Cognition Seminar on Language and Deception
Syllabus

Wednesday 1:00-3:50, Reese 324

Instructor: Mija Van Der Wege
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Office Hours: Monday 3-5 (or by appt.)

Course description:
In this course we will examine deception and persuasion in language use. We will take up three main issues. The first is what it means to deceive and how people deceive others through language. What methods do they use, and how do these methods work? 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 legitimate to deceive others, and if so, when and why?

Readings:
Readings will be made available in reserves and electronic reserves. I will hopefully have a WebCT site available with all of the readings linked from it.

Course requirements:
1. Mandatory regular attendance at all classes. We only have 13 classes to get through a lot of material. If you miss more than two (2) classes, you will fail the class.

2. Active participation in discussions. This includes familiarity with the assigned readings each week. You will also take responsibility for leading discussion on an assigned reading on two class days.

3. Reaction papers. You need to submit three (3) reaction papers (1-2 pages) on the readings for the course. You can choose which weeks you submit them, however, they cannot be on the weeks that you give a presentation. Please give your thoughts, opinions and reactions to the assigned papers. Do not just summarize the findings. Submit these by 5:00pm Tuesday of the week of the readings (the day before we discuss the readings) in person or by email. They will be returned in class.

4. Mini-projects: There will be two mini-projects to be described below. Due dates: submit the first by October 24 and the second by November 28 at the beginning of class.

5. Term Paper. In place of a course examination, students will complete a term paper (10-14 pages) on a relevant topic of your choice to be turned in to me by 5:00pm Wednesday December 19. Please make an appointment with me early on in the term to discuss your potential topic.
Mini-projects:

Mini-project 1 (due 10/24): Record and transcribe one TV commercial break (3-5 advertisements/1-3 minutes of advertising). Write down the words used and any significant nonverbal communication and events in the ad. Describe how language and other kinds of nonverbal communication are used to deceive in these commercials in a brief write-up (2-3 pages). If you have problems finding access to the necessary equipment, please let me know as soon as possible.

Mini-project 2 (due 11/28): Find one other example of deception and describe it, with documentation, in a brief write up (3-4 pages). Try to find examples related to the current topics of the seminar, e.g., a biased news article, an infomercial, a horoscope, a friend telling a story, a euphemistic sign.

Extension and Absence Policy:
There are two situations that can acceptably result in an extension of the date for assigned work or a missed class: (1) personal illness, and (2) personal or family crisis. You are entitled to an excused extension if either of these situations arise. You are not entitled to an excused extension if the illness or crisis allows you to complete work for another course. If an extension is needed, take the following steps: (1) If at all possible, notify me prior to the class in which the assignment is due. (2) If you are eligible for and wish to take an excused extension according to the guidelines above, submit to me a written statement indicating that you are acting in accord with Mount Holyoke’s Honor Code, and that your reason for the late assignment or the missed class is consistent with the criteria established above. You do not have to specify the reason, only that you meet the guidelines. Late work or missed class periods without a written statement are unexcused. The assignment date for an excused extension is one week later than the original due date unless other arrangements are made.

Grading:
15% Class Attendance and Participation  
20% Class presentations  
15% Reaction papers  
20% Mini-Assignments  
30% Term Paper  

Topic schedule:

What does it mean to deceive?

Week 1 (Sept 12): Truth and deception


Week 2 (Sept 19): Ethics of deception


Week 3 (Sept 26): Lying and its detection


Deception in the courtroom

Week 4 (Oct 3): Perjury as a legal issue


Week 5 (Oct 10): False confessions


Deception as a career

Week 6 (Oct 17): Deception in advertising 1


Week 7 (Oct 24): Deception in advertising 2

Mini-project 1 due in class


Week 8 (Oct 31): Persuasion and polling.


Week 9 (Nov 7): Telling people what they want to hear

Hyman, R. (1977). Cold reading: how to convince strangers that you know all about them. The Zetetic (The Skeptical Inquirer), 1, 18-37.


Deception in everyday life

Week 10 (Nov 14): Equivocation, evasion and ostensibility


Week 11 (Nov 21): No class for Thanksgiving recess.

Week 12 (Nov 28): Euphemism and obfuscation

Mini-project 2 due in class


Week 13 (Dec 5): Exaggeration and fiction


Week 14 (Dec 12): Social practices


Week 15 (Dec 19): No class for exam week

*Term paper due at 5:00pm in Prof. Van Der Wege’s office*