

Anthropology 225-02: Language and Human Experience

American University, Spring 2019

Time and place: Tuesday & Friday 8:10–9:25, Katzen Arts Center, Room 210

Instructor: Daniel Ginsberg, Anthropologist in Residence (ginsberg@american.edu)
In-person office hour: Friday 9:30–10:00 AM, Katzen Museum Café
Virtual office hour: Monday 8:30–9:30 PM

Teaching assistant: Shannon Clark (sc3966a@student.american.edu)

Office hour: Wednesday 11:00–2:00, Hamilton Building, Graduate Student Lounge

Overview

Whether they know it or not, everyone is interested in linguistic anthropology. Comments such as “People from Philadelphia talk funny,” “I didn’t understand the point of that story,” or “How was I supposed to know you were kidding?” are the kind of casual remarks that come up in day-to-day conversation, but behind each of them is an implicit theory about the way language and culture are connected – that a way of talking is connected with a geographical location, for example, or that a good story should have an identifiable “point.” As participants in the social world, each of us does this kind of theorizing all day, every day, but social scientists have developed theories and methodologies that allow us to conduct more principled investigations into questions such as “What does it mean when people from a given social group use a certain pronunciation?” “What counts as a ‘good’ story in this social setting?” and “What cues do people give to signal that they’re not intending to be taken literally?”

The goal of this course is to engage with foundational thinking in the fields of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, and to involve students both in communicating these ideas to a broader public and in using them for original analysis. We will begin by constructing a “tool kit” of core ideas, and then use those ideas to support our study of key topics. In parallel with this survey, students will work together to update a relevant Wikipedia article with citations they will find from the scholarly literature. Later in the semester, the class will identify a few sources of linguistic data, and students will participate in data analysis and write up research reports.

Student learning goals

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Explain how an understanding of language helps us to understand culture, and vice versa
- Use library services to find information that fills gaps in existing resources
- Communicate technical ideas to the general public
- Interpret language data from an anthropological perspective

Texts and resources

Ahearn, Laura. 2017. *Living language: An introduction to linguistic anthropology*, second edition. Wiley.

The textbook [is available in e-book format via the American University Library](#), and is on three-hour reserve at the library circulation desk. Supplemental readings and other media will be made available via [Blackboard](#).

Language and Human Experience as part of the General Education Program

The goal of this course is to invite critical thinking about language and human experience within a global perspective, paying attention to the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of language use (spoken, signed, written, electronic), as it is shaped by embodiment, gender, race, class, sexuality, nationalism, and other points of similarity and difference. An emphasis on diverse perspectives and experiences is informed by the nature of language usage itself, which is both an aspect of individual human experience and embedded in a social field.

ANTH 225 assumes no previous training in linguistics or anthropology. Course activities do assume that you have mastered the English language arts skills addressed in the first-year courses in College Writing or their equivalent.

About the instructor

I was a teacher before I was an anthropologist. In my previous career, I taught English to university students overseas and to adult and high school-aged immigrants in the US, and I became interested in questions of language, culture, and education. Being in classrooms as a professional and then as an anthropological fieldworker has led me to think critically about a lot of things that are typically taken for granted in education. As an educator, I'm always trying to provide a learning environment that is rooted in my values of community and democracy: everyone is welcomed and included, learning happens through conversation, and students have a say in what they learn and how they are graded.

I'm not a professor but an "anthropologist in residence," which means I'm primarily employed outside the university. My full-time job is as Manager of Education, Research, and Professional Development at the American Anthropological Association, where I study the profession of anthropology and support our members in their search for professional fulfillment. If you want to ask me about the Association, anthropology careers, or the discipline in general, I would welcome that.

Norms and policies

Courses typically have policies and norms of behavior regarding academic honesty, attendance, late work and the use of electronics in the classroom. In this course, rather than specifying policies in advance, we will take a more democratic approach that allows students to express what seems reasonable to them. We will finalize these policies in the first week of the semester, and an official document will be provided in the second week reflecting our consensus. To guide our discussion, here are the goals that I want these policies to accomplish:

- Students attend class consistently and participate in our community of study, but with reasonable accommodations for when life outside the classroom does not allow them to attend
- During class sessions, our focus and attention are on one another rather than on outside distractions, but technology may be used to bring in supplemental perspectives and to ensure that everyone's accessibility needs are met
- Everyone does their fair share of the work, not relying on group mates or outside sources to do what should be their responsibility
- As members of the larger community of American University, we are bound by the university's [Academic Integrity Code](#) and [Student Conduct Code](#)

Course requirements

Aside from preparing for, attending and participating in class (see above), the assignments for this course include three major assignments (due at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester) as well as a number of ongoing requirements. This is just an outline; specific guidelines for each assignment will be provided separately.

Major assignments:

- **Toolkit assignment.** The first chapter of the textbook lists four key terms that signal important ways that language and society are connected: *multifunctionality*, *language ideologies*, *practice*, and *indexicality*. In this assignment, you will choose a piece of pop culture or media and use it to illustrate at least three of these terms. This will serve as a “toolkit” to help you through the rest of the term.
- **Wikipedia project.** Instead of a midterm paper or exam (for which, let’s be honest, I would be the only audience), you will work to update a relevant Wikipedia article (with an audience of millions) by adding citations from the scholarly literature and explaining those citations in the body of the article. Specific training will be provided in class, as will a list of suggested articles to work on. There are more students in the class than articles on the list, so you are encouraged to collaborate with your colleagues who are working on the same article, but your only responsibility is the content that you add to the page. This project will begin in the second week of the course and conclude at Spring Break. You can access [our course Wikipedia page here](#).
- **Data analysis mini-paper.** After Spring Break, we will revisit your questions about language and culture to identify a selection of data sources for analysis. We will collaboratively collect data and make plans for analysis, and each student will choose one data source and write a three-page paper that draws from the data and advances a certain interpretation of it. This project gives you a chance to take what you learned from the earlier part of the course and put it into practice.

Ongoing requirements:

- **Reading responses.** Each week, in addition to other reading that you may be doing for the Wikipedia or data analysis project, one piece of reading is assigned. Typically, I’ve assigned textbook chapters on Tuesday of each week, followed by a scholarly article on Friday that gives one example of linguistic anthropology research on the same topic. You are expected to respond to **ten assigned readings** during the course of the semester in which you ask questions, make connections, highlight confusions, etc. All of your responses will be posted publicly for your colleagues, helping us to expand our conversation beyond the two and a half hours we see each other every week. For the scholarly articles, we will annotate the articles using the Hypothesis platform; for the textbook chapters, we will use forum posts on Blackboard.
- **In-class presentation.** There are a number of chances to give five-minute presentations over the course of the semester, and you are expected to give one at a time of your choosing. Specifically:
 - There will be a limited number of slots to present your toolkit to the class.
 - We’ll have one presentation about each Wikipedia article that class members work on.

- If your research for the Wikipedia or data project turns up a particularly interesting article that you'd like to summarize for the class, let me know.
- Anyone who hasn't done a presentation by the end of the semester can present their data analysis.
- **Reflective essays.** I've noticed that sometimes when you're in the midst of studying, it's easy to lose track of just how much you're learning. For this reason, at four times during the semester, I've scheduled chances to check in on what you are learning and how you feel you are doing in the class. We'll do this in the form of reflective essays of about one single-spaced page (500 words). The first reflective essay will focus on any ideas, questions or interests that led you to take this class; the second is a chance to check in once you get a sense of the rhythm of this course; the third will reflect on the Wikipedia assignment; and the fourth will look back on the data analysis project and the semester as a whole.

Assessment and grading

The purpose of assessment is to communicate to students how well they are meeting learning goals and what they need to do to make better progress. Ultimately, this course should offer students the opportunity to assess the quality of their own work. To be as clear as possible about these purposes, I will not evaluate individual assignments with A-B-C grades or numerical scores, but will rather provide detailed qualitative feedback. I want you to focus not on getting an A, but rather on learning to understand language as anthropologists do, and to apply that understanding to your own area of interest.

As for final grades, I believe your grade should indicate your overall effort and engagement. In order to determine final grades in a way that is equitable to students from different departments with different research interests doing different projects, final grades will be determined through ongoing conversation in the reflective essays and elsewhere. In general, students who wish to earn an A will be expected to complete all assignments and participate actively in class. If you would like to do less work and earn a lower grade, talk to me in advance about a revised set of expectations. For example:

- **For a B,** you might add fewer sources to Wikipedia, complete eight reading responses, and skip the in-class presentation
- **For a C,** you might do copy-editing and organizing work on Wikipedia without adding sources, complete six reading responses, not cite any sources in your data analysis paper, and skip the in-class presentation

Course schedule

Weeks 1–2: *How are language and society connected?*

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| Tu 1/15 | <i>Course overview and foundational concepts</i> |
| Fr 1/18 | Reading: Ahearn ch. 1 "The socially charged life of language"
Writing: Annotate the syllabus |
| Tu 1/22 | Reading: Ahearn ch. 2 "Gestures, sign languages, and multimodality"
Writing: Introductory reflective essay |

Introduction to the toolkit assignment
Introduction to the Wikipedia assignment; get started on Wikipedia

Fr 1/25 Reading: Kusters “Gesture-based customer interactions”
Wikipedia deadline: Sign up for an account

Week 3: How are thought and language connected?

Tu 1/29 Reading: Ahearn ch. 5 “Language, thought, and culture”
Wikipedia training: How to evaluate articles; how to edit
Assignment: Toolkits due

Fr 2/1 Reading: Duranti “Agency in language”
Wikipedia deadline: Evaluate an article

Weeks 4–5: How do people become language users?

Tu 2/5 Reading: Ahearn ch. 4 “Language acquisition and socialization”
Wikipedia training: Guides for writing anthropology and linguistics

Fr 2/8 Reading: Avineri et al. “Bridging the language gap”
Wikipedia deadline: Choose a topic and find three sources

Tu 2/12 Reading: Ahearn ch. 8 “Literacy practices”
Wikipedia training: Adding citations
Writing: Check-in reflective essay

Fr 2/15 Reading: Heath “What no bedtime story means”
Wikipedia training: Plagiarism and group work
Writing: Start writing your Wikipedia article draft

Weeks 6–7: How does language use connect with membership in a social group?

Tu 2/19 Reading: Ahearn ch. 6 “Communities of language users”
Wikipedia training: How to peer review

Fr 2/22 Reading: Mallinson and Childs “Communities of practice in sociolinguistic description”
Wikipedia deadline: Complete two peer reviews

Tu 2/26 Reading: Ahearn ch. 9 “Performance, performativity & the constitution of communities”
Wikipedia deadline: Respond to peer review

Fr 3/1 Reading: Bucholtz et al. “Entextualized humor and scientist identities”
Wikipedia deadline: Article goes live

Week 8: Looking back on the Wikipedia project

Tu 3/5 Wikipedia in-class presentations, day 1

Fr 3/8 Wikipedia in-class presentations, day 2

Week 9 (Tu 3/12 & Fr 3/15): Spring Break

Week 10: *How do you **do** research in linguistic anthropology?*

Tu 3/19 Reading: Ahearn ch. 3 “The research process in linguistic anthropology”
Writing: Wikipedia reflective essay

Fr 3/22 Dr. Ginsberg away at a conference: Society for Applied Anthropology

Weeks 11–12: *How does language connect to sociological identity categories like race and gender?*

Tu 3/26 Reading: Ahearn ch. 10 “Language and gender”
Data project: Group brainstorm of potential topics and data sources

Fr 3/29 Reading: Cameron, article TBD from the blog [language: a feminist guide](#)
Data project: Data collection plans

Tu 4/2 Reading: Ahearn ch. 11 “Language, race, and ethnicity”
Data project: Data collection ongoing

Fr 4/5 Reading: Cutler “Yorkville crossing”
Data project: Data analysis plans

Weeks 13–14: *Topics TBD based on data projects*

Tu 4/9

Fr 4/12

Tu 4/16

Fr 4/19

Week 15: *Final presentations*

Tu 4/23 Final presentations, day 1

Fr 4/26 Final presentations, day 2

Bibliography of supplemental readings

Avineri, Netta, Eric Johnson, Shirley Brice Heath, Teresa McCarty, Elinor Ochs, Tamar Kremer-Sadlik, Susan Blum, et al. 2015. “Invited Forum: Bridging the ‘Language Gap.’” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 25 (1): 66–86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12071>.

Bucholtz, Mary, Elena Skapoulli, Brendan Barnwell, and Jung-Eun Janie Lee. 2011. “Entextualized Humor in the Formation of Scientist Identities among US Undergraduates.” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 42 (3): 177–192.

Cutler, Cecilia A. 1999. “Yorkville Crossing: White Teens, Hip Hop and African American English.” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3 (4): 428–442.

Duranti, Alessandro. 2004. “Agency in Language.” In *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, edited by Alessandro Duranti, 451–473. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Heath, Shirley Brice. 1982. "What No Bedtime Story Means: Narrative Skills at Home and School." *Language in Society* 11 (1): 49–76.

Kusters, Annelies. 2017. "Gesture-based customer interactions: Deaf and hearing Mumbaikars' multimodal and metrolingual practices." *International Journal of Multilingualism* 14 (3): 283–302.

Mallinson, Christine, and Becky Childs. 2007. "Communities of Practice in Sociolinguistic Description: Analyzing Language and Identity Practices among Black Women in Appalachia." *Gender and Language* 1 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.v1i2.173>.

Accessibility

If you wish to receive accommodations for a disability, please notify the instructor with a letter from the Academic Support and Access Center (ASAC). To register with a disability or for questions about disability accommodations, contact the ASAC at 202-885-3360 or asac@american.edu, or drop by MGC 243. For more information, visit AU's Services for Students with Disabilities web page.

Resources are also available for students who experience life events or academic pressures that leave them feeling anxious, confused, depressed, lonely, or overwhelmed. (This is more common than you might think.) Although such students may not be eligible for accommodations through the ASAC, they are encouraged to talk to the instructor, their dean, or the Counseling Center (202-885-3500, MGC 214).

Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or who lacks a safe and stable place to live, and believes this may affect their performance in the course, is urged to contact the Dean of Students for support. Furthermore, please notify the instructor if you are comfortable doing so. This will enable him to provide any resources that he may possess.

Other resources on campus

Technical Support

AU is committed to providing a reliable online course system to all users. However, in the event of any unexpected server outage or any unusual technical difficulty that prevents a student from completing a time-sensitive assessment activity, instructors may extend deadlines and provide appropriate accommodations based on the situation.

- **Blackboard Support:** Students should immediately report any problems to their course instructor and also contact the Blackboard Support Center at blackboard@american.edu or call (202) 885-3904 for 24/7 support. Students can also log on to Blackboard Help for support.
- **AU Help Desk (focuses on all other IT issues):** Answers to your technology questions are just an e-mail, instant message, or phone call away. Contact the IT Help Desk at 202-885-2550, helpdesk@american.edu, or AskAmericanUHelp to reach one of our professional staff who can answer your questions and provide general troubleshooting assistance. Students can also log on to the Need Help Now? portal for support.

Academic Support Services

All students may take advantage of the Academic Support and Access Center (ASAC) for individual academic skills counseling, workshops, Tutoring and Writing Lab appointments, peer tutor referrals, and Supplemental Instruction. The ASAC is located in Mary Graydon Center 243.

Additional academic support resources available at AU include the Bender Library, the Department of Literature's Writing Center (located in the Library), the Math Lab in the Department of Mathematics & Statistics, and the Center for Language Exploration, Acquisition, & Research (CLEAR) in Asbury Hall. A more complete list of campus-wide resources is available in the ASAC.

Center for Diversity & Inclusion

CDI is dedicated to enhancing LGBTQ, multicultural, first-generation, and women's experiences on campus and to advancing AU's commitment to respecting and valuing diversity by serving as a resource and liaison to students, staff, and faculty on issues of equity through education, outreach, and advocacy. It is located on the 2nd floor of Mary Graydon Center. (202-885-3651, MGC 201 & 202)

Dean of Students Office

The Dean of Students Office offers one-on-one meetings to discuss academic, adjustment, and personal issues that may be interfering with a student's ability to succeed academically. The office also verifies documentation for students who have medical or mental health issues that cause them to be absent from class. (202-885-3300, Butler Pavilion 408)

International Student & Scholar Services

International Student & Scholar Services has resources to support academic success and participation in campus life including academic counseling, support for second language learners, response to questions about visas, immigration status and employment and intercultural programs, clubs and other campus resources. (202-885-3350, Butler Pavilion 410)

Office of Advocacy Services for Interpersonal and Sexual Violence

OASIS provides free and confidential advocacy services for students who experience sexual assault, dating or domestic violence, sexual harassment, and/or stalking. Please email or call to schedule an appointment with a victim advocate in OASIS. (oasis@american.edu, 202-885-7070, Wellness Center – McCabe Hall 123).

Writing Center

The Writing Center offers free, individual coaching sessions to all AU students. In your 45-minute session, a student writing consultant can help you address your assignments, understand the conventions of academic writing, and learn how to revise and edit your own work. (202-885-2991, Bender Library – 1st Floor Commons).

Emergency Preparedness

In the event of an emergency, American University will implement a plan for meeting the needs of all members of the university community. Should the University be required to close for a period of time, we are committed to ensuring that all aspects of our educational programs will be delivered to our students. These may include altering and extending the duration of the traditional term schedule to

complete essential instruction in the traditional format and/or the use of distance instructional methods. Specific strategies will vary from class to class, depending on the format of the course and the timing of the emergency. Faculty will communicate class-specific information to students via AU email and Blackboard, while students must inform their faculty immediately of any emergency-related absence. Students are responsible for checking their AU email regularly and keeping themselves informed of emergencies. In the event of an emergency, students should refer to the AU Student Portal, the AU website, and the AU information line at (202) 885-1100 for general university-wide information, as well as contact their faculty and/or respective dean's office for course and school/college specific information.

Discrimination and Harassment (Title IX)

American University expressly prohibits any form of discriminatory harassment including sexual harassment, dating and domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. The University is an equal opportunity, affirmative action institution that operates in compliance with applicable laws and regulations. AU does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including pregnancy), age, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, personal appearance, gender identity and expression, family responsibilities, political affiliation, source of income, veteran status, an individual's genetic information, or any other bases under federal or local laws in its programs and activities.

If you experience any of the above, you have the option of filing a report with the University Police (202-885-2527) or the Office of the Dean of Students (dos@american.edu or 202-885-3300). To file a Title IX complaint or for more information on your rights, contact the Title IX Program Officer (202-885-3373 or TitleIX@american.edu). Please keep in mind that all faculty and staff – with the exception of counselors in the Counseling Center, victim advocates in OASIS, medical providers in the Student Health Center, and ordained clergy in the Kay Spiritual Life Center – who are aware of or witness this conduct are required to report this information to the university, regardless of the location of the incident. For more information, including a list of supportive resources on and off-campus, contact OASIS (oasis@american.edu or 202-885-7070).

Sharing of Course Content

Students are not permitted to make visual or audio recordings (including livestreams) of lectures or any class-related content or use any type of recording device unless prior permission from the instructor is obtained and there are no objections from any student in the class. If permission is granted, only students registered in the course may use or share recordings and any electronic copies of course materials (e.g., PowerPoints, lecture notes, and any discussions – online or otherwise). Use is limited to educational purposes even after the end of the course. Exceptions will be made for students who present a signed Letter of Accommodation from the Academic Support and Access Center. Further details are available from the ASAC website.

Unauthorized downloading, file sharing, or distribution of any part course materials, or using information for purposes other than student's own learning, may be deemed a violation of American University's Student Conduct Code and subject to disciplinary action (see Student Conduct Code VI. Prohibited Conduct).