ANTHROPOLOGY 61B
Language in American Life
Instructor: Dr. Janet McIntosh

Class: Mondays, 2:10-5:00, Shiffman Humanities Ctr 217
Instructor: Janet McIntosh, Brown 207
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Course Description:

This course examines both language and languages in the United States from an anthropological perspective. We begin by exploring language as a medium that does not simply communicate ideas but that constructs our identities, our sense of reality, and our social worlds. We focus first on claims that American women and men use language differently, giving these differences close scrutiny and exploring their implications for gender inequality. We then explore language in various institutional settings, examining patterns of language use in (e.g.) contexts of military planning, law enforcement, jury trials, and religious ritual, and asking how outcomes, and even how the very sense of what feels “real” in these contexts, are affected both by what is said and by how it is said. Along the way, we will consider such matters as slang and its social purposes, minute conversational moves such as turn-taking and interruptions, and the ways in which we construct our identities through our speaking styles.

Then, we shift our focus to languages – the diverse varieties of English and other languages that circulate in the United States. While many Americans take it for granted that English ought to be our national language, our country’s history of cultural diversity and social stratification complicates this assumption. We examine debates surrounding bilingual education, Black English Vernacular, and the “English-only” movement, while questioning some of Americans’ deepest assumptions about dialects and accents.

Course Requirements:

1) Class attendance and participation. (There may be a couple of very short assignments that involve attention to your linguistic environment. These will not be graded; they will function primarily to facilitate discussion.) Your contributions to the discussion board on WebCT will count toward your participation, but participation in discussion is especially important to the collective experience and is strongly encouraged.
2) 3 short (1.5-2 page) response papers.
3) 5-6 page midterm essay
4) In the final few weeks, a brief presentation (probably about 10 minute long) to the rest of the class on some relevant linguistic matter (e.g. analysis of conversation in some significant context; analysis of the significance of some word in American life. We’ll discuss the possibilities at length.) Presentations may be made in pairs, depending on enrollment. If you don’t have a preferred presentation partner, you’ll be assigned one. Both members of a pair will receive the same grade.
5) 7-8 page final essay.

**Grading:**
Class attendance and participation: 15%
3 short response papers: 15% (5% each)  
5-6 page midterm essay 20%  
10-minute presentation: 20%  
7-8 page final essay: 30%

**Policy on Attendance:**
Attendance is mandatory and will be factored into your grade (see above). Each student is permitted no more than two **excused** absences. Please contact the instructor via email if you require an excused absence (even if you ask me in person, please confirm in email so that I have a written reminder). Absences beyond this must be accompanied by evidence of significant duress!

**Required readings:**
There are no books to purchase for this course. Nearly all course materials will be available online, either on WebCT or a web database (listed after the title of the reference in the syllabus). Anything not on line will be handed out in class.

**Introduction**

**January 22**

*Intro to course materials*  
*Names, labels, and identities*

**READINGS:**


UNIT I: Language and Gender

January 29

Gender differences in conversational/written style


VIDEO EXCERPTS: “Swingers”

Wednesday January 31—WE HAVE CLASS (Brandeis Monday schedule)

Theorizing differences


- William M. O’Barr and Bowman K. Atkins “‘Women’s Language’ or ‘Powerless Language’?” in Women and Language in Literature and Society, Pp. 93-110


VIDEO EXCERPTS: “Italian American” (Martin Scorsese)

**FIRST REPONSE PAPER DUE

UNIT II: Language and institutions

February 5

Language and politics/language and the professions: stories, words and styles


VIDEO EXERPTS: Michael Moore’s “The Big One”

February 12

Language in the military and law enforcement


February 19—NO CLASS (president’s day)

February 26

Slang in daily discourse, slang in the military and police force


-Excerpts from Tom Philbin’s Cop Speak: The Language of Law Enforcement and Crime (1996, John Wiley and Sons, Inc.) and Linda Reinberg’s In the Field: The Language of the Vietnam War (1991, Facts on File)--these are dictionaries of slang among US Police officers and among US soldiers in Vietnam. (Excerpts to be handed out in class.)

**SECOND RESPONSE PAPER DUE

March 5
Language in the courtroom


March 12

Language and religion


VIDEO EXCERPT: “The Apostle”

UNIT III: Linguistic Diversity in America

March 19

Introduction to linguistic diversity in America


VIDEO: “American Tongues”

**MIDTERM PAPER DUE**

March 26

_Dialects and Standardization_


In-class debate

April 2

_African American English and the “Ebonics” controversy_


**THIRD RESPONSE PAPER DUE**

April 9—NO CLASS (Passover and spring recess)

April 16

_Bilingualism and the “English Only” debates_


VIDEO: “English only in America?”

**April 23, April 30**

Student presentations in class, evaluations

***FINAL PAPER DUE May 5th***