Course description

Language is critical in the formation of social groups and struggles for power and prestige among groups. This course will survey language diversity in American society, based on such variables as class, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, age, and region. Examination of language policy issues will illuminate the ways that dominant uses of language reinforce structured differences in social power and prestige among cultural groups. We will also examine political uses of language to both legitimize and challenge key aspects of the social order, with particular attention to discursive attempts by both liberals and conservatives to appropriate the American narrative in staking their territory on contested issues.

Required texts


Additional readings will be posted on e-reserve.

Course requirements

- Class attendance, preparation, and participation 20%
- Sociolinguistic analysis essay 30% (due March 18)
- Case study—language groups, status inequality, and conflict 50%  
  - Conference with instructor (by March 21) required, but not graded  
  - Written proposal (by April 15) 5%  
  - Annotated bibliography (by April 29) 5%  
  - First draft or detailed outline of paper (by May 6) 5%  
  - Final paper (by May 19, 4:30 pm) 35%
Course Policies

This course will abide by the following grading system outlined by the Wellesley College Articles of Government (Book II, Article VII, Section 1):

Grade A is given to students who meet with conspicuous excellence every demand which can fairly be made by the course.
Grade B is given to those students who add to the minimum of satisfactory attainment excellence in not all, but some of the following: organization, accuracy, originality, understanding, insight.
Grade C is given to those students who have attained a satisfactory familiarity with the content of a course and who have demonstrated ability to use this knowledge in a satisfactory manner.
Grade D is a passing grade. There is no grade of D+ or D-.
Grade F denotes failure and a loss of credit for the course.

Academic honesty is expected of all students in accordance with the Wellesley Honor Code. Suspected honor violations relating to course work in this class will be reported to the General Judiciary.

Late papers will be penalized one letter grade per day late, except in cases of extreme emergency (such as hospitalization, death of a loved one). Minor illnesses, overscheduling, and perfectionism do not constitute extreme emergencies. However, if you have had a major disruption in your life and need extra time, I am willing to work with you; in such cases, please make a request as early as possible.

Except for special cases, I do not distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences. Please come to class on time. Absences and habitual tardiness will affect your grade for class participation. Excessive absences will result in loss of credit for class participation.

I will gladly make necessary accommodations for students with disabilities. Those needing accommodations are encouraged to work with either Jim Wice or Barb Burck in the Pforzheimer Learning and Teaching Center in Clapp Library to make appropriate arrangements.

***Disclaimer: The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus and course schedule. Any changes will be announced in class and posted on the course conference.***
Seminar Preparation, Participation, and Leadership

Each week, we will have two discussion leaders responsible for leading our class discussion of the week’s readings. The two discussion leaders should communicate with one another in order to coordinate their leadership of the class. All students will be responsible for encouraging and facilitating class discussion each week by submitting one of the following to the course conference in preparation for each class meeting:

- A current item from the news media that relates to the topic of language and social inequality, along with a brief written memo tying the item to the week’s reading and/or to previous course readings or discussions. If possible, include a link to the item in your post; if not, include a brief description in your memo. You may offer items that illustrate concepts or patterns that have been discussed, that serve as refuting evidence for some argument that has been offered in a reading or in class, or that raise interesting questions to add to an earlier discussion. Your memo should be no longer than 350 words.

- 2-3 discussion questions that are suitable for contributing to class discussions, based on the assigned readings for that meeting. Please note that good discussion questions rarely ask for mere summary of an article’s main point(s), but rather ask provocative questions that engage readers in dialogue with one another or with the author. The goal of discussion questions should be not only to stimulate discussion (i.e., get people talking), but also to critically engage readings by critically analyzing the way arguments are constructed, questioning the assumptions behind what is said, subjecting arguments to questions of evidence, and/or synthesizing information and viewpoints from various readings.

- A brief written reaction (one or two paragraphs) to a particular reading, either in support of or against an argument or assumption made by the author. These reactions should not be summaries of the readings, but rather a critical engagement of the reading and your articulate response to it. Written reactions may be no longer than 350 words.

All submissions to the course conference should be made no later than 4:30 pm on Monday afternoons. Discussion leaders will be responsible for reading all submissions and incorporating (at least some of) them in their plans for class discussion. In addition to regular class participation, both weekly submissions and discussion leadership will be considered when assessing the participation portion of students’ grades.
Course Outline

I Language and society

A. Getting acquainted; language histories and interests; overview – Jan. 29

Lippi-Green *English with an Accent* chapter 1

B. Language variation – Feb. 12

Lippi-Green *English with an Accent* chapters 2-3

C. Culture, meaning, and metaphor – Feb. 12


D. Language and social power—theoretical considerations – Feb 19

Lippi-Green *English with an Accent* chapter 4

Recommended:
II Language socialization

A. Language learning – Feb. 26


Eckert, Penelope. 2003. “Language and Adolescent Peer Groups.” Journal of Language and Social Psychology 22:1, 112-118. (This journal is available online through Wellesley College library.)

Recommended:

Carrie Secret interview in The Real Ebonics Debate (p. 79)

B. Language and identity –March 4

Lippi-Green English with an Accent chapters 5-7

Rodriguez “On Becoming a Chicano”


Recommended:


III Language and power

A. Language and Discrimination – March 11 & 18

March 11

Recommended:

March 18
Lippi-Green English with an Accent chapters 8-10

Recommended:

B. Linguistic Imperialism, Nationalism, and Indigenous Languages—April 1


Recommended
Cultural Survival Quarterly Issue 21.2: Rescuing Critically Endangered Native American Languages
http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/csq/index.cfm?id=31.2


C. Language Status and Language Policy in the US – April 8 & 15

April 8
Lippi-Green English with an Accent chapter 11

Recommended:
April 15


Recommended:


D. Rhetoric & Political Power – April 29
Lakoff, George. 1995. “Metaphor, Morality, and Politics: Or, why conservatives have left liberals in the dust.” Social Research 62:2, 177(37). (journal available online through college library)


E. Rhetorical Resistance to Power – May 6


Sociolinguistic Analysis Essay
Due March 18

The purpose of the essay is to engage in sociolinguistic analysis of an actual speech event in which two or more people (but not yourself) are involved. You should in some way record the event. You can either record speech in a natural setting (e.g., around campus or around town) or you can record something broadcast over some public medium. You should transcribe a segment of the recording of at least 5 minutes duration; attach your transcription to your essay. Your essay should analyze the linguistic and/or social features of the speech you record. You may comment on more than the segment that you transcribe, but your transcription should illustrate at least some of what you analyze.

Factors you may wish to consider include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Who is speaking? How does the speech reflect the social location(s) of the speakers? (age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, status or prestige) What lexical or phonological markers indicate the speaker’s identity?
- In general, how would you characterize the speech you recorded? Is it scripted or spontaneous? Is it formal or informal? Is it legitimate or illegitimate?
- What languages, codes, or dialects are used? If more than one, what is the relationship between them? If more than one variety is used by a single speaker, what seems to govern switching?
- What, if anything, might the speech you recorded indicate about the speakers’ worldviews? Are culturally-bound metaphors prominent? How might their speech reinforce a particular sense of reality?
- Does the speech reflect the process of language socialization at work? How? What is being learned?
- In what ways does the speech you recorded reflect a dynamic of power or privilege between the speakers?

Suggested length of essay: 6-9 pages (not including transcript)
Language Status Case Study
Final Paper

For your course project, you will write a detailed case study of a language group involved in either an unequal status relationship or a social conflict in which language plays a part. The choice of cases can be driven by your own background and interests. Some of the kinds of topics you might think about include ethnic conflicts in which language is a prominent concern, conflicts over the status of a particular language or language variety, attempts to enact or resist change within a language or language group, struggles to maintain or gain social power that rely strategically on rhetoric or narrative, instances of development of specialized language features by dominant or dominated social groups, proposals of or protests to some language policy, the history of discrimination against a particular social group based significantly on linguistic matters, etc. The possibilities are extensive, and there is room to pursue divergent interests. You will select your topic and outline your approach to the case study in consultation with the instructor.

Previous case studies have included such diverse topics as:
- Uses and Perceptions of Creole, French, and English in Haitian Adventist Churches in Boston
- The role of Korean language in the experiences of Korean adoptees
- Sedaris Revisited: Lisping and the Stereotype of the Sissy
- Analysis of the Working Class Boston Accent in Good Will Hunting
- Gendered language and privilege
- Communication and Currency: Limitations of the US healthcare system for Hispanics
- Education and Mass Media as Mainlines into the Mainstream: Methods of cultural integration and the revitalization of Tamazight in Morocco
- Power relationships revolving around language in post-colonial Senegal
- The Death and Rebirth of a Language: The Life Cycle of Gaelic
- Maori Language Revitalization
- The language policies of apartheid in South Africa
- The language naming battles of the Serbs and Croats
- Analysis of rhetorical appeals by US presidential candidates

Deadlines for completion:
- By March 21—conference with instructor to select topic and propose case study method
- By April 15—written proposal for final paper (1-2 pages)
- By April 29—annotated bibliography of sources (list of sources that includes a brief abstract of each resource and summarizes its usefulness to your project)
- By May 6—detailed outline of paper (first draft encouraged)
- By May 19 (4:30 pm)—final paper due

Suggested length of case study paper is approximately 20-25 pages.