

**Boston University Linguistics Program
College of Arts and Sciences**

CAS LX 365/EN 313/GRS LX 665: Variation in Dialects of English

Time: Tues/Thurs 12.30pm-1.45

Professor: Neil Myler

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Room B08

Location: MCS B19

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Office hours: Weds 2.45-4.15
Thurs 2.15-3.45
or by appointment

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 almost in its entirety, is the following:

- Wolfram, Walt & Natalie Schilling. 2016. *American English*, 3rd Edition. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

If you decide to order this book online instead of getting it from the bookstore, **make sure you get the 3rd edition**. It differs in a number of ways from the earlier editions.

In addition, there will occasionally be readings from other sources, and students taking the course at the as LX 665 will be reading published papers on English dialect syntax in a separate reading group. All of these additional readings will be posted in pdf form to Blackboard Learn.

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

Course Requirements and grading:

Undergraduates (taking as CAS LX 365 or EN 313)

- 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%

Graduate students (taking as GRS LX 665)

- Class participation (including grad syntax discussions): 20%
- 6 Assignments: 20%
- English dialect syntax term paper or literature review: 50%
- Class presentation based term paper or literature review in progress: 10%

Class participation will be assessed on the basis of your attendance record and your level of participation in class discussions/in-class exercises. For graduate students, this component of the grade will be partly based on their participation in a weekly reading group at which graduate students and the instructor will meet to discuss an assigned article on English dialect syntax. For the first few meetings, the instructor will lead the discussion, but each graduate student will take a turn leading the discussion of the assigned article starting later in the semester.

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.

Students taking the course at the 300 level must produce an Essay on dialect representation in a piece of popular media, which is due on **Tuesday, November 27**. This will be a 5-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, November 6**, and may begin work on the project as soon as I confirm my approval.¹

Undergraduate students will each deliver a 10-minute class presentation based on their essay in Weeks 14/15.

Students taking the course as LX 665 will write a term paper constituting an original piece of English dialect syntax research or an English dialect syntax literature review. This is a paper between 10 and 25 pages in length, which chooses a particular syntactic construction from a dialect of English and provides a detailed overview and evaluation of the literature concerning it. This paper is due **by email in pdf form by Noon, Friday, Dec 14**. Students must meet with the instructor by **Tuesday, November 6** to discuss the choice of topic, and to establish a reading list.

Graduate students will deliver a 10-minute class presentation based on their term paper or literature review-in-progress in Weeks 14/15.

Undergraduate students will take a Midterm and a Final examination. Both of these 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.

¹ Those of you who took LX 110 in a previous year may have chosen to do a similar exercise for their final project in that class. If you did, please be aware that a higher standard of linguistic sophistication will be expected for the essay you do for this class. Also please be aware that BU does not allow one to get academic credit for the same work twice—this is known as “self-plagiarism”, and is a violation of the Academic Conduct Code. In other words, do not be tempted to re-use your LX 110 final project in whole or in part for this class (to be safe, if this warning is relevant to you, you would be better off choosing an entirely different piece of popular media to focus on).

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, except when special permission is granted to photograph the board. 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:

<https://www.bu.edu/cas/files/2017/02/GRS-Academic-Conduct-Code-Final.pdf>

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:

93-100	A	78-79.99	C+
90-92.99	A-	73-77.99	C
88-89.99	B+	70-72.99	C-
83-87.99	B	60-69.99	D
80-82.99	B-	<60	F

Course Overview (subject to change- any updates will be posted to Blackboard)

Week Dates	Topic	Readings <i>AE= American English, 3rd Edition</i>	Deadlines
Week 1 Tuesday, Sept. 4	Introduction <i>Course overview</i>		
Thursday, Sept. 6	Why Dialect Variation Matters	<i>AE Ch 1</i>	
Week 2 Tuesday, Sept. 11	Phonetic transcription: a refresher	<i>AE Ch 3</i>	
Thursday, Sept. 13	A Brief History of English in the United States	<i>AE Ch 2, AE Ch 4</i>	Assignment 1 Due (Linguistic autobiography)
Week 3 Tuesday, Sept. 18	Mapping dialect variation <i>Methods in dialectology</i> <i>Major dialect areas in the US</i>	<i>AE Ch 5</i>	

	<i>Online resources: Atlas of North American English; The Yale Grammatical Diversity Project</i>		
Thursday, Sept. 20	Social and ethnic dialects	<i>AE Ch 6 & 7</i>	Assignment 2 Due (Phonetic transcription practice)
Week 4 Tuesday, Sept. 25	<i>Social and ethnic dialects continued</i>		
Thursday, Sept. 27	Gender Variation <i>Variation by gender</i>	<i>AE Ch 9</i> Kiesling 2004 Labov 2001	No Assignment Due (extra time for assignment 3)
Week 5 Tuesday, Oct. 2	A Morphosyntax Refresher <i>Parts of Speech and Grammatical Categories Constituency</i>	<i>Watch video lecture before Class</i>	
Thursday, Oct. 4	A Crash-course in English Clause Structure <i>Verbs and their arguments</i> <i>The subject and Tense</i>		Assignment 3 Due (regional, social and ethnic variation)
Week 6 Tuesday, Oct. 9	NO CLASS—BU on a Monday Schedule		Practice Midterm released online
Thursday, Oct. 11	<i>The English auxiliary system</i> <i>Do support</i> <i>T-to-C movement</i>		Assignment 4 Due (Grammatical categories and constituency)
Week 7 Tuesday, Oct. 16	<i>English clause structure continued</i>		
Thursday, Oct 18	Syntax Consolidation <i>For this session, we'll do in-class exercises and review to consolidate the more difficult syntax stuff.</i>		No assignment due—break to study for midterm.

Week 8 Tuesday, Oct 23	Midterm Review Session		Work through practice midterm before class
Thursday, Oct 25	In-Class Midterm		
Week 9 Tuesday, Oct. 30	African American Vernacular English <i>Origins of AAVE</i> <i>Negative concord and negative inversion, Ain't (in AAVE and elsewhere)</i>	<i>AE Chapter 8</i> <i>Green 2002: Ch 2 & 4</i>	
Thursday, Nov. 1	No Class—Professor Myler Away		
Week 10 Tuesday, Nov. 6	African American Vernacular English cont. <i>Inversion in embedded questions</i> <i>Habitual BE</i> <i>Stressed BIN</i> <i>Copula deletion</i>	<i>Continue reading</i> <i>AE Chapter 8 and</i> <i>Green 2002: Ch 2 & 4</i>	300-level Students must notify me of their choice of popular media to discuss by this date LX 665 students must meet with me to discuss a lit-review topic and settle on a reading list by this date
Thursday, Nov. 8	Southern and Appalachian English <i>A-prefixing</i> <i>Multiple modals</i> <i>Liketa</i> <i>Split subjects</i> <i>Personal datives</i>		Assignment 5 Due (More morphosyntax; AAVE)

Week 11 Tuesday, Nov. 13	Strange Participles <i>Verbal 'rather'</i> <i>I'm done my homework</i> <i>Needs washed</i>	Work your way through handout on verbal vs. adjectival participles	
Thursday, Nov. 15	Wider-world applications and implications <i>Applied Dialectology</i> <i>Dialect Awareness</i>	<i>AE Ch 11 & 12</i>	Assignment 6 Due (More dialect syntax)
Week 12 Tuesday, Nov. 20	British English and American English <i>Overview of English in Britain</i> <i>Differences between British and American English</i>	<i>Beal 2010 Ch 2 & 3</i>	
Thursday, Nov. 22	No Class—Thanksgiving Break		
Week 13 Tuesday, Nov. 27	Discussion of Essays and preparation for Presentations		Essay on dialect representation in media is due Practice final released online
Thursday, Nov. 29	Buffer/Student Presentations		
Week 14 Tuesday, Dec. 4	Student Presentations		
Thursday, Dec. 6	Student Presentations		
Week 15 Tuesday, Dec. 11	Final Review		Work through Practice final in advance
Friday, Dec. 14	Grad final projects due (by noon, in pdf form, by email)		
TBA	Final Exam		

Course Bibliography

Beal, Joan. 2010. *An Introduction to Regional Englishes: Dialect Variation in England*. Edinburgh University Press.

Green, Lisa J. 2002. *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.

Kiesling, Scott. 2004. Dude. *American Speech*. 79.3:281-306.

Labov, William. 2001. *Principles of Linguistic Change Vol. 2: Social Factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wolfram, Walt & Natalie Schilling. 2016. *American English*, 3rd Edition. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.