Summer 2014

EFS 689H: American Humor

Thursdays (July 10 - August 14)
3:15 - 5:05 p.m.
Location: Bldg. 160, Rm. 325

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Description from EFS Web Site

EFS 689H. American Humor (1-unit)
Humor is an important part of life at American universities. Professors often tell jokes during lectures and group meetings, students like to “kid around,” and campus newspapers feature editorial cartoons and humor columns. In this course, students study many examples of jokes and humorous stories that Americans find amusing, practicing advanced listening comprehension, and expanding their understanding of English idioms at the same time. Note that this is an advanced class: An iBT TOEFL score of 100 or above or equivalent is strongly recommended.

http://www.stanford.edu/group/efs/688.html
http://www.stanford.edu/group/efs/ccs.html

Explanation, Objectives, and Philosophy of Instruction

EFS 689H is designed to enhance international students’ understanding of the American sense of humor. The course highlights a range of socio-cultural assumptions and referential material underlying jokes, films, sitcoms, other television programs, cartoons, and assorted comic situations.

Confronting the laughing hydra, enjoying the jolly cornucopia, and annotating the world: Since humor and comedy are immensely multi-faceted phenomena, a broad spectrum of media selections will be analyzed, explained, discussed, and interpreted. Accordingly, there will be a significant spotlight on relevant vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. The course also attempts to broaden student perspectives (generational, historical, social, cultural, and experiential). In essence, the topic of comedy and humor will serve as a vehicle for language learning and for reinforcing cultural awareness.

A high level of language proficiency is generally expected in academic and professional communities. In order to stimulate progress and to familiarize students with sophisticated discourse, the level of instruction and classroom communication will be relatively advanced and challenging.

An additional benefit of the course is its emphasis on critical thinking skills and analytical abilities, particularly with respect to appreciating, interpreting, and explaining comedy and humor. Unless we are dealing with established facts, a variety of opinions and reactions may be expressed. Accordingly, it is important to support your point of view with clear and logical evidence when possible.

Student responsibility, initiative, and independent effort are powerful factors in language learning. Along with classroom activities, students will be expected to work independently in order to improve their own skills.

In addition to listening projects, the course may include brief reading, writing, and speaking assignments to accompany and reinforce class activities (e.g., to prepare for, or to follow-up from, material presented in class).

During the term, various genres and topics might overlap due to their relationship to each other or due to issues of availability and timeliness.
Class activities and discussions will be selected from among the following topics, among others (to be explained in class):

Categories and terms:

- Humor and comedy
- Parody, satire, and burlesque
- Slapstick
- High comedy and wit
- Low comedy and farce
- Dark comedy and gallows humor
- Comic irony and sarcasm; sardonic humor
- Political humor
- Banter and repartee
- Puns

Types of sources, texts, and vehicles:

- Jokes (needless to say)
- Clips from films, sitcoms, and other television programs
- Cartoons and comics, including editorial and political cartoons
- Short stories and other literary selections
- Stand-up comedy and comic monologues
- Improvisational comedy

Additional issues related to comedy and humor (to be discussed and explained in class):

- Allusions, background knowledge, frames of reference, and intertextuality
- Recognition, familiarity, identification
- Political and ideological implications and interpretations
- Historical background
- Anticipation vs. surprise; fulfilling audience expectations vs. defying audience expectations
- Transcending the U.S. entertainment industry
- Understanding characters, character types, and characterizations
- Suspension of disbelief; literal vs. figurative interpretations; “the world within the joke”
- Variations in audience appeal, tastes, interests, comprehension, interpretation, and experience
- Significance of language issues in humor (double-meaning, malapropisms, misunderstandings, etc.)
- Questions of sensitivity and appropriateness

(Caveat: It cannot be guaranteed that you will laugh every day; not everyone finds everything funny at all times.)
By the end of the course, students (hopefully) should be able to:

- recognize allusions and make associations that enhance their understanding of American cultural content

- engage with classic material found in American literature and other sources to appreciate references encountered when interacting with native speakers in the U.S.

- independently research allusions and references to comprehend unfamiliar comic situations

- differentiate among various categories of humor as needed in order to enhance and reinforce appreciation and comprehension

- identify and explain the elements that make a situation funny (e.g., fulfillment of expectations vs. unexpected outcomes, mistaken identity, improbability, allusions to recognized and recognizable socio-cultural elements, characters behaving in expected or unexpected ways, and others listed above)

- exploit the background they have acquired to fully appreciate, and conscientiously critique, offerings found in American media

- appropriately and effectively use hitherto unfamiliar terms and expressions encountered during the course

- enhance their own participation in the informal discourse characteristic of professional, personal, and social interactions

- effectively communicate jokes and other humorous elements in a way that can be appreciated and understood by native speakers

- create and express their own material, using recognized and appropriate elements of comedy and humor, in a manner that successfully conveys intended meaning

**Materials**

- No textbook is required for purchase. Miscellaneous documents, worksheets, handouts, videos, Internet selections, and other materials will be provided by the instructor.

- Recommended: Comprehensive dictionary and thesaurus (online versions available)

- Other texts and resources will be discussed or recommended during the term.

**Communication**

- Stanford e-mail accounts and the Coursework site will be used for announcements, updates, and other messages, so please check these periodically.

- Please feel free to communicate with the instructor if you have comments or questions.

**Grading and Registration**

- All registration should be completed through AXESS.

- Grades: The grade for completion of the course assignments and requirements is Satisfactory (S); the grade for non-completion is No Credit (NC).
**Requirements**

1. **Participation**
   - Participate attentively, constructively, and cooperatively in all class activities and projects.

2. **Attendance**
   - Attend at least 90% of all class meetings. Students who miss more than one class session run the risk of not receiving credit for the course (Language Center and EFS program policy).
   - Avoid ongoing scheduling conflicts; for example, do not arrange a schedule which requires you to arrive late or leave early on a regular basis.
   - Please communicate with the instructor concerning attendance and absences. Additional details and unusual considerations, such as illness, will be explained and discussed in class.

3. **Assignments**
   - Complete and submit assignments conscientiously.

4. **Improvement**
   - Demonstrate improvement in terms of listening and speaking skills related to the course content.

5. **Consultation sessions (optional but recommended)**
   - Attend individual or small-group consultation sessions with the instructor to discuss progress and performance, receive individualized feedback, practice speaking, ask questions and clarify details concerning comedy and humor, etc. (Consultation sessions provide a valuable opportunity for students to function as dedicated agents in their own progress. In general, it is greatly beneficial for students to participate actively during their appointments rather than serve as passive recipients of the instructor’s explanations.)

**N.B.** Additional information may be announced as needed.

**DISABILITY NOTICE:** Students who have a disability which may necessitate an academic accommodation or the use of auxiliary aids and services in a class must initiate the request with the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC), located within the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). The SDRC will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend appropriate accommodations, and prepare a verification letter dated in the current academic term in which the request is being made. Please contact the SDRC as soon as possible; timely notice is needed to arrange for appropriate accommodations. The Office of Accessible Education is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066; TDD: 723-1067).