

Postgraduate student seminar
Second semester, 2020

**The politics of grammar:
Rule, exception and fantasies of linguistic control since Plato**

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Time and place

Fridays 2-3.45pm from August 24 (excepting October 9)

In person: Room 209, Mills Building, University of Sydney [to be confirmed]

Online: <https://uni-sydney.zoom.us/j/98208429023>; phone +61 731 853 730 or +61 861 193 900 or +61 8 7150 1149 or +61 2 8015 6011 or +61 3 7018 2005. International numbers available: <https://uni-sydney.zoom.us/j/98208429023>. Meeting ID: 982 0842 9023.

Description

These seminars will not present a systematic history of grammar and the language disciplines, even though they take moments of that history as their object and introduce some of its best known and most important aspects. Rather than surveying this disciplinary tradition comprehensively, we will approach the diversity of Western linguistic theory from a particular perspective, exploring how ‘political’ considerations have entered into, and shaped, canonical understandings of the nature, structure and usage of language. The ‘political’ factors to be examined play out in a variety of keys – in the micropolitics of scholarly interaction within disciplinary and educational communities; in the ideological forces that influence the conception and reception of theoretical ideas; and in the macropolitical ends to which linguistic speculation has occasionally been explicitly turned, and which theories have often reflected. What traces does European linguistics bear of its origin as an elite, antidemocratic project? How have dispositions of domination been internalized in ideas about grammar and language? In what ways has disciplinary development been a function of the pure discretion of intellectual elites? How has authoritarianism, intellectual or otherwise, been at work in the history of linguistic ideas? What fantasies of control have impelled and undermined the effort to understand language and its manifestations? In asking these and related questions, we will glimpse some varieties of counter-history that can be advanced against received narratives of the development of linguistics, and scrutinise the ‘dark side’ of theoretical creativity and change in a discipline – ‘grammar’ – whose influence on the broader humanities has been overwhelming.

If you plan to attend, please email me (nick.riemer@sydney.edu.au) so I can add you to the email list for the course.

Schedule of seminars and readings

1. August 28

Ideology and the history of linguistic ideas

- Nick Riemer, 'Linguistic form: a political epistemology', in James McElvenny (ed.) *Form and Formalism in Linguistics* (Berlin, Language Sciences Press, 2019). Open access: available free online at <https://langsci-press.org/catalog/book/214>

2. September 4

Plato and the *Cratylus*

- Plato, *Cratylus*, tr. Jowett (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1616/1616-h/1616-h.htm>)

3. September 11

Ancient grammar and its medieval legacies

- Dionysius Thrax, *Tekhne Grammatike* ["Art of Grammar"], tr. Alan Kemp, *Historiographia Linguistica* 13 (1986): 343–363.
- Donatus, excerpts from the *Ars Minor* and *Ars Maior*. In Copeland and Sluiter (eds), *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric. Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300–1475* (Oxford: OUP, 2009) [to be distributed]

4. September 18

Vernacular grammar in the Renaissance

- Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* (tr. Steven Botterill, Cambridge, CUP, 1996); <https://www.danteonline.it/english/opere.asp?idope=3&idlang=OR>
- Ben Jonson, *English Grammar* (1640) [to be distributed, also available online through the British Library: <http://explore.bl.uk>]

5. September 25

French and English thought on language in the 17th and 18th centuries

- Selections from the Hobbes, Locke, Port Royal Grammar, Condillac, Rousseau [texts to be distributed]

6. October 2

German thought on language in the 18th and 19th centuries

- Selections from Humboldt, Herder, Grimm, Bopp [texts to be distributed]

October 9: no seminar

7. October 16

Saussureanism

- Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916)
- Saussure *On the Dual Essence of Language* (1891) [to be distributed]

8. October 23

Anti-Saussureanism

- Selections from V.N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) [to be distributed]

9. October 30

Descriptive linguistics after Saussure

- Selections from Sapir, Boas and Harris [to be distributed]

10. November 6

Linguistics and Western Marxism

- Selections from Gramsci and Pêcheux [to be distributed]

11. November 13

The generative 'enterprise' and its offshoots

- Chomsky, texts tba

12. November 20

Ideology and the contemporary language sciences

- Reading tba

A comprehensive bibliography and reading list will be distributed/posted in the first class. Meanwhile, in addition to the texts listed above, many of which are available online, participants can start with Vivien Law, *The History of Linguistics in Europe. From Plato to 1600* (Cambridge, CUP, 2003), which is widely available in libraries, including as an e-book, and which can also be bought at Gleebooks, 49 Glebe Point Rd.