LING 26540: Language & Technology

Instructor: Tran Truong (trantruong@uchicago.edu)

Winter 2021

Class Location & Time: M, W 3:00–4:20
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., Deaf people, African Americans, political dissidents) 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
- 10% Canvas discussion posts (due weeks 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8)
- 20% Writing Assignment 1: Close reading (due week 5)
- 20% Writing Assignment 2: Field notes (due week 7)
- 5% In-class presentation (week 9)
- 5% Reading quiz (week 9)
- 30% 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.*

At some point during the quarter, you will be in charge of leading discussion. This will entail presenting to the class some raw data from your research (more on the research project below), commenting on it, and contextualizing it in relation to the course readings or other students’ research projects. Detailed instructions will be given by the end of week 1.

**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 3:00. 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 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, 6, 7, and 9, 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 weeks 2–8, you will collect linguistic data relevant to your chosen phenomenon/community. You will transcribe, annotate, and give preliminary analyses of these data. 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. Depending on your chosen focus, the form and structure of your field notes could 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 may 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. (Example: Speedrunning and the problem of transcribing and representing multimodal interaction.)

Reading quiz

On Tuesday of week 10, we will have a short reading quiz. This will be a simple matching quiz and is not expected to take longer than 5–10 minutes.

Schedule

Our schedule of readings is an evolving document and is guaranteed to change significantly based on the research foci you choose, especially in later weeks. 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): Writing I**

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<th>Date</th>
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Mufwene 2013. Language as technology.  

**Canvas post #1 due.**

**Week 2: Writing II**

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Selections from Pae 2020. *Script Effects as the Hidden Drive of the Mind, Cognition, and Culture*. |

**Canvas post #2 due.**

**Week 3: The printing press & typewriter**

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Fichte 1793. Proof of the unlawfulness of reprinting. |
Selections from Kittler 1999. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. |

**Canvas post #3 due.**

**Week 4: The telephone & cochlear implant**

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Hall 1992. Women's language for sale on the fantasy lines. |
| W Feb 3  | Selections from Lane 1957. *The Mask of Benevolence*.  

**Canvas post #4 due.**

**Week 5: Computer-mediated communication**

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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| M Feb 8 | Androustopoulos 2006. Sociolinguistics and computer-mediated communication.  
Townsend & Wallace 2016. Social media research: A guide to ethics. |

**Writing assignment #1 due.**
Week 6: Computer-mediated communication & racialized populations I
M Feb 15  Bailey & Trudy 2018. On misogynoir: Citation, erasure, and plagiarism.
          Trudy 2014. Hypervisibility and marginalization: Existing online as a black woman
          and writer.
          Noble 2013. Google search: Hyper-visibility as a means of rendering black women
          and girls invisible.
W Feb 17  Baker & Potts 2013. “Why do white people have thin lips?” Google and the
          perpetuation of stereotypes via auto-complete search form.
          Hern 2018. Google’s solution to accidental algorithmic racism.
          Stucchio & Mahapatra 2017. AI ‘bias’ doesn’t mean what journalists say it means.
          _______________________________________________________________________

Canvas post #6 due.

Week 7: Computer-mediated communication & racialized populations II
M Feb 22  Blodgett & O’Connor 2017. Racial disparity in natural language processing: A case
          study of social media African-American English.
          Florini 2013. Tweets, tweeps, and signifyin’: Communication and cultural perfor-
          mance on “Black Twitter.”
W Feb 24  Guest lecturers: Jessica Kantarovich & Corinne Kasper. Language technologies
          & indigenous languages.
          _______________________________________________________________________

Writing assignment #2 due.

Week 8: (In)civility
M Mar 1   Suler 2004. The online disinhibition effect.
          Sindorf 2013. Symbolic violence in the online field: Calls for ‘civility’ in online
          discussion.
W Mar 3   Phillips 2011. LOLing at tragedy: Facebook trolls, memorial pages and resistance
to grief online.
          Tuters & Hagen 2019. (((They))) rule: Memetic antagonism and nebulous othering
          on 4chan.
          _______________________________________________________________________

Canvas post #7 due.

Week 9: Summative assessments
M Mar 9   Reading quiz
          Final presentations
W Mar 11  Final presentations
          _______________________________________________________________________

Writing assignment #3 due Th Mar 18.

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 im-
portant 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.

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.

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.

Resources
- College Writing Tutors: 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/
• **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