

LG 554-7-AU
Analyzing Language in Society –
Research Methods
Autumn 2018
Mon 12-2pm in 2.411

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Office hours (Autumn Term): Mon 2:30–3:30pm, Tues 11:30am–12:30pm

Module Aims and objectives

This Module is required for students on the MA Sociolinguistics. In it, you will learn how to collect and analyse data and present your results. You will do more data collection in the first half, and more data reduction and analysis in the second half.

The course aims are:

- to give you a foundation in some of the primary methods often used in sociolinguistic research, including
- both quantitative & qualitative approaches as used in variation, ethnography of speech, & discourse analysis,
- focusing on how to design and conduct surveys of language and dialect structure and use.

The history of sociolinguistics is largely the development and refinement of empirical methods. We will therefore draw on both classic and updated techniques, considering different ways to collect data and begin linguistic analysis. Our survey will attempt to include many of the following topics in the first term:

- o methods of sampling populations of speakers
- o ethnographic observation and note-taking
- o how to approach informants
- o the design and use of simple questionnaires
- o the central roles of sociolinguistic interviews ...
- o ...and of participant-observation techniques
- o problems in eliciting and recording natural speech
- o approaches to record-keeping and their consequences
- o and the ethics of (socio-)linguistic research
- (especially our responsibilities to the speakers & communities we study).

For your part, you will

- o develop and practice a variety of fieldwork skills and materials

- o plan and carry out data-collection projects
- o gather demographic and ethnographic information on the people you observe
- o obtain proper consent, treat data confidentially, treat people w/respect, and observe ethical guidelines
- o conduct data-reduction and aggregation operations
- o carry out preliminary and more advanced analysis
- o organize your research materials,
- o report orally on the progress of your research, and
- o write reports on several small research tasks.

Expected Learning Outcomes

By the end of the module, you will (depending on the choice of assignments):

- recognize and have experience of the stages of sociolinguistic research
- have collected samples of naturally-occurring speech
- have made some of the mistakes one can make in the field
- understand some of the problems involved in recording speech interactions
- have learned thru experience to critique methods and assumptions of linguistic data collection (which will add to your understanding of other people's work)
- be acquainted with some of the ethical issues involved in human-subjects research in general, and in sociolinguistic research in particular
- have begun to work with transcription and (preliminary) analysis of speech data
- be familiar with important literature/case studies on sociolinguistic methodology
- have experience presenting and discussing research orally in class
- have developed abilities, materials, and a personal attitude towards community-based research, which will help you to develop fieldwork projects of your own.

Transferable (Employability) Skills

You will also have acquired a number of skills and experiences useful outside of linguistics and academe, in other fields such as journalism, consulting, law or business. Depending on the assignments you choose to do, and whether you work singly or with a group, these may include:

- familiarity with problem-solving skills on your own or in a group setting
- awareness of how your own social identity affects (speech) interactions you are involved in
- practice approaching and interacting with previously-unknown people, one-on-one or in groups, to whom you represent your project and from whom you obtain speech data
- using microphones and digital recording equipment and processing digital signals for research
- interviewing, ethnographic observation, and note-taking and record-keeping techniques

- digital skills, including software (Excel, ELAN, VabrRul/Rbrul, Audacity, digital recording etc.)
- oral reporting of work in progress, with critique from group members, and other presentation skills
- and practice in writing and revising technical reports.

Teaching Methods and Expectations of Students

This is a course about *doing* -- learning how to perform basic research tasks. It differs from other compulsory courses (e.g. *Approaches to Language in Society*, LG532) in that we will not so much survey an existing body of knowledge, as learn how to discover and create new knowledge. Readings are more often practical and technical than theoretical or investigative. It also differs from many optional modules in that the methods studied here do not all belong to a particular sub-discipline of linguistics (some of them do not properly belong to linguistics at all), but can be applied to various existing, new or combined approaches (at any rate, some of them can!). Some flexibility in timing and content is to be expected -- as always in fieldwork -- and it may be possible to accommodate individual student goals and preferences.

Classes will involve a mixture of lectures, workshop sessions and general discussion. Much of your work will be carried on outside of class on your own schedule, and it will be important for you to use class time to share your insights, problems and results, and to actively seek guidance. Attendance is expected **every week**. It is your responsibility to participate as fully as you are able. This is an experiential learning course: it cannot be successfully completed by simply listening and reading! It is necessary that you make mistakes, and learn from them. Please **bring to my attention any resources** for learning that you'd like me and other class members to know about, e.g. web links, readings, mass media or audiovisuals, etc. I'll be happy to add any appropriate new materials from you.

Group/pair work: You are free, and encouraged, to work in small groups or pairs, as well as individually. It often takes more energy to work together with other people than to do something alone, but the result is invariably useful: the final product is often improved, and the learning process always is. A good pairing is for a native and non-native British English speaker to work together -- e.g. the former can help with recognising British English features, and the latter brings a fresh ear to perceiving them.

You are responsible for doing your fair share in a group/pair project, and working out what that means with your collaborator(s). It does **not** mean doing most of the work (which isn't fair to you or others), nor letting others carry your weight. If you have a problem with your partner(s), try to resolve it by honest discussion as soon as you recognize it; if necessary, come to me. If you choose to do an assessed task using group process, consult me first so I can make arrangements for individual marking.

Reading Materials (see *Talis Aspire list*)

...are often based on case studies of other sociolinguistic research projects. Our concern is less to criticize authors for the failings or non-universality of their approach -- after all, every project is particular, and not every method or suggestion can be generalized to our immediate needs. Rather, we will search for what is useful, what should be avoided and learned from, and what can be creatively transformed.

Where readings are concerned, *your responsibilities include:*

- a) Read the main selections carefully in preparation for class (ie, *before* you arrive!).
- b) Prepare, & be sure to articulate, your questions & difficulties with them. Take notes!
- c) Follow up questions in class discussion until you are satisfied that you understand.
- d) Offer your insights, test out your ideas & guesses, formulate & air your own views.

If you have difficulty speaking up or being heard in class, it's your responsibility to see me and point this out -- just as it's mine to be aware and give you any assistance I can in participating.

Resources and Responsibilities

It will be helpful if you share what resources you have with other students, and respect those shared with you.

- Please do **come to my office hours** at least once this term, to ask questions about lectures, fieldwork, or assignments, or discuss anything you're interested in about course topics or the university.
- If you have a car it might be helpful to drive to fieldwork sites, but it isn't needed -- public transport, bikes, etc. can also be used. If you are considering working in a location you feel might be dangerous, be sure to consult me for advice beforehand. Your first priority is always to behave safely and sensibly.
- If you have **recording equipment**, please use it and share it. Arrangements will be made for you to borrow some if you don't own any. I can give **advice** on purchasing recording equipment, both in class and in individual consultations. I suggest you **don't buy equipment before speaking to me**, as much of what is available is not suitable for research use; most sales information is unhelpful, and salespeople are not educated about the equipment they sell, nor about your needs as a researcher. You may make an expensive mistake!
- **Department recording equipment** is available for your use, both to experience different media, and in case you can't afford to purchase your own. The Dept. has recently purchased new state-of-the-art digital recorders and microphones, which are intended for your use. When using Department equipment, you are responsible for taking care of it; we will cover how (not) to use it in class. You will also be responsible for buying your own recording media and batteries. In general,

though, you may be best off investing in your own (suitable) equipment – once you know what you want – as you will have its unrestricted use, get to know it well, and take better care of it than borrowed equipment.

- Researchers are divided on the question of paying informants; I recommend that students do not offer to pay. If you choose to help out your speakers in some way -- from buying a pint or making dinner, to giving lifts, or more serious efforts (reciprocity is another issue we will discuss) -- you're free to do so as an individual, though of course you cannot commit the Dept. or the University. However, be aware that people may view you as a representative of the University anyway, no matter what you say. Please consult the University of Essex Ethical Guidelines For Research Involving Human Participants, linked from this Dept. [webpage](#).
- You will be responsible for treating recordings of other people's speech in a responsible and professional manner, including preserving their **confidentiality**, their **legal rights**, and their **trust** in academic researchers. We will cover this in class -- until then, use common sense, and tell people the truth. Don't do anything secretive or clandestine.

Difficulties

Data collection, especially in face-to-face community-based fieldwork, is intellectually, physically, socially and emotionally demanding. There's no easy way to learn this; no short-cuts. We all have built-in limitations of who we are, and how people react to us, that inevitably prove frustrating at some point in the field.

You may need to spend long hours, experience bad weather, be bored, tired, irritated or inconvenienced, to get good data. Informants cancel sessions, fail to show up, question your motives, act unpleasant, or change their minds at the last minute. Our self-worth as people is involved in playing our parts well, and it can be difficult to both 'behave normally', and observe as a linguist, at the same time. Please try to anticipate this!

You will need enthusiasm, energy, and patience, all your interpersonal skills, willingness to grow, and trust and goodwill towards your class members, me, and others. But the rewards for this type of work are proportional to the difficulties involved. You may begin the course feeling apprehensive (especially if you are a non-native speaker of English, or - like me - a foreigner to the local area), but you will certainly end it feeling more competent, understanding, secure and knowledgeable about the region and people you study -- as well as being a better linguist.

Assessment

This module is assessed 100% by coursework: there's no final exam.

- There are several small unassessed tasks – no mark given – just do them. The first of these is due in the second week of class (Week 3), so please **start now!**
- There are two required, assessed tasks. You have some choice among these.

- Each chosen task will be worth 50% of the course mark. Your first choice of assignment is due in **Thurs 22 Nov 2016 (Week 8)**. Your second choice of assignment is due on **Thurs 13 Dec 2016 (Week 11)**. Be sure you hand in one assignment in Week 8, and one in Week 11, if not before.
- Choice of tasks is discussed in class; details will be linked from this page. Each assignment should be **at least 1500 words** (not less, but can be more if you need to). No assignment should be longer than 3000 words, maximum.

More info on assessment and tasks is presented in a separate link on the coursepage.

Schedule of Classes and Topics:

Mon 8 Oct	Week 2	Introduction. Research experiences, methods, questions. Doing sociolinguistics. Definitions, histories.
Mon 15 Oct	Week 3	Methodological themes. Types of data & data collection. Recording speech: Digital technology, microphones.
Mon 22 Oct	Week 4	Ethics: Consent/releases. Sampling: Social surveys.
Mon 29 Oct	Week 5	Observation. Ethnography. Sociolinguistic interviews I.
Mon 05 Nov	Week 6	Sociolinguistic interviews II. Interview modules. Records/archiving.
Mon 12 Nov	Week 7	Variation analysis. Linguistic variables.
Mon 19 Nov	Week 8	<i>Catching up on work. First assignment due Thurs 22 Nov.</i>
Mon 26 Nov	Week 9	Narrative analysis.
Mon 03 Dec	Week 10	Rapid/anonymous elicitation tasks.
Mon 10 Dec	Week 11	Social network measures. <i>2nd assignment due Thu 13 Dec.</i>