Course business

Why does "public discourse" matter to linguistics, and vice-versa?

What assumptions must we make (or abandon) to deal with this language?

Nature of the public; historical emergence; linguistic consequences

How do we gauge the effects of language on public attitudes? (i.e., how can we study this language empirically?)
What's Special about Public Discourse?

Why should public discourse interesting to us as linguists?
Two reasons:

1. Linguistic notions may be useful in understanding the semantics and pragmatics of public speech.
   - E.g., applications of theories of metaphor, speech-acts, mental models of social space...and much more.
   - But this work usually assumes that the lg of public discourse is qualitatively like other lg – won't add to our understanding of lg in general.
What's Special about Public Discourse?

Why should public discourse interesting to us as linguists? Two reasons:

1. Linguistic notions may be useful in understanding the semantics and pragmatics of public speech.

2. Lg of public discourse might have properties that make it either unique or exemplary. i.e., there may be things we can learn about lg that aren't evident, or are less so, in other varieties.
What place for linguistics?

How can we pare these down to interesting linguistic topics?

An example: What can linguists contribute to the (vast) literatures on "complex words" that figure centrally in public discourse? – cf readings on imperialism, media, freedom, partisan, patriotic, civility, souverain, solidarité, Herrschaft, Heimat, etc.?
What can linguists say about cultural keywords? Cf the question of taste:

"The sense of smell has few abstract or mental connotations, although bad smell is used in English to indicate bad character or dislikeable mental characteristics ("he's a stinker," or "that idea stinks"), while the active verb smell may indicate detection of such characteristics ("I smell something fishy about this deal"). Taste, however, is a physical sense which seems universally to be linked to personal likes and dislikes in the mental world. Lat. *gustis* and Fr. *goût*, like Eng. *taste*, may indicate a "taste" in clothing or art as well as in food.

Eve Sweetser, "Metaphors of Perception," in *From Etymology to Pragmatics*
But what accounts for changing significance attached to perception metaphors?

The Eighteenth century was the century of taste, that is, of the theory of taste...A few representatives of the theory of taste lingered on into the early nineteenth century, but theorizing in the taste mode was, alas, dying. George Dickie, *The Century of Taste*

Does ling. meaning remain constant, while context colors it in different ways? Cf OED entries for *taste*:

7. a. The fact or condition of liking or preferring something; inclination, liking for (e.g., "to my taste, a taste for")

8. a. The sense of what is appropriate, harmonious, or beautiful; esp. discernment and appreciation of the beautiful in nature or art; spec. the faculty of perceiving and enjoying what is excellent in art, literature, and the like.
Separating Lg from its cultural context

To isolate what is purely linguistic must ignore a large part of the social or political context that gives these items significance… (Lexical pragmatics is a reductive science.)
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But historians, philosophers, sociologists, etc. so often seem to get a big part of the linguistic story wrong…

Issues of polysemy vs. generality, pragmatics vs. semantics, connotation vs. denotation, etc.

And miss phenomena of real linguistic interest ("broken concepts")
What must linguists let go of?

What do linguists have to concede to be able to deal with the complexities of the language of public discourse?

Language as a social fact vs. methodological individualism. The triumph of cognitivism...

How we deal with variation: "different grammars"/"different rules"

E.g. football in US vs UK, "on the up and up," etc.

Normative judgements ("It really means X") are displaced, linguistically irrelevant – "language changes."
What must linguists let go of?

But cf "contested words" (W. B. Gallie: "essentially contested concepts")

"Waterboarding isn't torture in my dialect."

Contrast arguments about natural kind word (e.g., *elm*, *carbohydrate*) or specialized vocabulary (*impressionism*, *tartan*)
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But we can't deal with these questions without admitting the validity of normative or ethical values in lg. Some forms or usages really are "better" than others.
What must linguists let go of?

Idealization to "perfect information"

Cf. Chomsky in *Aspects*:

"Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly…"

Putnam et al. on the "division of linguistic labor" – Fodor's "deferential" concepts. (which "belong to epistemology and not to semantics.")

Note not just nat-kind terms.

But note that our conceptions of meanings isn't simply incomplete, but often inconsistent.

Cf. *caucasian, values*… Blending of types.
What must linguists let go of?

The irrelevance of diachrony

"The people has a feeling for usefulness but not the slightest concern about history." Michel Bréal, *Essai de Sémantique*, 1897

The "etymological fallacy" (cf complaints about *dilemma*, *aggravate*, *decimate*, *protagonist*, etc.)
What must linguists let go of?

The irrelevance of diachrony

…but political & public language depends for its legitimation on the perception of semantic continuity, both legitimately and illegitimately.

Linguistic continuity as evidence of historical continuity…

Cf discourse about "liberalism" and "conservatism."
Recovering the roots of "progressivism."

"Progressivism is not a long-standing ideology like liberalism, but an historically-grounded concept ... that accepts the world as dynamic." John Halpin, Center for American Progress

Cf the discourse about "freedom," "class," etc.
What must linguists let go of?

The irrelevance of diachrony

Linguistic continuity that masks shifts of reference

The student of politics must be on his guard against the old words, for the words persist when the reality behind them has changed. Aneurin Bevan, 1952

The last thing a party abandons is its language, because among political parties as elsewhere, the people make the rules of language, and the people give up the ideas they've been given more readily than the words once they've learned them. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*
What must linguists let go of?

The irrelevance of diachrony

Linguistic continuity that masks shifts of reference

The kind of words we’re hearing now from the Democratic candidates go beyond legitimate political discourse—this is political hate speech.” RNC Chair Ed Gillespie, 2004

Senator Kerry ... wants to ignore the some 10 million workers in that survey that are the entrepreneurs who are self-employed like truck drivers, like painters, like child-care workers, like hairdressers, like auto mechanics. Commerce Sec. Don Evans, 2004

Shifting meanings of leftist, etc.

The persistence of brand aura...
What must linguists let go of?

The unconscious nature of forces of change

... but linguistic innovation is generally conscious, whether as production of new forms or the re- (or mis-) reading of old ones.

E.g, the reconfiguration of the language of civil rights in the 1970's and after: the reinterpretation of "color-blind," "diversity," "discrimination," "people of_____"
What do linguists get in return?

Consideration of public language yields a more complex picture of speakers' knowledge of words — and in some ways a simplification.

Cognitivism leads us to build properties that words inherit from their social context into lexical meaning.

Elaborate our understanding of the eristic and symbolic functions of language: How does language work to persuade us?

Rethink the relations between words and concepts
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*But don't look for a "theory" of public language*…