LING 26540: Language & Technology

Instructor: Tran Truong (trantruong@uchicago.edu)

Winter 2021

Class Location & Time: Stuart 101, M/W 4:10–5:30
Office Hours: By appointment only as a result of covid-19 restrictions

Course Description

Notable proponents of generative linguistics have argued, not uncontroversially, that the ability to acquire language is the defining characteristic of the human species. Yet the human is not only *Homo orator*, but also *Homo faber*: we are further distinguished from non-human animals by our tool use and the complex technologies that have thence emerged. In this course, we will discuss the relationship between language and technology—and between linguistic change and technological innovation. We will take as a point of departure the history of writing, before moving on to important case studies at the language-technology interface, including the typewriter and cochlear implant. In the latter half of the course, we will shift our focus to computer-mediated communication, with an eye on how technology is simultaneously positioned as a force that creates and forecloses certain possibilities for linguistic expression and metalinguistic reflection.

Course Objectives

At the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. identify the ways in which new technologies create the conditions of possibility for the emergence of new linguistic styles, genres, and repertoires;
2. understand how language technologies shape, and are shaped, by linguistic structure;
3. compare, contrast, and evaluate the often negative ideologies that arise around linguistic and technological change;
4. bear witness to the manner in which marginalized populations (e.g., women, Deaf people, African Americans, indigenous peoples, etc.) are surveilled and excluded—or liberated and enfranchised—by language technologies; and,
5. conduct fieldwork on a technology-mediated language style, genre, repertoire, community, or subculture of your choice.

Prerequisites

This course has no prerequisites.
Required Materials

All readings will be posted on Canvas.

Grading

10% Participation & attendance
5% Discussion leadership
10% Canvas discussion posts (due weeks 1, 2, 3, 4, 6)
20% Writing assignment 1: Close reading (due week 5)
20% Writing assignment 2: Field notes (due week 7)
10% In-class presentation (week 9)
25% Writing assignment 3: Final paper (due week 10)

Participation & attendance

When I lead discussion, I practice cold calling to ensure the full participation of all students. This is a good way for me to master your names. It also makes it easy for me to give everyone full points for this grading component at the end of the quarter. Please speak to me individually if cold calling makes you anxious or uncomfortable, and we can figure out an alternative solution. You will always be able to skip your turn when called upon by saying Pass. **Once during the quarter, you will be in charge of leading discussion.**

Punctuality: Barring exceptional circumstances, I pledge to begin and end class on the hour. This means that you should arrive a few minutes early and be ready to start right at 4:10. This also means that you are free to leave as soon as class ends, even if I am in the middle of a sentence.

Canvas discussion posts

On most weeks in which there is no major writing assignment due, you will submit a Canvas post. On week 1, this will be a self-introduction. On weeks 2, 3, 4, and 6, your post can take the form of a response to a reading or a response to another student’s post. Posts should be at minimum 300–500 words.

Research project

By the end of week 2, you will pick a phenomenon at the interface of language and technology. Examples include emojis, dogespeak, nounself pronouns, reply guys, reaction GIFs, orthographic representation of African American English on social media, autocorrect, etc. You may also choose a technology-based community or subculture: Twitch streamers, incels, unboxers, the dirtbag left, knitters on Pinterest, prison abolitionists on Twitter, the Beyhive, English-to-ASL poetry translators, etc. The phenomenon or community may be as broad or as narrow as you want, but it should be something you would be willing to study for 9 weeks. You do not have to be an active user of the phenomenon or an active member of the community (nor do you have to endorse the beliefs or practices of the community).
Writing assignment 1: Close reading

In a paper of 5–7 pages in length, you will describe and analyze one aspect of the linguistic style, genre, or register associated with your chosen phenomenon/community. It should begin with a presentation of the data you are considering (e.g., a transcription of a video, screenshots or reproductions of social media posts, etc.), followed by an explanation of the data that would be understandable to someone who has no knowledge of the phenomenon/community in question. The paper should attend to the formal and structural properties of the data (i.e., what does it mean when the speaker/signer/writer uses this form?) as well the manner in which the language technologies involved influence the form, meaning, and interpretation of the data. (Example: Expression of nonbinary identity in a gendered language: The case of Hebrew-speaking Tumblr users.)

Writing assignment 2: Field notes

From week 2 onward, you will collect linguistic data relevant to your chosen phenomenon/community. You will transcribe, annotate, and give preliminary analyses of these data, and submit these field notes in week 7. Special attention should be paid to both the speakers/signers/writers’ engagement with technology as they produce the data, as well as the manner in which your understanding of the language-technology relationship has evolved throughout the data collection process. Where possible, field notes should make connections to course readings, in-class discussions, and Canvas posts (your own or other students’). Depending on your chosen focus, the form and structure of your field notes may look very different from another student’s. (Example: A zip file of 5–7 YouTube videos of a beauty vlogger, with an accompanying transcriptions and your own reflective/dialectical/ethnographic notes.)

Writing assignment 3: Final paper

Your final paper should be 10–15 pages in length and make use of the data you have collected. A range of options are possible: you could write a longer, more in-depth close reading of another data fragment. Or you could write a lexicon or ethnography of your chosen phenomenon/community. Or you could write a methodological or ethical guide to working with your chosen phenomenon/community. In any case, you will need to foreground the ways in which intellectual engagement with your topic is important for our shared understanding of the language-technology interface. Many other options are available and can be chosen in consultation with me. You will give a presentation of the topic of your final paper in class on week 9. (Example: Speedrunning and the problem of transcribing and representing multimodal interaction.)

Schedule

Readings are subject to significant modification, depending on the research foci you choose. Please come to class having already read the assigned reading for a particular day. Do not worry about understanding everything! We will take all the time we need in class to unpack any parts that were difficult to grasp.
Week 1 (remote): Technology, broadly considered


Canvas post #1 due.

Week 2: Writing & the alphabet

M Jan 18  Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. (no class)


Canvas post #2 due.

Week 3: The printing press & typewriter


Canvas post #3 due.
**Week 4: The telephone, television, & social media**

**M Feb 1**  


**W Feb 3**  

**Choose one of the following:**


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**Week 5: Language technologies & audism**

**M Feb 8**  
Sewell, Cobi. What I Think About Cochlear Implants [Video]. YouTube. [https://youtube.com/watch?v=VPt9mGxnL20](https://youtube.com/watch?v=VPt9mGxnL20).


**Choose at least one of the following:**


**W Feb 10**  


Lahoue, Isabella. 2020. The generation that doesn’t believe Helen Keller existed. *Medium*.


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**Writing assignment #1 due.**
**Week 6: Language technologies & anti-Blackness**

**M Feb 15**


**W Feb 17**


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**Canvas post #6 due.**

**Week 7: Ethics**

**M Feb 22**


**W Feb 24**
 **Guest lecturers: Jessica Kantarovich & Corinne Kasper.** Language technologies & indigenous languages.

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**Writing assignment #2 due.**

**Week 8: Cohorts**

**M Mar 1**


**W Mar 3**


 Last day to fulfill discussion leadership role.

**Week 9: Summative assessments**

**M,W Mar 9,11**
 **Final presentations**

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**Writing assignment #3 due Th Mar 18.**

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**Territorial Acknowledgment**

This course meets on the homelands of the *Niswi-mishkodewinan*, an alliance between the Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Potawatomi. The State of Illinois is also home to the Ho-Chunk, Inoka, Menominee, Meskwaki, Miami, and Sauk. The uses of technology in the maintenance of endangered languages, as well as the diversity of language-technology ideologies within indigenous communities, will be important topics of discussion in week 7. The Department of Linguistics at the University of Chicago is strongly committed to the training of indigenous linguists.
Course Policies

Technology

For in-person meetings, I encourage students to print out materials in advance to minimize the in-class use of laptops and mobile devices. Some students may have access needs and/or politico-moral commitments that necessitate the use of technology. Those of you without such needs or commitments should consider that the discussion-based classroom is one of the last discourse contexts in which you can choose to be fully (or mostly!) removed from the virtual world. Consider the technology-minimizing policy as an opportunity to cultivate your attentional control and other executive functions, which have been so thoroughly atrophied in this era of constant hyperstimulation. Given that we will examine our relationship with technology very closely in this course, we might come to conclude that this policy—and the ideologies that underlie it—are not fit for purpose. I look forward to having that discussion with all of you.

Access

If you have an access need that could be met by means of a reasonable accommodation, let me know. You do not need to discuss with me the nature of your disability. You do not need to file your disability with the university. Your access need may not be related or reducible to a medical(ized) disability at all. None of these factors will limit your eligibility to request an accommodation. I am personally and deeply invested in your human flourishing in the context of this course, whether or not your access needs are legible or legitimate to the university bureaucracy and/or the medical establishment. We will be thinking deeply about language technologies and access(ibility) in week 5.

E-mail

I am a millennial and will be extremely available by e-mail. E-mails that contain a formal salutation (Dear Tran) and valediction (Sincerely) will be responded to the moment they are received (although if I am using my mobile device, I may not use the salutation and valediction myself). Less formal e-mails will be responded to within twenty-four (24) hours. The relationship between writing, formality, and the liminal nature of e-mail (as a highly oralized written genre) will be a minor theme of this course.

Malpractice

Plagiarism (i.e., taking someone else’s work and passing it off as your own) and collusion (i.e., letting someone else pass off your work as their own) are serious cases of malpractice and shall be dealt with pursuant to university policy. Source mal- and misattribution, while less serious if done unintentionally, also constitute malpractice. I strive not to view these behaviors as a moral failing, nor as a reflection of a student’s character: this is why I reject the terms academic honesty and academic integrity. Rather, I view them as a failure of socialization into the discursive norms of the linguistics community. Such norms can at times be opaque, arbitrary, and even unproductive: if your understanding of them is hazy—or if your rejection of them is principled—I strongly encourage you to meet with me. The emergence of such notions as copyright and authorship is a technology-mediated phenomenon and will be a topic of class discussion in week 3.
Resources

- **College Writing Tutors**: [https://writing-program.uchicago.edu/writing-support/ccwt/](https://writing-program.uchicago.edu/writing-support/ccwt/)

- **Writing Tutors** specializing in students for whom English is an additional language: [https://esl.uchicago.edu/one-on-one/](https://esl.uchicago.edu/one-on-one/)

- **Center for College Student Success** for students from first-generation, lower-income, and/or immigrant backgrounds: [https://college.uchicago.edu/student-services/center-college-student-success/](https://college.uchicago.edu/student-services/center-college-student-success/)

- **Sexual Assault Dean-on-Call**, available 24/7: 777-834-HELP

- Ordained Religious Advisors at the **Office of Spiritual Life**: 773-702-2100

- **Student Health Service**: 773-702-4156

- **Student Counseling Service**: 773-702-9800