

LING 444 (Origin and Evolution of Language) General Information Fall 2026 (draft of May 1)

Overview: When, how, and in what form did language first appear in our species? Is language a biological adaptation? If so, for what? If not, how did it come about?

Such questions were long regarded as unanswerable. But the last three decades have seen a resurgence of interest brought on by progress in linguistics, psychology and neuroscience, anthropology, archeology, paleontology, biology, genetics, primatology, and computer science/artificial life.

The study of the origin and evolution of language is perforce a multidisciplinary endeavor. Only through the marshaling of evidence from many different disciplines can theorizing about the language evolution be sufficiently constrained to remove it from the realm of speculation and allow it to become an area of legitimate scientific inquiry. Yet, one would have to be a monster of omniscience to command all the relevant information, let alone put it together in a single course. Our treatment must therefore be selective and focused on what linguistics can (and cannot) contribute to the inquiry. (3 credit hours)

Instructors. *Elliott Moreton*, Professor, Department of Linguistics, Smith Building, Room 101, moreton@email.unc.edu. Office hours are not yet fixed, but tentatively 10–12 a.m. on Wednesdays. *Paul Roberge*, Professor, Department of Linguistics, *** office ***, ptr@email.unc.edu. *** office hours ***

Meeting times and delivery mode. Instruction at UNC-CH returned to on-campus/in-person mode as of the fall term of 2023. We'll be meeting in Hamilton Hall, Room 150, on Mondays and Wednesdays, 3:35 – 4:50 pm. At present, we do not anticipate webcasting or recording the daily proceedings, and so remote participation — real-time or asynchronous — is not an option, unless, of course, circumstances down the line dictate otherwise.

Prerequisites and target audience. This course is pitched at advanced undergraduates with a linguistics major or minor and first-year master's students. For undergraduate students, LING 101, LING 101H, or the equivalent is an absolute minimum prerequisite. Ideally, however, you should also have successfully completed at least one “core” course in linguistics (syntax, morphology, phonology, phonetics), though historical linguistics, or language acquisition would be OK, too.

Required readings. To be posted to Canvas. See class schedule.

Grading. Undergraduate students can be assured that they are *not* competing with graduate students for grades. The respective grading scales are different, the latter group being evaluated according to what is essentially a pass/fail system.

Article summaries: 35%

Research project – oral presentation: 20%

Research project – written presentation: 20%

Final examination: 15%

Engagement (attendance, participation): 10%
TOTAL: 100%

This formula is not ironclad in the sense that the instructor reserves the right to adjust grades upward or downward to reflect significant improvement or fall-off in performance. We shall give these factors — alongside attendance and participation — close scrutiny when deciding borderline cases between one letter grade (or half-step) and another. So don't get complacent but don't give up if you start out slow.

Special needs. [Accessibility Resources and Service](#), a part of the [Division of Student Affairs](#), works with departments throughout the University to assure that its programs and facilities are accessible to every student. Students are responsible for establishing eligibility for services through ARS, for obtaining ARS recommendations for reasonable accommodations, and for initiating discussions with their instructors. Contact [ARS](#) for general information regarding facilities, documentation requirements, programs, and accommodations available for students with disabilities.

Counseling and Psychological Services. [CAPS](#) is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body through timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services, whether for short or long-term needs. Go to their [website](#) or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health Services building for a walk-in consultation to learn more.

Nondiscrimination and Title IX. The University's [Policy Statement on Non-Discrimination](#) applies to all educational programs and activities. Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to seek resources on campus or in the community. Incident reports can be made [online](#) to the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#), the Title IX coordinator (Elizabeth Hall – titleixcoordinator@unc.edu), Report and Response Coordinators in EOC (reportandresponse@unc.edu), [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) (confidential), or through the [Gender Violence Services Coordinators](#) (gvsc@unc.edu; confidential). Additional resources and contact information are available at [Safe at UNC](#).

Additional student resources. Links to information on [Campus Health](#), [The Learning Center](#), [The Writing Center](#), and other resources are given here and on the Sakai course site (Resources > External Links > UNC-CH and Triangle).

COVID. The indoor face mask requirement was lifted for most of the UNC-CH campus on March 7, 2022. If you feel more comfortable wearing a mask inside our building, you are free to do so. There are many reasons why a person may decide to continue to wear a mask, and that choice will be respected. For additional information on COVID-related community standards, protocols, testing, and vaccination, see the updated <https://carolinatogether.unc.edu/community-standards/Carolina Together> program website.

The [University Approved Absence](#) process has been streamlined for students who test positive and must isolate due to COVID-19. Positive tests conducted at Campus Health will automatically generate a UAA form. Students who test positive using an at-home test or at an

off-campus testing site can use this self-submit [form](#).

Auditors. Class meetings are restricted to enrolled students only. We are not admitting auditors to this class, for reasons having to do with past experience with noncredit persons just “sitting in,” and in view of the University’s [policy on course audits](#) <http://registrar.unc.edu/registration/registration-policies/auditing-a-course/> in general. (Ordinarily, audits are permitted only in large lecture-based courses and not in courses that require significant participation.)

LING 444 (Origin and Evolution of Language) Course Policies Fall 2026

This document contains class policies regarding attendance, late assignments, make-ups, the final examination, and ethical conduct.

No-show policy. If, for whatever reason, you decide not to take this class, the instructor would appreciate it if you would execute a drop/add action straight away. Otherwise, you are expected to attend class **beginning the first day of the semester**. The Office of the University Registrar has issued this [warning](#): If you fail to attend both of the first two class meetings during the first week of term, you are subject to being dropped from the class at the discretion of the instructor and without notice.

Attendance. Regular attendance is a student obligation. According to University's Class Attendance Policy (published in the [University Catalog](#) and on the [University Approved Absence Office](#) page), there is no right or privilege that permits students to be absent from class except for authorized University activities, religious observance or practice required by the student's faith, disability, as required by law and approved by [ARS](#) and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#), significant medical conditions, personal or family emergency. <https://odos.unc.edu/https://womenscenter.unc.edu/resources/gender-violence-services/https://eoc.unc.edu/what-we-do/accommodations/> Furthermore, there is no unofficial practice or custom that assures students a certain number of "cuts" per semester. See the [FAQs for students](#) published by the UAAO for further information.

Authorized University activities include those events and activities that require a student's participation on particular dates as official representatives of the University, such as national student government conferences and NCAA varsity sports. The other absence types requiring UAAO approval speak for themselves. Students who wish to be excused from class due to religious observance should inform me within the first two weeks of the semester, or as soon as possible if the date occurs within that period. As I understand current policy, an extended absence (of a week or longer) due to significant health conditions or a family/personal emergency will require approval from the [University Approved Absence Office](#). See the UAAO's document [University Approved Absence Requests](https://uaao.unc.edu/faqs-for-students/)<https://uaao.unc.edu/faqs-for-students/> and [tutorial](#).

If you must be absent for whatever other legitimate reason (routine illness, job or graduate/professional school interview, etc.), I expect you to let me know where you were (if the reason for your absence could not be foreseen) or will be (if the reason for your absence is foreseeable). I am not unreasonable about this, but do not abuse my good will. If you don't communicate with me, I shall simply assume that you have chosen to place other interests ahead of course work.

Less officiously stated, there is no substitute for showing up. Experience shows that students who are chronically absent do poorly in the course. I consider chronic absenteeism a serious matter that will be reported to your adviser and/or academic dean **and reflected in your grade**. According to [University's Class Attendance Policy](http://advising.unc.edu/policies-and-procedures/attendance/)<http://advising.unc.edu/policies-and-procedures/attendance/>, missing three or more consecutive class meetings, **or more classes than the course instructor deems advisable** shall be considered "chronic."

If you do miss a class, you are still responsible for the assignment(s) due and material

covered that day; and you are on your own (I won't be giving private tutorials during conference hours to students who are absent). Have one of your classmates discuss his/her notes with you.

Attendance is mental as well as physical. You should prepare the assigned readings before each class and take notes during lecture. You must keep up with the readings, for if you fall behind, you will struggle. (I also recommend that you take notes as you read. Your notes don't have to be exhaustive, but they will help you immensely when preparing graded work.) All assigned readings and material presented in class are “fair game” for tests, quizzes, and examinations. Informed discussion of the readings will be an important *modus operandi* in the class. This means that every physical absence and lack of preparation is significant. Failure by just a few students to do the assigned readings will quickly bring us to stagnation. Your physical (well, virtual, if it comes to that) and mental presence is needed (and desired!).

Technology during class sessions. I expect that we will all be invested in creating a learning environment of respect and engagement and that you will be 100% on task while we are in session. If I have to spell it out, that means no Internet surfing, no email or messaging friends, no messing around on social media, and no playing games, watching videos, shopping online, doing assignments for other classes, and so on. ***Such activity is just plain rude***, both to the instructor and to one's classmates. Mobile phones should be silenced or turned off and stored out of sight during class.

On-time arrival and departure. I request that you arrive for class on time, prepared, and ready to contribute. If you know in advance that you will arrive late or if you must leave early, please contact me before class. For my part, I shall do my best to be ready to start on time and finish promptly at the designated time.

Late written assignments and makeups. Ordinarily, late written assignments will not be accepted. Pre- and postponement of tests and exams is possible only in exceptional circumstances, as defined by University regulations. Personal convenience does not constitute an “exceptional circumstance,” so coordinate your activities and travel plans with the syllabus. See following item on the scheduling of the final examination.

Final examination. The final examination for LING 444 is scheduled for ***Saturday, December 5, 2026, at 4.00pm***. The instructor cannot move the final examination to another time or accommodate individual requests for pre- or postponement; so please don't ask. Coordinate your travel plans with the [final examination schedule](#).

Nota bene: The University policy on final examinations stipulates the following: “When students are unable, for reasons clearly beyond their control, to take a traditional final examination at the scheduled time, they can be excused only by the director of Campus Health Services or their academic dean [of Academic Advising or his/her designee] (who can issue an ‘examination excuse’). An absence may be excused for severe health problems leading to the student's placement on the Infirmary List by either Campus Health Services or Counseling and Psychological Services, for serious personal or family circumstances, for religious observances required by the student's faith, for a scheduling conflict involving multiple examinations at the same time [which should be exceedingly rare], or when a student has three or more final examinations scheduled in 24 hours. In cases of illness, personal or family emergency, or

religious observance, additional documentation may be required by the dean” (from the [Final Exam Excuse Policy](#), scroll down); see also the [CAPS page for navigating illness during final exams](#) and [Academic Advising, Final Exam Excuses](#), which have links to the online final exam excuse request form and other information. Please note further that the University Approved Absence Office **does not** issue final examination excuses, that the exam excuse process cannot be done retroactively, and that any petition for a change in the examination schedule because of the “three exams in twenty-four hours” rule must be made to your dean’s office **before** the first day of final examinations.

Honor Code. Academic misconduct — especially plagiarism — will not be tolerated. By enrolling in this class, you warrant that you have read, understand, and acknowledge your obligations under the [Honor Code](#) <http://honor.unc.edu/https://studentconduct.unc.edu/http://instrument.unc.edu>. The Student Attorney General and the [Office of Student Conduct](#) (which reports to the [Dean of Students](#)) have worked together to create an educational [module](#) about the Honor System at Carolina. Students are strongly encouraged to read through the module and become familiar with the basic policies set forth in the [Instrument of Student Judicial Governance](#). (Such training became mandatory for all incoming first-year and transfer students starting in fall 2013.) I also recommend that students view the University Libraries’ [animated tutorial on plagiarism](#).

Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to cheating on tests and examinations, plagiarism, collusion, the submission for credit of any work or materials that are attributable in whole or in part to another person, any act designed to give unfair advantage to a student, or the attempt to commit such acts.

If I have reason to suspect that academic fraud has taken place, I shall not hesitate to report the incident to the assistant dean of students for judicial programs. Sanctions for academic fraud can be severe, ranging from failing grades and probation to suspension and even expulsion from the University. If you cheat, you in effect repudiate the core values of the University community — personal integrity, respect for others, intellectual engagement, and a commitment to doing one’s best; and from my perspective you have no business being here. But that said, let me appeal to your better instincts. Do the right thing. Trust me, we will all be better for it.

Use of generative artificial intelligence. When not otherwise specified in an assignment, the use of generative AI in this class is governed by the guidelines developed by UNC-CH's Generative AI Committee, which can be found at that link starting at the heading *Syllabus guidelines for generative AI* and continuing through the end of the page. The instructor (and, if it comes to that, the Honor Court) will expect you to have read them. Individual assignments may have more stringent requirements, which will be stated in the assignment itself.

Minimization of tangibles. To the extent practicable, I do not make paper copies of syllabi, assignment descriptions, handouts, and evaluative exercises. Ordinarily, these documents will be posted to Sakai or distributed by email. As a general rule, I will not accept paper copies of written assignments, which should be prepared electronically and deposited to the Assignments utility on Sakai. Mother Earth thanks us for our support.

Electronic communication: Sakai provides for messaging and forum, to which you can avail yourselves if so you choose. These tools can serve a couple of purposes. The messaging function

allows me to communicate with you as a group, e.g., to send out announcements and clarifications, respond to queries, etc. Second, these tools can serve as a means to discuss course material and pose questions.

I communicate via email to students' UNC-CH assigned email addresses. You are responsible for checking your email regularly. For group communication, I shall use the email lists in Sakai and ConnectCarolina. I won't be sending out personalized communications to individuals whose email addresses in these systems are different from their preferred addresses (e.g., you prefer to use gmail, Yahoo Mail, outlook.com, or mail server other than your University-provided account, viz. userid@live.unc.edu).

Audio and video recording of class. Students are not permitted to record audio or video of lectures and discussion sessions. Permission will be granted only if the use of recording devices has been approved by Accessibility Resources and Service as an accommodation. Such permission will be subject to limitations and conditions, as spelled out in [ARS policy](#).

Copyright. UNC-CH [copyright policy](http://policies.unc.edu/files/2013/05/Copyright.pdf) <http://policies.unc.edu/files/2013/05/Copyright.pdf> clearly prohibits students from selling or otherwise acquiring financial or commercial gain from notes that they take in their classes and labs. Furthermore, redistribution of course materials and syllabi, including and especially uploading them to Course Hero and web sites of that ilk, is strictly prohibited. Students who go against these prohibitions are in violation of the Honor Code and will be subject to Honor Court proceedings. (This policy does not constrain students with learning disabilities and assigned note takers, as long as the exchange is between the principals and does not extend to third parties.)

Food and drink in the classroom. As per University policy, the consumption of food and beverages is prohibited in general purpose classrooms. Please do not eat in our room while class is in progress. Under the best of circumstances it is unprofessional, disrespectful, and distracting. Eat a good lunch so that you can make it through a late afternoon class without hunger pains, or grab a snack *before* coming to class.

LING 444 (Origin & Evolution of Human Language) Class Schedule Fall 2026

The material listed on the class schedule for a certain week is the material that will be dealt with in class that week, obviously. If, in class, the instructor does not call explicit attention to a specific assignment, or in the event that the instructor is absent due to illness, personal exigency, or professional obligation, students will follow the assignment given on the syllabus. My gut feeling is that the schedule I have mapped out is realistic, but it's possible that it will need to be tweaked here and there, though not drastically. Nevertheless, the instructor reserves the right to adjust the schedule at any time, as in his judgement is necessary to meet the needs of the class.

Week	Dates	Topics	Readings	Discussion lead / presentations
1	Aug. 21 M Aug. 23 W	Introduction & historical backdrop Obstacles and challenges	Marantz (1983)	
2	Aug. 28 M Aug. 30 W	Reopening the question Comparative approach	Bickerton (2014, ch. 1) McMahon and McMahon (2013, ch. 3)	
3	<i>Sept. 4 M</i> Sept. 6 W	<i>Labor Day, no class</i> Design features of language	Hockett (1960)	
4	Sept. 11 M Sept. 13 W	Evolution: natural selection, adaptation Language as adaptation	Maynard Smith (1975)	Pinker (2003)
5	Sept. 18 M	Evolution: non-adaptations	Buss et al. (1998)	

	Sept. 20 W	Language as non-adaptation		Hauser et al. (2002)
6	Sept. 25 M Sept. 27 W	Well-being day, no class Protolanguage		Jackendoff (1999)
7	Oct. 2 M Oct. 4 W	Protolanguage: holistic or compositional?	Botha (2016, ch. 1)	Wray (2002)
8	Oct. 9 M Oct. 11 W	Overview: Animal communication Animal communication : compositional or holistic?	Seyfarth & Cheney (2010)	Engesser et al. (2016)
9	Oct. 16 M Oct. 18 W	Early hominin migrations “Synthetic” protolanguage	McMahon & McMahon (2013, ch. 4)	Tallerman (2007)
10	Oct. 23 M Oct. 25 W	The Windows Approach Gestural protolanguage	Botha (2016, ch. 2)	Corballis (2003)
11	Oct. 30 M Nov. 1 W	From animal communication to protolanguage Evolution of speech and	Fitch (2017)	Liberman (2003)

		motor control		
12	Nov. 6 M Nov. 8 W	Windows: L2 acquisition, grammaticalization Windows: Hunter-gatherer societies, infant-directed speech	Benazzo (2009)	
13	Nov. 13 M Nov. 15 W	Windows: Artifacts and symbolic behavior Window: pidgins	Wynn (2021)	
14	Nov. 20 M Nov. 22 W	Window: home signs <i>Thanksgiving recess, no class</i>	Goldin-Meadow (2012)	
15	Nov. 27 M Nov. 29 W	Cultural evolution Writing systems	Tamariz & Kirby (2016)	
16	Dec. 4 M Dec. 6 W	Computer simulation and the Baldwin Effect Wrap-up and evaluation	Hinton & Nowland (1987)	Research papers due
	Saturday, Dec. 9, 4.00pm	***Final examination** *		

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