

SPRING 2026 LINGUISTICS 3010.001: AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

Professor: Dr. Patricia Cukor-Avila

Time: M/W 10:00-11:20 Art 219

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Office Hours: by appointment (f2f or Zoom)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course students will learn about the history, linguistic structure, social dimensions, and political and educational debates of one of the most studied (and controversial) varieties of American English. Students will have the unique opportunity to work first-hand with recordings of African Americans that span over 150 years from three unique data corpora: 1. formerly enslaved people born in the 19th century and recorded in the 1930s and 1940s as part of the WPA Project; 2. Recordings/transcripts in the online Corpus of African American Language (CORAAL); and recordings from a longitudinal study (over 35 years) on rural African American English in Texas.

Readings and class discussions will cover topics such as:

- The history of slavery in the US including settlement and migration patterns
- The linguistic implications of contact between speakers of African languages and the founder languages spoken in the US in the 18th and 19th centuries
- The social and linguistic history of the post-bellum South, including farm tenancy
- The Great Migration and other demographic upheavals that had dramatic social and linguistic consequences for African Americans
- The political and educational debates surrounding the use of African American English including:
 - The “Deficit Theory”
 - The Ann Arbor Decision
 - The Oakland “Ebonics” controversy
- The “Origins Debate”
- The linguistic structure of African American English including innovations and changes since the mid 20th century
- Subjective reactions and attitudes toward the use of African American English in contemporary society

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- define the social, historical, and political circumstances that contributed to the development of contemporary African American English
- identify linguistic features of African American English
- code and analyze linguistic data from recordings of African American English speakers
- understand and explain the linguistic mechanisms and social correlates that have contributed to change over time in African American English
- discuss the social implications of speaking a stigmatized variety of English
- apply linguistic theory to analyze legal challenges

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Course grades will be determined from the following:

1. CLASS PARTICIPATION, DISCUSSION POSTS ON CANVAS, READING QUIZZES (50%)

Class Participation (10%): Much of what you will learn in this class will come from class interactions, discussions, and presentations. Therefore, attendance is required. If you know of any circumstance that will cause you to miss class, please let me know in advance so we can make any arrangements necessary. If you are too ill to come to class, you must contact me before class to let me know.

Discussion posts (15%): You are required to submit comments (minimum 200 words) to discussion prompts based on the readings PRIOR to class. Your comments should make insightful points or critiques or raise thought-provoking questions. You can also include questions that you have about the readings/topic that you want to pose to the class. I may select some of your comments/questions to include in our class discussion. You must post your comments/questions to Canvas by 5:00pm the day before the lecture. Posts that are fewer than 200 words or that are late will receive 50% credit. Posts that are more than 24 hrs. late will receive no credit.

In-Class Reading quizzes (25%): These are short quizzes based on reading assignments or other class assignments.

2. IN-CLASS ESSAY EXAMS (40%)

These are observations/reports on an aspect of language related to our readings, videos, guest lectures, and class discussions. Essay topics may be (1) introspective, where you reflect upon your own experiences, recent or past, and report what you remember and what you learned from them; (2) outwardly focused, where you observe linguistic interactions between those around you and from your observations of media (videos, blogs, social media), report what you observe; (3) designed to show your ability to find sources of information appropriate to an issue, evaluate those sources on the basis of credibility, reliability, bias, and currency, and effectively report on the information you have collected and evaluated. In general, essays should include observations that reflect on the linguistic, cultural, and moral values that underlie the situations and issues that you are reporting and reflecting on.

3. FINAL EXAM (10%)

All due dates will be posted on Canvas. You should plan ahead and submit your assignments/posts on or before the due date. Once the assignment closes late submissions will not be accepted.

Focus 100% on the class and refrain from doing other work or using cell phones or other electronics. This includes texting and checking email. It is rude and VERY disruptive for the instructor and your fellow classmates!

REQUIRED READING

All course materials will come from articles and videos uploaded to Canvas in weekly modules. Students are expected to complete all reading and/or other materials (e.g., podcasts, videos) at the beginning of each weekly module.

COURSE SCHEDULE (ALL DATES ARE TENTATIVE AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE DURING THE SEMESTER)

- WEEKS 1-5: UNIT #1 – HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH
 - Sociohistorical background: slavery, the expansion of slavery, tenancy, urbanization, the Great Migration
 - Early linguistic research
 - The origins debate; divergence vs decreolization
 - WPA Slave Recordings
 - Diaspora varieties – Samaná, Nova Scotia, Liberia
- WEEKS 6-10: UNIT #2 – STRUCTURE AND USE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH
 - Phonological features – can a person “sound Black?”
 - Grammatical features – tense, aspect, and change over time
 - African American English in the media
 - Subjective reactions and attitudes toward the use of AAE
- WEEKS 11-15: UNIT #3 – AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH: POLITICS AND THE LAW
 - Education: The Ann Arbor decision; the Oakland Ebonics controversy
 - African American English in the courts (O.J. Simpson, George Zimmerman, Rachael Jantel); accuracy of court reporting

ATTENDANCE POLICY

While attendance is expected as outlined above, it is important for all of us to be mindful of the health and safety of everyone in our community. Please contact me if you are unable to attend class meetings because you are ill, or unable to attend due to illness. It is important that you communicate with one of us prior to being absent so I may make a decision about accommodating your request to be excused from class. This may include a physician’s note so be sure to get this documentation if you are ill and go to the doctor.

STUDENT BEHAVIOR

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor’s ability to conduct a class or other students’ opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student’s conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The university’s expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including university and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. Information about The Code of Student Conduct can be found at <http://deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct>

Cell phone use is not allowed in class. Students must silence their phones and put them away during class time. Any student found using a phone in class for non-class related use will be asked to leave the class. If there is a reason to have your phone out during class you must clear this with the professor before the start of class.

Laptops and tablets may only be used for class-related purposes. Recent research has shown that students retain material much better if they take notes with a pen and paper and not on their computers <http://www.npr.org/2016/04/17/474525392/attention-students-put-your-laptops-away>

I encourage you to follow this practice. Students who choose to use their laptops or tablets to work on assignments for other classes, check email, social media, surf the web, send text messages, or other non-class activities will be asked to leave the class.

GENAI USE

In this course, I want you to engage deeply with the materials and develop your own critical thinking and writing skills. For this reason, the use of Generative AI (GenAI) tools e.g., Claude, ChatGPT, and Gemini is **NOT** permitted. While these tools can be helpful in some contexts, they do not align with our goal of fostering the development of your independent thinking. Using GenAI to complete any part of an assignment, exam, or coursework will be considered a violation of academic integrity, as it prevents the development of your own skills, and will be addressed according to the [Student Academic Integrity policy](https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003) (<https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003>).

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AND INTEGRITY

It is your responsibility to become familiar with UNT's Policy of Academic Dishonesty. The full policy can be found [here](https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003) (<https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003>). This policy defines the following forms of academic dishonesty:

- **Cheating:** Intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise. The term academic exercise includes all forms of work submitted for credit or hours.
- **Plagiarism:** The deliberate adoption or reproduction of ideas, words, or statements of another person as one's own without acknowledgement.
- **Fabrication:** Intentional and unauthorized falsification or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise.
- **Facilitating academic dishonesty:** Intentionally or knowingly helping or attempting to help another to violate a provision of the institutional code of academic integrity.

If any course material is submitted that violates this policy of academic dishonesty, the assignment will receive a grade of F, and the student may receive a failing grade for the entire course; appropriate judicial action will be filed. This action includes a report of academic misconduct to the Office of Academic Integrity and possible dismissal from The University of North Texas. There are no first-offense warnings regarding plagiarism.

PROHIBITION OF DISCRIMINATION, HARASSMENT, AND RETALIATION (POLICY 16.004)

The University of North Texas (UNT) prohibits discrimination and harassment because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, or any other characteristic protected under applicable federal or state law in its application and admission processes; educational programs and activities; employment policies, procedures, and processes; and university facilities. The University takes active measures to prevent such conduct and investigates and takes remedial action when appropriate.

ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES

ODA policy – *The University of North Texas is on record as being committed to both the spirit and letter of federal equal opportunity legislation; reference Public Law 92-112 – The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended. With the passage of new federal legislation entitled Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), pursuant to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, there is renewed focus on providing this population with the same opportunities enjoyed by all citizens.*

In accordance with the terms and spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504, Rehabilitation Act, we will cooperate with the Office of Disability Accommodation to accommodate reasonably qualified students with disabilities. If you have a disability for which you will require

accommodation, please advise the professor of your needs in writing no later than the end of the second week of the semester. Essential competencies for this course include the ability to:

- read and synthesize research articles.
- use an audio and/or video recorder.
- use a computer with various word processing, e-mail, transcription, and graphics software applications.
- speak in front of the class and use multimedia to support the presentation.

ADA POLICY

The University of North Texas makes reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. To request accommodations, you must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) by completing an application for services and providing documentation to verify your eligibility each semester. Once your eligibility is confirmed, you may request your letter of accommodation. ODA will then email your faculty a letter of reasonable accommodation, initiating a private discussion about your specific needs in the course.

You can request accommodations at any time, but it's important to provide ODA notice to your faculty as early as possible in the semester to avoid delays in implementation. Keep in mind that you must obtain a new letter of accommodation for each semester and meet with each faculty member before accommodations can be implemented in each class. You are strongly encouraged to meet with faculty regarding your accommodations during office hours or by appointment.

Faculty have the authority to ask you to discuss your letter during their designated office hours to protect your privacy. For more information and to access resources that can support your needs, refer to the [Office of Disability Access](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access) website (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access>).

SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION

UNT is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. If you (or someone you know) has experienced or experiences any of these acts of aggression, please know that you are not alone. The federal Title IX law makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender are Civil Rights offenses. UNT has staff members trained to support you in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more. UNT's Dean of Students' [website](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/dean-of-students) offers a range of on-campus and off-campus resources to help support survivors, depending on their unique needs (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/dean-of-students>).