



**English 4720: Language Variation in American English**  
 Spring 2009 T/Th 10:00-11:50 a.m. in 3037 Brown

**Instructor:** Dr. Lisa Minnick  
**Office:** 923 Sprau  
**Office hours:** Wednesdays 2-4 p.m. and by appointment

**Email:** [lisa.minnick@wmich.edu](mailto:lisa.minnick@wmich.edu) (preferred mode of contact)  
**Course Page:** <http://www.retroflexive.com/4720main>

**From the catalog:** English 4720 is study of regional and social varieties of American English from sociolinguistic perspectives, focusing on the forces that influence different types of language variation. Examines issues of linguistic bias and offers a multi-cultural perspective on the role of language in daily life.

**Course description, purpose, and objectives:** In this course, we will discuss the theories and practices of language variation research, particularly as applied to American English. In doing so, we will consider approaches to the study of language variation, with attention to key figures, studies, and methodologies. We will discuss the functions and effects of dialectal variation, and how factors such as geography, ethnicity, gender, social status and other extralinguistic variables interact with language and contribute to variation. We will also explore how popular perceptions and attitudes contribute to the differential valuation of American English varieties and the effects of these valuations. Finally, students will learn the skills and practices of linguistic research and language description and apply these skills to original linguistic research projects.

**Texts:** Finegan and Rickford, *Language in the U.S.A.* and \$10 fee card.

**Assignments and grading:**

Midterm exam	20%
Final exam	25%
Collaborative project	20%
Working-group activities and homework	15%
IPA quiz	10%
Attendance and participation	10%

**Grading criteria for all assignments:** This is a **4000-level course in English** and therefore I expect students to be sufficiently prepared to complete all work according to **advanced-undergraduate standards**. The subject matter specific to this course may be new to you—that is what you are here to learn, after all—but you should come in with well developed study habits and sufficient skills in reading, analysis, research, and writing to succeed at the 4000 level. If you have concerns or questions about these requirements, please come to office hours or make an appointment to meet with me early in the semester.

- A = 4.0 points awarded for **excellence** (not merely good work or effort).
- BA = 3.5 points
- B = 3.0 points
- CB = 2.5 points
- C = 2.0 points
- DC = 1.5 points
- D = 1.0 point
- E = 0-0.5 points for work that does not meet minimum standards; 0 for work not turned in.

**Exams:** The midterm and final exams will include phonetic transcriptions, articulatory descriptions, identifications and terminology, and questions covering lecture, discussion, and readings.

**Collaborative project:** Working in small groups, students will design and conduct an original language-variation study, gathering and analyzing linguistic data. Each group will present its results in a 6-8 page research paper, in journal-article format. We will discuss and work on this project extensively in class as you generate ideas, consult scholarly literature, carry out your research, and analyze your results. This project is an opportunity for you to apply the material you learn in class in a hands-on, experiential way.

**Working-group activities:** Each student will be part of a working group for class activities and the collaborative project. Working-group activities are experiential activities for applying the theories and methods you're learning in class.

**Homework and quizzes** will help you apply the skills you are learning, such as IPA transcription and articulatory description, and are designed to keep you on track and up to date.

**Attendance and participation:** I think that English 4720 is a fun and interesting course, but it requires a solid set of skills and base of knowledge that you will have to master early on, and therefore active participation is a must. You'll need to be present every day to the extent that it is humanly possible. If you must miss class, my policy is to permit up to three "free" absences. By "free," I mean that I ask no questions and do not differentiate between excused and unexcused absences. I also mean that's all you get. Exceptions can only be made in cases of serious illness (such as those requiring hospitalization) and other documentable emergencies. If you miss more than three class meetings, there may be a substantial deduction in your course grade; five or more absences may result in a course grade of E. It is each student's responsibility to stay on top of all course material and assignments when a class meeting is missed by consulting the updates page online and getting the notes from a classmate. Lectures and discussions missed cannot be made up in office hours or at any other time. Leaving at the break counts as an absence.

### Course Policies

**Academic honesty:** All work you turn in for this class must be your own, with all outside reference sources properly cited and acknowledged. Plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, any kind of falsification or forgery, computer misuse, multiple submission, complicity, and/or any other type of academic dishonesty on any exams or work assigned for this course will not be tolerated in any form. You are required to read and comply fully with the policies and definitions outlined in the Western Michigan University statement on academic integrity, which is available online at <<http://www.osc.wmich.edu/academicintegrity/catalog.html>>. If there is reason to believe any student has been involved in academic dishonesty, s/he will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct, given the opportunity to review the charge(s), and have the opportunity for a hearing. Please consult with me if you are in doubt about how to cite a source, whether a source is appropriate, whether a citation is needed, if you are not sure what level of help on an assignment might cross an ethical line, or with any other academic integrity questions. As I am also required to uphold the standards of academic integrity, my policy is zero tolerance for any type of deception, and I do not want for any of you to find out the hard way how seriously I take this.

**Students with disabilities** should contact Ms. Beth Denhartigh at the beginning of the semester at 387-2116 or by email at [beth.denhartigh@wmich.edu](mailto:beth.denhartigh@wmich.edu) so that any physical, learning, vision, hearing, psychiatric or other disability can be documented and accommodations arranged. Please note that a disability determination must be made by Ms. Denhartigh's office before accommodations can be made.

**Late work** is generally frowned upon in college and elsewhere, and this class is no exception. Arrangements should be made in advance (and you'll need a documentable explanation). Unexplained late work (or excuses after the fact) will not be accepted and a grade of zero will be assessed for the assignment.

**Being late to class** should be avoided. Students who are not in class on time risk missing important course content (such as instructions or quizzes). When someone walks in late, it is distracting to other students and the instructor. The same goes for leaving early. If you are late, I recommend that you stay after class to make

sure you have been marked present. Absences resulting from uncorrected lates count towards your three allotted absences. Habitual lateness will result in a reduction of your attendance and participation score and hence your course grade. Leaving at the break will be recorded as an absence.

**Makeups:** Daily assignments, exercises, quizzes, presentations, and in-class activities such as working-group assignments cannot be made up if missed because of lateness or absence. Makeups on major assignments, such as exams or projects, must be arranged with me in advance of due dates in order to avoid penalties, and students will have to make a pretty strong case in order to be granted an extension.

**Classroom etiquette:** You are not required to agree with everything you read or everything that is said during discussions in this class. You are encouraged to read and think critically. An open dialogue is encouraged, and all thoughtful contributions are welcome. I ask that everyone be respectful during class discussions. The goal is for our classroom to be a safe place for flexing your intellectual muscles, where everyone feels comfortable generating, expressing, and challenging ideas. Your help in reaching this goal is essential. Also, please familiarize yourself with and be prepared to abide by WMU's code of student conduct at <http://www.osc.wmich.edu/studentcode/conduct.html>. Students who are not willing or able to respect the rights of everyone to a comfortable teaching and learning environment will be asked to leave.

**Other etiquette and classroom civility issues:** Sleeping, eating, grooming, reading non-course materials, doing homework, having conversations, emailing or surfing the web on your laptop, **using any kind of electronic communication device**, and other such activities are prohibited because of their disruptive and impolite nature, and because they keep students from fully participating. Your active participation is part of your course grade, and the class will be as interesting for you as you make it. Showing up on time and prepared (that means completing all reading assignments and other homework and being ready to work when you arrive) will help your grade as well as enhance your learning experience.

**No recording of any kind – audio, video, photographic, or otherwise – is permitted in this class without the informed consent of all students and the instructor.** Everyone in this class has a right not to have their voice and/or likeness recorded without their knowledge and permission, including the instructor, so keep those camera phones and other recording devices to yourself.

**Electronic copies of assignments will not be accepted in lieu of hard copies unless the assignment specifically calls for electronic submission.** Plan ahead to make sure your printing needs can be met in time for due dates.

**Graded assignments** and exams will generally be returned within one to two weeks.

**If you would like extra help with course material, you are always welcome in my office.** Stop by during office hours or let me know you if would like to meet and we can set up a time. Email any time if you have questions or concerns. During the week, I try to respond within 24 hours to emails that need a response; on weekends, it may be a few days before I am able to get back to you. If you are ever not completely clear on what is being asked of you, please check with me.

**Workload:** The workload is substantial, with challenging (and plentiful) reading and written assignments. Keep up with all readings and other deadlines as assigned to be fully prepared to participate in class discussions and to succeed on exams and assignments.

**Note: Learning the discipline of linguistics is a cumulative process. Gaps in your knowledge early on can cause problems later. Let me know as soon as you can if you feel like you're getting behind. My job is to help you learn this stuff, so by all means take advantage of this resource by coming to office hours, talking with me after class or during the break, or making an appointment to meet.**

## Schedule of Reading and Writing Assignments

I reserve the right to make minor adjustments or massive changes to this syllabus as a result of interference from reality. Please check our class updates page <<http://www.retroflexive.com/4720updates>> regularly for news, schedule changes, and announcements. Class lectures and discussions will not be linear recapitulations of readings; rather, lectures and readings complement each other. Therefore, you will be expected to **come to class having read the day's assignments in advance of class discussions** so that you can participate fully.

### Week 1: Introduction to course; what is language variation?

Jan 06-08

Tuesday, Jan 06

- Introduction to course
- What is language variation?
- Approaches to the study of language variation.

Thursday, Jan 08: Come to class having read Foreword to *Language in the USA*.

- What every 4720 student needs to know about linguistics.
- The language of linguistics.

### Week 2: Introduction to linguistics and the International Phonetic Alphabet.

Jan 13-15

Tuesday, Jan 13: Come to class having read Algeo and Pyles, "The Sounds of Current English."

- Linguistic features and independent variables.
- Places and manners of articulation and the International Phonetic Alphabet.
- Working groups established.
- **Working-group activity #1: Your linguistic profile (due Thursday, January 22).**

Thursday, Jan 15: Continue to work through Algeo and Pyles, "The Sounds of Current English."

- Places and manners of sound articulation.
- The International Phonetic Alphabet.
- **IPA homework assigned (due Tuesday, January 27).**

### Week 3: What is American English? History and diversity of the English language in the United States.

Jan 20-22

Tuesday, Jan 20: Continue to work through Algeo and Pyles.

- Fun with IPA: Learning phonetic transcription.
- Understanding articulatory descriptions.

Thursday, Jan 22: Come to class having read *USA* Ch. 1, "American English: Its Origins and History."

- Continue work on IPA and articulatory phonetics.
- The history and diversity of American English.
- **Completed working-group activity #1 (linguistic profile) due.**

**Week 4: Regional variation and the Northern Cities Shift. IPA homework due Tuesday; quiz Thursday.**  
Jan 27-29

Tuesday, Jan 27: Come to class having read *USA* Ch. 3: "Regional Dialects" and online readings on the Northern Cities Shift, linked at 4720updates.

- Language variation and dialect geography.
- The Northern Cities Shift.
- IPA homework due at class time.**

Thursday, Jan 29: Continue to work through online readings on the Northern Cities Shift, linked at 4720updates.

- IPA quiz (beginning of class).**
- The Northern Cities Shift.
- Begin work on Working-group Activity #2: The Northern Cities Shift (time permitting).

**Week 5: Working-group activity #2: The Northern Cities Shift.**  
Feb 03-05

Tuesday, Feb 03: **Working group activity #2: Eliciting, documenting, and analyzing the NCS.**

Thursday, Feb 05: **Working group activity #2 (complete): Field reports due at end of period.**

**Week 6: Social variation, language attitudes, and perceptual dialectology.**  
Feb 10-12

Tuesday, Feb 10: *USA* Ch. 4: "Social Varieties of American English."

- Social and ethnic variation.
- Independent variables and how they interact with language.

Thursday, Feb 12: *USA* Ch. 26: "Language Attitudes to Speech"

- Perceptual dialectology and language attitudes.
- Language attitudes and ideology.
- Collaborative projects assigned (due Thursday, April 16).**

**Week 7: Language variation in the African American community.**  
Feb 17-19

Tuesday, Feb 17: *USA* Ch. 5: "African American English."

- African American English, features and history.
- The linguistic and cultural significance of AAE.

Thursday, Feb 19: Lippi-Green, "The Real Trouble with Black English," and *USA* Ch. 16: "Ebonics and Its Controversy."

- Language attitudes and AAE.
- The Ann Arbor case and the Oakland Resolution.
- Bridge readers and other experimental methods.

**Week 8: Language variation in the African American community (continued). Midterm exam.**  
Feb 24-26

Tuesday, Feb 24: Complete discussion of AAE. Review for midterm exam.

**Thursday, Feb 26: Midterm exam.**

**Week 9: No class—spring break!**  
March 03-05

**Week 10: Stylistic variation.**  
March 10-12

Tuesday, March 10: Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, "Dialects and Style."

- Intraspeaker variation.
- Stylistic variation in theory and practice.

Thursday, March 12: Continue to work through Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, "Dialects and Style."

- Style shifting and linguistic repertoire.
- Measuring stylistic variation.

**Monday, March 16 is the last day to withdraw from class (not that you'd want to).**

**Week 11: Language, gender, and sexuality.**  
Mar 17-19

Tuesday, March 17: *USA* Ch. 22: "Language, Gender, and Sexuality" and Cameron, "Performing Gender Identity."

- "Women's language"? The historical view.
- Language and gender and gendered language.

Thursday, March 19: Kiesling, "Dude," and Levon, "Hearing 'Gay': Prosody, Interpretation, and the Affective Judgments of Men's Speech."

- Theoretical approaches to language and gender.
- Is there "gay language?"

**Week 12: Protocols for empirical research.**  
Mar 24-26

Tuesday, March 24: Handout on ethical research protocols and working-group activity.

- Ethical research protocols and informed consent.
- Research questions, hypotheses, and methodologies: starting a linguistic field project.
- **Working group activity #3 (begin): Developing and articulating your research question.**

Thursday, March 26: Working-group activity.

- **Working group activity #3 (complete): Developing and articulating your research question. Proposals due at end of class period.**

**Week 13: Continue work on collaborative projects.**

March 31-April 02

Tuesday, March 31: Work on collaborative projects.

- Principles of experimental design and participant selection.

Thursday, April 02: Conducting original language variation research.

- Developing project methodologies to answer your research question and prove your hypothesis.
- Developing data collection instruments and analysis methods.
- Gathering and analyzing data.

**Week 14: Work on collaborative projects.**

April 07-09

Tuesday, April 07: Work on collaborative projects.

Thursday, April 09: Work on collaborative projects.

**Week 15: Present and discuss collaborative projects.**

April 14-16

Tuesday, April 14: Begin project presentations.

Thursday, April 16: Complete presentations; review for exam. **Collaborative projects due.**

**Final exam Tuesday, April 21, 10:15 a.m. - 12:15 p.m.**