Edward Sapir said:

“Everything that we have so far seen to be true of language points to the fact that it is the most significant and colossal work that the human spirit has evolved – nothing short of a finished form of expression for all communicable experience. This form may be endlessly varied by the individual without thereby losing its distinctive contours; and it is constantly reshaping itself as is all art. Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations.”

At about the same time (circa 1920), Krazy Kat said:
True, all true. As Krazy suggests, this “massive and inclusive art” is also the information bottleneck of the human condition. A vast amount of our knowledge, including virtually everything we learn in formal education, comes to us through Language. Consequently, learning to analyze language, in ways that work for all languages, and to describe it objectively, is an indispensable tool for intellectuals, and one that stimulates in addition the habit of close attention to language, which is one of the things necessary for effective writing, not to mention clear thinking. Further, an understanding of how language really works (in contrast to the linguistic mythologies usually taught in schools) gives one a metaphorical place to stand that facilitates the study of anything that is described in language, which means just about everything.

Over the last century, linguistic scientists have amassed an array of analytic procedures, concepts, and findings that allow one to de-mystify speech, grammar, and language use, and to discover a number of surprising facts about one’s own and others’ languages. This course is a 5-credit intensive introduction to the methods linguists use for describing languages (although general training in analytic thought is our ultimate goal).

Drawing on examples from a large number of the world’s languages, after a brief introductory unit we will devote about two weeks to each of the major areas of linguistic analysis, in order:

1. Morphology
2. Phonetics
3. Phonology
4. Syntax
5. Semantics and Pragmatics

By focusing simultaneously on language data, and on the techniques used to make sense of these data, we will see that our understanding of the object of inquiry (language) is influenced by our methods of inquiry.

There will be frequent quizzes and daily data analysis problems, which will form the context for our discussion. In addition, there will be comprehensive midterm and final take-home exams, which may be done in groups. This class, while required for English majors, is also suitable for those with interests in scientific analysis (including mathematics, computing, and engineering), since the analytic methods discussed are generalizable easily.

There is no textbook; materials for analysis and handouts are in a coursepack. Students who would like a textbook to study should invest in The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, available at local bookstores. No prerequisites except an interest in language and thinking.