should be communicated to the instructor in advance wherever possible. Students should provide proper official documentation in order to have absences excused for the reasons mentioned above. Multiple unexcused absences will result in poor grades for participation.

To achieve the best possible grade for participation you should:

- Come to every class
- Complete all weekly assigned readings
- Contribute to class discussions by finding and sharing information about the various topics we will cover throughout the semester.
- Come prepared to discuss the texts you have read, and volunteer your ideas in discussion. Even if you do not understand a reading, you can participate by asking questions!!!

Readings and lecture notes

Students are expected to have read all assigned readings before class and also contribute information about the various topics we will cover by sharing it in a form of a short presentation with their group partners every week. Lecture notes based on the reading and the class lecture will also be provided after each class as an aid to understanding the textbook and readings. The lecture notes are just a skeletal treatment of the lecture, however, and are not a substitute for the class lecture or the reading. Students will be learning about a new field of study in this class, therefore some of the materials and concepts may seem fairly complex. In such cases, students should read the assigned readings and go over the lecture notes multiple times. Students are expected to bring the assigned readings in class sessions on the days that they are discussed.

Extra Credit

There are no extra credit assignments for this course. If you miss a significant portion of class (3 or more classes), you may submit a make-up assignment. Please contact me when you have missed, or know you will miss, 3 or more classes.

Coursework

Class Discussions

One of your assignments for this course will be to find and share information from research-based scientific articles or other sources, on the various topics we will discuss weekly in class. For this assignment, you will need to cite the specific source you used, i.e. journal article, website, etc. and give a short presentation in order to share the content and information with the rest of the class.

Written assignments

There will be two major written assignments. The first, and shorter assignment, will involve a summary of assigned readings/videos and a critical review of the presented arguments and ideas. The second assignment is longer, and it will require you to analyze a documentary video of bonobo ape, Kanzi, and the primatologist Dr. Savage-Rumbaugh and claims about language. Written assignments must be submitted on Canvas on the days that they are due. No late written work will be accepted.

Quizzes

There will be regular quizzes given in and out of class to be sure students are keeping up with the readings and discussion topics. If you are absent on a quiz day, the quiz cannot be made up unless you have a legitimate excuse as defined in the [UNT Student Attendance and Authorized Excuse](#)[Links to an external site.](#) policy number 06.039.

Group Presentation

We will have group presentations in class (2 students in each group) on the assigned readings or topics of students' choice and interest. These group presentations will be given over the course of the semester and should not take longer than 20-25 minutes each. Students will be allowed to choose their topic and content of the presentation, if they prefer so. The presentation may involve summarizing a linguistic or other article related to the topics covered in class. In this case, it will involve reading the article carefully to fully understand the argument, creating an outline, and writing a cogent summary of the main points.

The presentation can be given in PowerPoint or Prezi and should have the following structure:
(i) introduction: main arguments/ideas, (ii) data and methods (if applicable), (iii) results, (iv) discussion: implications of arguments and beyond.

Class behavior (instructor's policy)

Be on time! Please make every effort to get to class on time. It is important that you don't arrive late or leave early. Repeated late arrival will result in loss of points in your attendance grade.

Refrain from using electronic devices in class! Please avoid using cell phones or other electronics during class time. It is disruptive for the instructor and your fellow classmates!

Be respectful! Avoid eating, sleeping, chatting or working on other classes.

Class behavior (University policy)

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The university's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including university and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at www.unt.edu/csrr[Links to an external site.](#)

Academic Integrity

Please make sure that all the work you submit in this course is **your own!!!**

It is your responsibility to know the definitions and consequences of plagiarism, cheating etc. as outlined in the Code of Student Conduct and Discipline, available in the Undergraduate Catalog and online

at [http://catalog.unt.edu/content.php?catoid=5&navoid=244#Student Standards of Academic Integrity](http://catalog.unt.edu/content.php?catoid=5&navoid=244#Student_Standards_of_Academic_Integrity)[Links to an external site.](#)

Disability Accommodation Statement

Students with any special needs or disabilities (including learning disabilities) should inform me of their needs as soon as possible so that proper accommodations can be made.

"The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding

your specific needs in a course. You may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the Office of Disability Accommodation website at <http://www.unt.edu/oda>Links to an external site.. You may also contact them by phone at 940.565.4323.”

Signature Assignment: Group Project Presentation

[Core Objectives Met: Critical Thinking, Teamwork, Communication]

Project description

For this assignment, you will work with your group partners to collaborate and prepare a project presentation based on one of the descriptive, analytical prompts provided below. Using CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS, you will apply what you have learned about animal and human communication systems to develop claims, support the claims with arguments, and present a conclusion. You will use TEAMWORK SKILLS to collaborate positively with your team members. This will involve original contributions on the part of each team member as well as responding to feedback constructively within the team. Finally, you will COMMUNICATE your findings in a visual presentation to the class. In this assignment you will demonstrate mastery of three core objectives for the Life and Physical Sciences Core Curriculum area.

Suggested Project Prompts

Below are five possible prompts which your group might take as a point of departure for your projects. While the various prompts allow room for flexibility and creativity in terms of which species, systems, modes, etc., are considered, it is important that your group addresses the main points in whichever prompt you choose. If your group would like to explore a different set of questions not provided below, this will need to be approved in advance by the instructor. Please discuss with me as soon as possible beforehand to be sure the topic is suitable and that proper resources can be found.

1. Describe the mode(s) of communication of a particular species we did not cover in class, explain how it is used, what functions it serves and what are some major features and properties that characterize it. Be sure to discuss the ways it does or doesn't align with the design features of Human Language we have discussed in class.
2. Describe and compare the mode(s) of communication of various species.
3. Select a specific mode of communication (e.g. olfactory communication) and describe

how it is used by various species, what functions it serves and what are some major features and properties that characterize it. Be sure to discuss the ways it does or doesn't align with the design features of Human Language we have discussed in class.

4. Provide a comprehensive and detailed analysis of how Human Language communication compares to another specie's communicative modes. Be sure to discuss the ways it does or doesn't align with the design features of Human Language we have discussed in class.

5. Explore the issue of nature versus nurture in animal communication systems referring specifically to the topics we have addressed in class. How might this compare to Human Language?

Organization and Structure of the Presentation

Your presentation must include:

1. A title and the names of the group members
2. An introduction summarizing the topic you focused on and how you address it.
3. Body of presentation presenting, i) the basic facts and a detailed description. Make sure to use clear headings for separate sections if there are distinct subtopics you're focusing on, ii) review of any additional information you may have found about the topic from external sources. iii) your analysis and claims on the relevant topic.
4. A conclusion summarizing the major observations and results.
5. A complete reference list. You must properly cite all your sources/references in the presentation and at the end of the presentation in MLA or APA style.
6. A minimum of 12 slides.

Grading Rubric

The group presentation will be graded on a total of 50 points for:

1. Explanation of the selected topic and component parts (15 pts)
2. Structure: well structured, clear and easy to follow presentation of information (5 pts)
3. Presentation, interpretation, and analysis of the topic, evidence, findings, and terminology (20 pts)
4. Richness: collection of detailed information, use of visual and audio media, proper use and citation of sources (5 pts).
5. Teamwork: overall evidence of preparation, collaboration, and constructive team climate. (5 pts).

Signature Assignment: Chimp Talk and Language

[Core Objectives Met: Empirical and Quantitative, Critical Thinking, Communication]

Project description

This is an individual written assignment based on observable evidence you will gather from a documentary entitled “Chimp Talk” (1998). The documentary, which is available through the UNT Media Library, contains footage of the bonobo ape, Kanzi, and primatologist, Dr. Savage-Rumbaugh, interacting and purportedly communicating. Demonstrating EMPIRICAL AND QUANTITATIVE skills, you will gather qualitative and quantitative evidence from the video to interpret based on the information we have covered in class. You will also employ CRITICAL THINKING skills, as you analyze the claims made in the documentary, the context, and opinions both for and against in the literature. With the evidence you have gathered, you will then develop an argument of your own assessment of the state of affairs. Finally, you will COMMUNICATE your findings in an essay of 1500 words. In this assignment you will demonstrate mastery of three core objectives for the Life and Physical Sciences Core Curriculum area.

Project Instructions

Watch the short documentary “Chimp talk” (14 mins) available through the UNT Media Library and write an essay that is informed by the following:

1. Make a detailed list of the behavioral, cognitive abilities, and other traits demonstrated by Kanzi (e.g. desire, humor, use of tools, emotions, memory, etc.). Be sure to note the timestamp in the video where each instance occurs.
2. The central attributes of language are: Symbolism/associations: signs representing actions and things; Creativity/productivity: creative combination of symbols to express new information; Semanticity: meaning; and Syntax: ordering of symbols in a consistent rule-governed way. Does the behavior of Kanzi show any of these features? Discuss evidence from the documentary of each of these attributes, noting timestamps of relevant instances.
3. How does Dr. Savage-Rumbaugh’s definition of ‘language’ compare to the one offered by Dr. Petitto, compared to what we have learned in class? Does Kanzi have ‘language’ according to Petitto’s definition, or the class definition?
4. Do you believe that Kanzi is communicating? Why or why not? What relation does this have regarding whether or not Kanzi is using ‘language?’ What does your own evidence support?
5. What linguistic abilities did Kanzi appear to develop during the training with keyboards and lexigrams and the human interaction? How does Kanzi’s ‘language’ development compare to that of human babies?
6. Based on the evidence you have collected, position your argument(s) with respect to both supporters and critics of Dr. Savage-Rumbaugh’s claims of Kanzi’s abilities.

Organization of the Paper

Your final paper should include:

1. An introduction of up to one page presenting what you have found in the documentary and how you will address it in the paper.
2. Body: Multiple sections as needed incorporating the information you have gathered in 1-6 above. Make sure to always cite the sources, references, previous studies in the text where relevant. You should use headings for separate sections if there are distinct subtopics you're focusing on.
3. A conclusion summarizing your main observations and findings.
4. A complete reference list. Include all references or secondary sources you used at the end of the paper, formatting them properly in MLA or APA style.

Format of Final Written Paper

The final project should have the following format:

- Approximately 1500 words
- Typed
- Double spaced
- Twelve-point Times New Roman font
- 1-inch margins on all sides
- Include a cover page with your name, title, date, and class, bold-faced and centered on the page

Grading Rubric

Your essay will be graded on:

- Depth of research: How well you address the questions: i.e. how well your evidence supports your claims. (30 pts).
- Clarity and organization: Logical flow, structured sections, and clear argumentation (10 pts).
- Proper citation and academic writing: Use of credible sources and adherence to citation style (5pts).
- Grammar and presentation: Attention to detail in proofreading and formatting (5pts).