CAS LX 530: Variation in Dialects of English- Fall 2015

Time: Tuesday & Thursday, 2-3.30  
Location: CAS 116

Professor: Neil Myler  
Email: myler@bu.edu

Office: 621 Commonwealth Ave  
Office hours: Monday 9-10.30am

Room B08  
Wednesday 4-5.30pm

Course website: Blackboard Learn

Course objectives:

Why are different “versions” of English often so strikingly different from each other? How can we subject dialect variation to scientific study? How much grammatical diversity is there in North American English, and what bearing does it have on linguistic theory? When we observe (for example) that natives of Philadelphia accept and produce sentences like I’m done my homework, but that natives of other regions do not, we must conclude that this variation arises from some difference in the mental grammars of the speakers of different dialects. But how can we investigate such differences in mental grammars empirically? This course aims to answer questions of this sort, by examining how English varies by region in the United States (with occasional forays into English as spoken in the British Isles). The class will examine grammatical diversity on a number of levels (including accents and dialectal vocabulary), but the main focus will be on studying and accounting for syntactic differences amongst varieties. Students will also consider how the scientific study of dialects can inform public policy debates in areas where language is relevant, and use their new understanding to critically evaluate representations of dialects and their speakers in the popular media.

Prerequisites for the course:
CAS LX 250 Introduction to Linguistics (or equivalent), or permission of the instructor.

Students completing the course will learn:

• To show knowledge of the geographical distribution, histories, and main linguistic features of the major dialect regions of North America
• To characterize phonological differences amongst dialects, and transcribe them phonetically
• To understand the core syntactic properties of English clause structure, and how this varies across dialects
• To use syntactic and morphological tests to argue for or against a particular analysis of a grammatical phenomenon
• To be a critical consumer of popular media depictions of grammatical diversity
Required Reading (Available at Barnes and Noble in Kenmore Square):

The main textbook for this course, which we will read in its entirety, is the following:


In addition, there will occasionally be readings from other sources- all of these will be posted in pdf form to Blackboard Learn.

Note that the textbook is just the foundation of this course, not the totality of it, and that you cannot pass this course by reading the textbook alone. Regular attendance in class is therefore essential- see below on class procedures.

Course Requirements and grading:

- Class participation: 10%
- 6 Assignments: 30%
- Essay on dialect representation in a piece of popular media: 10%
- Class presentation based on essay: 10%
- Mid-term examination: 20%
- Final examination: 20%

Class participation will be assessed on the basis of your attendance record and your level of participation in class discussions/in-class exercises.

The Assignments will be a mixture of linguistic problem-solving (i.e., applying analytical techniques and skills learned in class to unfamiliar linguistic data) and short-answer critical thinking questions.

The Essay on dialect representation in a piece of popular media is due on Thursday, Nov 20. It will be a 4-page essay which summarizes a piece of popular media (which may be any sort of media product- a play, an episode of a TV show, a movie, a newspaper article, a fiction or non-fiction book, a blog post, etc.) and gives a linguistically-informed discussion of its merits and demerits as a representation of dialects and their speakers. Students may choose any relevant piece of popular media to examine, provided I agree to its suitability. You must notify me of your choice by Tuesday, Nov 4, and may begin work on the project as soon as I confirm my approval.

Students will each deliver a 10-minute class presentation based on their essay in Week 14 (Dec 2 & 4).

Both the Midterm and the Final examinations will be a mixture of multiple choice, problem-solving and short answer questions. The Final will not be cumulative, in the sense that pre-Midterm material will not be tested directly on the Final. However, post-
Midterm material builds heavily on conceptual foundations built in the first half of the course.

**Course policies:**

**Copyright.** All materials used in this course are copyrighted. This is obvious in the case of the textbook readings, but it also holds of my lecture slides, exercises, and other materials. Reproducing class materials, or uploading them to websites, is a copyright infringement.

New assignments are posted to Blackboard on Thursday mornings, and are due on the following Thursday. Completed assignments are to be printed out and turned in at the beginning of Thursday class. Email submission is not permitted unless you are unable to attend class for some valid reason.

Late assignments are not accepted, except under relevant extenuating circumstances.

Please let me know of any unavoidable absences, whether for religious, personal, or health reasons, as soon as you become aware of them. If you know you will be observing one or more religious holidays this semester, please examine the syllabus to determine which class days you will need to miss, and let me know by email as soon as possible. I will work with you to help you catch up on missed work, in accordance with BU’s policy on religious absences: (http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/absence-for-religious-reasons/)

No make-up exams will be granted, unless compelling personal, religious, or medical reasons force you to miss an examination and you have my permission in advance. The decision to grant or refuse a make-up exam is mine. A make-up exam will always be accommodated in the event of a religious absence.

**Procedures.** Class time will be used to reinforce, practice, and extend material found in the readings. As well as new material, classes will often involve group exercises designed to reinforce the more difficult concepts.

**Classroom etiquette.** No cell phones. Laptops are to be used only for taking notes. Even so, you might be better off leaving your laptop at home and taking hand-written notes: http://www.vox.com/2014/6/4/5776804/note-taking-by-hand-versus-laptop

Extra credit exercises will be granted only at my discretion and, if granted at all, will be made available to the whole class in the form of additional “bonus” sections of assignments or exams.

**Academic Integrity.** All students are responsible for understanding and complying with the BU Academic Conduct Code, available at: http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/
Graduate students should refer to the GRS Academic Conduct Code, which can be found here: http://www.bu.edu/cas/students/graduate/forms-policies-procedures/academic-discipline-procedures/

Collaboration. If you decide to form a study group to work together on assignments, your collaboration should not go beyond discussing ideas together. In other words, you must write up your own assignment separately from the group, using only your own words (except when quoting other work directly, in which case use citations as standard).

The following are all **banned forms of collaboration**:
- Having one or more members of the group produce a “group draft”, or “group essay plan”, which individual members of the group then customize.
- Writing up on separate computers while conferring with each other in real time (whether in person or via skype, chat services, or any other medium).
- Using another student’s complete assignment as a reference when completing your own.

Furthermore, when assignments are problem-set-based rather than essay-based, I encourage you to try to work alone, at least at first. Otherwise, it will be hard for you to tell how much you’ve really understood.

**Grading standards:**

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<th>Score Range</th>
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<tr>
<td>93-100</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>&lt;60</td>
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Course Overview (subject to change- any updates will be posted to Blackboard)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week Dates</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Readings</th>
<th>Deadlines</th>
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<tr>
<td>R, 9/3</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Course overview</td>
<td>AE Ch 1 &amp; 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>T, 9/8</td>
<td>Dialect Variation and Change</td>
<td>Languages vs. dialects, Dialects and linguistic theory</td>
<td>AE Ch 3 &amp; 4</td>
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<td>R, 9/10</td>
<td>Where does dialectal variation come from?</td>
<td>Phonetic transcription: a refresher</td>
<td>Assignment 1 Due (Linguistic autobiography)</td>
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<td>T, 9/15</td>
<td>Social and ethnic dialects</td>
<td>Gender and Stylistic Variation, Variation by gender</td>
<td>No Assignment Due (extra time for assignment 3)</td>
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<td>R, 9/24</td>
<td>Stylistic variation</td>
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<td>T, 9/29</td>
<td>A Morphosyntax Refresher</td>
<td>Parts of Speech and Grammatical Categories, Constituency</td>
<td>Watch video lecture before Class</td>
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<tr>
<td>R, 10/1</td>
<td>Constituency continued</td>
<td>Major constituent types of English</td>
<td>Assignment 3 Due (regional, social and ethnic variation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T, 10/6</td>
<td>A Crash-course in English Clause Structure</td>
<td>Verbs and their arguments, The subject and Tense</td>
<td>Practice Midterm released online</td>
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<td>R, 10/8</td>
<td>Assignment 4 Due (Grammatical categories and constituency)</td>
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AE = American English, 2nd Edition
| Week 7 | The English auxiliary system  
Do support  
T-to-C movement |  |
|---|---|---|
| T, 10/13 | Consolation  
For this session, we’ll go through the practice midterm and/or do in-class exercises and review to consolidate syntax | No graded assignment (work through practice midterm in advance) |
| R, 10/15 | In-Class Midterm |  |
| | Consolidation  
For this session, we’ll go through the practice midterm and/or do in-class exercises and review to consolidate syntax | No graded assignment (work through practice midterm in advance) |
| Week 8 | African American Vernacular English  
Origins of AAVE  
Negative concord and negative inversion, Ain’t (in AAVE and elsewhere) |  |
| T, 10/20 | African American Vernacular English cont.  
Inversion in embedded questions  
Habitual BE  
Stressed BIN  
Copula deletion | AE Chapter 7  
Green 2002: Ch 2 & 4 |
| R, 10/22 | Southern and Appalachian English  
A-prefixing  
Multiple modals  
Liketa  
Split subjects  
Personal datives | Assignment 5 Due  
(More morphosyntax; AAVE) |
| T, 10/27 | Strange Participles  
Verbal ‘rather’  
I’m done my homework  
Needs washed | Work your way through handout on verbal vs. adjectival participles |
| R, 10/29 | SO intense  
Drama SO and other intensifiers  
So don’t I | Assignment 6 Due  
(Southern and Appalachian) |
| Week 10 | Wider-world applications and implications  
Applied Dialectology | AE Ch 10 & 11 |
| T, 11/3 | Dialect Awareness | Break (to work on popular media essay) |
| R, 11/5 |  |  |
| Week 11 | AE Ch 10 & 11 |  |
Week 12

T, 11/17
British English and American English

R, 11/19
Class Flipped- Professor Myler Away

Overview of English in Britain
Differences between British and American English

Week 13

T, 11/24
Discussion of Essays and preparation for post-
Thanksgiving Presentations

R, 11/26
No Class: Thanksgiving Break

Week 14

T, 12/1
Student Presentations

R, 12/3
Practice final released online

Week 15

T, 12/8
Final Review

R, 12/10
Final Exam

Course Bibliography


