Our most remarkable capability as a species is language. No matter where they grow up, and across wide variations in home environment, children acquire their native language—quite rapidly and seemingly without effort—over the first few years of life. Researchers have been investigating just how language is acquired for a very long time, and have learned an enormous amount about the genetic and neurobiological bases of language, the perceptual, learning, and cognitive mechanisms involved, and the role interpersonal interaction and social context play in acquisition. Just how these multiple sources work together to launch language acquisition is still far from fully understood, however. In this course, we’ll explore this question through the lens of some of the most exciting current work in the field. In so doing, we’ll consider and consider core theoretical issues and study and critique different methodological approaches to studying language acquisition from early infancy, with the goal being to enable you to acquire sufficiently broad knowledge along with the requisite critical analysis skills to be able to continue learning about this topic on your own.

The course is designed to bring graduate students together not just from Psychology, but from other departments in the University as well (although Psychology students will be given priority if the course is over subscribed). Each of you will be expected to take a leadership role in directing class discussion, in preparing questions that will generate discussion, and in honing both your critical thinking and analysis skills as well as your oral and written communication skills. Moreover, each of you will be given the opportunity to showcase what you have learned and how you can conceive of using that knowledge in a new way. To achieve this goal, your final paper will be either a 4 page grant proposal, building on what you have learned to propose a new line of research, or a 4 page knowledge translation plan, wherein you propose a way in which the knowledge and ideas you have gained in the course can be used to educate children or adults, intervene with particular populations, or influence social policy.

The class will meet on Wednesday mornings, from 10-12. As in many graduate courses, there will be a series of readings and different individuals will be expected to help lead the class discussion each week. However, in addition, five internationally known researchers have been invited to give university wide lectures (as part of the SSHRC Gold Medal Language Sciences Lecture Series) that all members of the class will be expected to attend. These will be held on 5 Tuesdays throughout the term from 3:30-5: January 24, February 7, February 28, March 14, and March 28. The Wednesday before we will read and discuss papers by those speakers, as well as related papers by others working in close areas. We will work together as a group, and with input from the speakers, in selecting the readings. The day after their talks, each speaker will
attend our regular Wednesday class meeting, to answer questions and engage in discussion with you.

Week 1. January 11: Organizational Meeting, and work out first set of readings
Week 2: January 18: Read papers on bilingual acquisition
Week 3: January 24: Language Sciences Lecture by Krista Byers-Heinlein, Concordia
   “One baby, two languages: How infants navigate and learn from bilingual environments”
   January 25: Grad class meets with Krista
Week 4: February 1: Read papers on word learning, including computational approaches
Week 5: February 7: Open Language Sciences Lecture by Michael C. Frank, Stanford
   "Bigger data about smaller people: Studying children’s language learning at scale"
   February 8: Grad class meets with Mike
Week 6: February 15: Read papers on word segmentation and statistical learning
February 23: Reading week no class
Week 7: February 28: Open Language Sciences Lecture by Jenny Saffran, U Wisconsin
   “Statistical learning and early language development”
   March 1: Grad class meets with Jenny
Week 8: March 8: Read papers on the neurobiology and genetics of language
Week 9: March 14: Open Language Sciences Colloquium by Simon Fisher, Max Planck Nijmegen, and Donders Brain and Language Institutes
   “A molecular genetic perspective on speech and language”
   March 15: Grad class meets with Simon
Week 10: March 22: Read papers on language and conceptual development
Week 11: March 28: Open Language Sciences Colloquium by Sandy Waxman, Northwestern U
   “What’s it all about: How (and how early) do infants link language and cognition?”
   March 29: Grad class meets with Sandy
Week 12: April 5 – Discussion and Wrap up
Week 13: April 12: Class Presentations
Projects due – April 23 – Grant proposal or KT proposal