Seminar on Language and Deception

Syllabus

MW 1:50-3:35, Olin 103

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Course description:
In this course we will examine the nuances of deception and persuasion through how we use and process language. We will take up three main issues. The first is what it means to deceive, how people deceive others through language, and how people are deceived. What methods do they use, and on what psychological principles do these methods rely? The second issue is why people deceive. What purposes do their deceptions serve—in court, in advertising, in bureaucracies, in business transactions, and in everyday face-to-face conversation? The third issue is the ethics of deception. Is it ever legitimate to deceive others, and if so, when and why?

Two core questions that will inevitably arise over and over again are: (1) What is the difference between a lie and an untruth, and how do we distinguish between the two? (2) Can we make a useful distinction between explicit lies and implied or inferred lies?

Course Objectives:
1. Establish a habit of mind of critical thinking about claims made, including rhetoric, language, implication, images, and numbers.
2. Identify claims made through verbal or non-verbal implication.
3. Understand some of the psychological processes involved in language production and comprehension.
4. Understand some of the psychological processes involved in processing and remembering implied claims.
5. Reinforce content knowledge by conveying primary concepts and relevant psychological findings to a group of younger students through a group project.
6. Practice writing about psychological findings for a general audience and for a psychological audience.
7. Practice information literacy through finding and evaluating psychology primary source articles.
8. Reinforce knowledge of experimental design through critical analysis of primary source articles and through design of a new experiment.
9. Consider the range of types of false information that can be communicated and the moral consequences and social expectations surrounding these different types.
Course Expectations:

1. *Regular attendance at all classes* (10% of grade). This is a seminar, which means that the primary format will be discussion. If you aren’t in class, you can’t participate in the discussion. Making-up discussions on your own is just silly. Thus, if you miss three (3) or more classes for whatever reason (including illness), you will fail the class. Likewise, being late to a discussion (or a presentation) is disruptive and inconsiderate to the entire class. Please plan on being to class on time.

2. *Regular participation in classes* (10% of grade). The format of this seminar is primarily discussion. To have productive discussions, everyone needs not only to be present but also to be ready, willing and able to participate. I expect everyone to actively participate, even if you don’t usually actively participate in classes. This includes speaking up to offer opinions, comments, questions, connections, and listening carefully to the opinions, comments, questions and connections offered by your peers. Obviously, being prepared is important to a rewarding discussion. You should not only be familiar with the assigned readings each class but also have given some thought to the implications of the readings.

3. *Finding and presenting article and leading discussion* (10% of grade). In addition to participating in discussions, I would like for each of you to take responsibility for leading part of class discussion on two class days. You and a partner will be responsible for finding two primary source articles that relate to our class readings for the day. In class, you will each summarize an article in a 5-10 minute presentation, outlining the main assumptions, methods, findings, and ties to the class readings. In addition, you and your partner will provide 3-5 discussion questions for the class to ponder and lead the class in discussion for roughly 30 minutes. I would like for you and your partner to submit an annotated bibliography of 4-5 potential articles, rank ordered by preference, to me a week before the class you will present in. I will get back to you within 1-2 days to let you know which articles you should cover in class. The annotations should include the full APA style reference, the article abstract, and 2-4 sentences describing how the article relates to the course in general and the assigned readings for the class day in particular. This will require that you do some reading and work well in advance of your presentation day. A good place to start is the references for the class readings.

4. *Article blogs* (10% of grade). After presenting each of your articles in class, you need to submit a 500-750 word blog post on your article (you and your partner will each take an article). These posts should summarize your article’s main assumptions and hypotheses within the context of the course readings, provide a critical analysis of the study’s methods, and review the findings and conclusions. Papers should be posted to the Moodle forum for the blog posts, by no later than two days after your class article presentation. These papers should have a thesis, good paragraph structure, and sourcing of evidence. You should peruse some well-established science blogs to get a sense of what a good science blog post looks like (e.g., John Tierney at the New York Times, Not Exactly Rocket Science at National Geographic, SciCurious at Science News, the sadly now-defunct Cognitive Daily blog at Science Blogs, or one of the hundred or so blogs at Psychology Today).

5. *Online discussion participation* (10% of grade). I have created discussion forums on Moodle to help us start and continue thinking about the issues that arise in the readings and in discussion outside of class. These online discussion forums serve several purposes. (1) The
online discussion will encourage you to complete the reading in a timely fashion and to begin thinking before class about the larger implications of the readings. (2) The online discussion will give discussion leaders an opportunity to see what others in the class are thinking about: what issues are seen as important, interesting, controversial, or even confusing. (3) The online discussion will provide a forum for continuing discussion of topics throughout the term. I would like for you, as you see examples of deception or misleading information in everyday life, to comment about it on Moodle. (4) I hope that at the end of the class, we will have created an interesting reflection on issues of truth, deception, persuasion, and misdirection. The first two goals require that you add to the discussion before each class. Share any silly questions, piercing comments, idle thoughts, and inflammatory opinions you have (at least the ones regarding the assigned readings and class topics). Feel free to link to other websites, reference news articles, or include images. Please do not just summarize the findings. Feel free to respond to what others have written or to prior discussions begun in class. **We will set a deadline for posting to the discussion forums in class.** An ideal deadline is late enough that you have time to read the material, but early enough that those responsible for the discussion can have a glimpse into what you each are thinking. The posts don’t need to be your final, informed opinion on the set of readings, but should rather be a momentary insight about one or more of the readings for a given class period. Feel free to post multiple times about different topics as they occur to you as you read the articles. You are not required to post to Moodle for the day that you present your article, but you are welcome to do so.

6. **Media Literacy Project (25% of grade).** In the second half of the term, you will be working in groups with students from the Northfield Public Schools on a project related to advertising and media literacy. Your joint group will select a theme (e.g., jeans, fast food, energy drinks, video game systems, computers, cell phones, political ads) and find a variety of ads in your theme. Making use of the theories and research from class, you will discuss the ads with the high school students. In addition, each of you will select a cognitive process (e.g., mere exposure, implicature) to investigate more thoroughly, preferably one that is related to one or more of your selected ads. You will find additional primary sources that describe and explain this process in more detail and use this information to help the high school students deconstruct the ads. The project will culminate in a joint session on May 21, with each group presenting, discussing, and critiquing 2-3 ads. I expect that groups will meet at least one a week.

7. **Term Paper (25% of grade).** The readings and topics in the course have been very applied. One of the goals of cognitive psychology is to learn more about the mental processes underlying how people and animals interpret stimuli in the world. Interpreting language involves many interconnected processes, many of which we don’t yet fully understand. In place of a course examination, I would like for you to suggest a way to increase what we, as scientists, know about how people interpret language in ways that could be used to deceive. This contribution could take the form of a proposed experiment or a theoretical framework that could encompass several areas of research. This paper will allow you to explore one (or more) of the topics covered in this course in more detail and will challenge you to consider the implications of the current theories in the field. Plan on coming to talk to me by midterm about your first thoughts about the term paper.
Term paper proposal (due 5/6, 9am): Write a one-page description of your initial thoughts about the term paper. Outline your general topic, your ideas for experimentation (if applicable), and your method of analysis.

Term paper (due 6/9, 9am): The term paper should be a 10-14 page experimental proposal. The paper should be in APA format, with an introduction outlining previous research done on your topic (at least 10 articles), a method section outlining your proposed study, a results section describing how you might analyze your data, and a discussion section proposing implications in the field of communication of your proposed study. If you like, you can collect some data, but you must discuss your project with me before doing so.

Extension and Absence Policy:

Late work will not be accepted or graded. Situations such as illness and family crises are grounds for an extension. If you have the misfortune to be in such a situation, please contact your class dean and have him or her contact me to approve the extension. Having another assignment or exam due on the same day does not constitute a legitimate excuse. If you are involved in extracurricular activities that may take them off-campus on the day an assignment is due, please plan on submitting the work early.

Books and Readings:

We will be reading large parts of the following books in addition to other readings. Most of them are inexpensive, but you want to purchase a copy. Copies of all readings will be available on Moodle.

APA Publication Manual


**Topic Schedule**

March 31: Introduction
April 2: Truth and Deception
April 7: Conversational Pragmatics*
April 9: Conversational Implicature*
April 14: Perjury*
April 16: Visual Images in Advertising*
April 21: Advertising Language I*
April 23: Advertising Language II*
April 28: Surveys and Polls*
April 30: Social Influence and Statistical Reporting*
May 5: *No class: Midterm Break*
May 7: Perspective taking and Framing*
May 12: Political Language*
May 14: Bias in News Reporting*
May 19: Civility and Politeness*
May 21: *No class: Media Literacy Symposium (4:30-7:00pm)*
May 26: Detecting lies and deception I*
June 2: Detecting lies and deception II*
June 4: Ethics of Deception
June 9: *Term paper due*