

African American English

(Under the auspices of “Senior Capstone” and “The Senior Course”)

(E)LING 495R section 1 Spring 2023

JKB 1013 MWF 12:00–1:50pm

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Office hours: 2:00–4:00 on Wednesdays and Thursdays

(What are office hours? See below for details!)

Me generally geeking out for a sec

I am *very* excited to be teaching this course on African American English! Full disclosure, this is a brand new course for me. In fact, as far as I know, this is the first time such a course has been offered at BYU! I hope you will bear with me as we go through this course for the first time together.

As a bit of background on why we’re offering this course in the first place, our department likes to offer a variety of topics as capstone courses. They are usually special topics courses—basically professors’ pet projects—taught in a way that serve as a way to integrate as much as possible of what you’ve learned in your major. Up until a few years ago, the bulk of these were taught by our most senior faculty. However, many of them have retired. So, with only a few capstone topics in the rotation, we were in need of some additional topics. For a while, I’ve thought a course on language discrimination, attitudes, and identity might be interesting. However, when I was approached and asked to teach a capstone, they asked me to do it on “something to do with American English.” After some discussion, we settled on African American English, which I think is a nice intersection of those two topics. Thus, this course was born!

I’ll be learning along with you. African American English is foundational to the field of sociolinguistics, so I have been exposed to many of the broad topics. However, I have never taken a course dedicated to African American English and, before prepping for this course, had never really studied it in depth. So, again, please bear with me as we learn this material together. Hopefully we’ll all walk away with a good experience.

What do we call this thing?

We’ll talk more about this on the first day of class, but the variety that we’ll be studying goes by many names. The ones I use the most are African American English, African American Language, African American Vernacular English, and Black English, which I’ll likely be using interchangeably.

The elephant in the room

It has not escaped my attention that I—a White person—will be teaching you—based on BYU’s demographics, probably White as well—about a language variety spoken primarily by Black Americans. In fact, if you’re from the inter-mountain West, you may not have had that much exposure to African American English in the real world. I have had some (I worked at my dad’s store in primarily Black part of St. Louis in high school and I lived in Georgia for seven years), but not a lot.

Because of all this, there is a real potential of us (myself included!) talking about African American English in a way that is at best exoticized and at worst flat out discriminatory. Race and ethnicity is a hot topic in the United States right now, and there will probably be times where you could take the things that we talk about out of context to portray this course, me, linguistics, and BYU in a very negative light.

I will not tolerate racist or prejudiced comments, reactions, or behavior. (And I encourage you to call out such actions if you see them coming from me!) If there are any biases that you have coming into this course that may prevent you from effectively learning about a legitimate variety of English spoken by tens of millions of Americans, I encourage you to think carefully about what you can do to rid yourselves of those so that we can all have a productive term.

Prerequisites

This is a senior capstone course for majors within the Linguistics Department. Linguistics majors should be enrolled in LING 495R Senior Capstone, and the official prerequisites are that you have completed LING 210, 220, and 230 (sounds, structure, and meaning, respectively). Editing & Publishing and Applied English Linguistics majors should be enrolled in ELING 495R The Senior Course, and the official prerequisites are that you have senior status according to BYU. Of course, instructor permission is an option for those who do not meet these prerequisites.

Please note that because this is an "R" class (i.e. 495R), you are allowed to *repeat* the course. This means that you do not have to count this iteration of 495 as your capstone. Instead, you can count it as an elective and take another capstone later (probably on a different topic).

Materials

There will be one required textbook. It is expected that you have a copy of this book.

Lisa J. Green. 2002. *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*.
Cambridge University Press.

I apologize that this book is somewhat dated. It might even be older than some of you! However, it is an excellent resource and overview of African American English and is highly recommended by Black linguists and those who study Black English. While some of the examples may be dated, most of the content is very much relevant to today. Much of the

material I will draw from in my lectures is more recent, so please do not think of this course as “African American English from 20 years ago.”

There is one ***optional*** book that you may purchase if you’d like.

Sonja Lanehart, ed. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*. Oxford University Press.

Several of your readings will come from this book. However, we will only have time to read around five of the 48 chapters, so I don’t expect you to buy it just for that. Besides, it’s available electronically through the library’s website for free.

Course Purpose

Here’s what the official course purposes for this course is:

LING 495R: Integrative, culminating experience for linguistics majors; topics vary.

ELING 495R: In-depth study of a limited area of English language. Content varies; requires research and writing.

However, those are very general statements that are supposed to apply to a very broad range of topics. This section is specifically about African American English. Here’s what the course purpose then for this iteration of 495R is:

In-depth study of the sounds, structure, meaning, usage, origins, and sociolinguistics of African American English.

Since we are approaching a limited area of the English language from a variety of linguistic angles, I hope this serves an a useful integrative, culminating experience for all, regardless of your major.

Learning Outcomes

Here’s the official list of learning outcomes for the course.

For LING 495R:

- *Demonstrate Integration of Knowledge and Communicate Results:* Students will demonstrate that they can integrate their knowledge of core and applied areas of linguistics to produce a linguistic artifact (grammar, lexicon, corpus, experiment, survey, etc), and communicate the results in writing or speaking.

For ELING 495R:

- *Course Project:* Students will be able to demonstrate how a variety of linguistic concepts, authoritative sources, and methodologies they have previously learned about in other courses may be effectively applied in a focused course project in which the students participate.

- *Identifying Linguistic Assumptions:* Students will be able to identify some of the linguistic assumptions that underlie the approaches and methods they might use in completing the project.
- *Substantial Paper:* By the end of the course, students will have written a substantial paper that describes, explains, and justifies the work they have done and the approach they have used in their project.

The common theme is that there should be a rather substantial project as a part of this course.

Assignments and Grades

The grade breakdown for this class is pretty simple:

Homework (40%)	There will be seven weekly homework assignments throughout the term. The lowest score will be dropped.
In-Class Presentations (20%)	You will do two presentations for the class during the term.
Final Project (40%)	You will turn in a final project that serves as your “culminating experience” for this course. You will have a rather large amount of flexibility in what this project looks like, but it should be somewhat substantial.

Your assignments will be weighted accordingly and your final grade will be determined using the following table:

Grade	Minimum Percent	Grade	Minimum Percent
A	93	C	73
A-	90	C-	70
B+	87	D+	67
B	83	D	63
B-	80	D-	60
C+	77	E	0

Communication

We will be using Learning Suite for official course-related materials. All the assignments, slides, and grades will be available on LearningSuite.

You may communicate with me by sending an email at any time. However, be aware that I do treat my job as a 9–5 gig, so I may not answer it until I get in the next day. That means if you email me late Friday night, I might not get to it until Monday morning; don’t expect an immediate response if you email me at midnight.

Policies

Homework is due when class starts on each Wednesday. After the due date/time, there is a 48-hour grace period during which they can be turned in without penalty. Anything beyond that will not be accepted.

Because we will be a small class, I would very much prefer that you attend in-person as much as you can. However, I understand that extenuating circumstances sometimes make physical attendance impossible. If you need to attend remotely, please let me know as soon as you can before class and I can open up a Zoom room. You're welcome to attend live or watch the recording afterwards. However, I will only turn on Zoom and record the lectures if someone asks. You can find the link and the recordings by going to Learning Suite > Online.

Office Hours

My office hours are 2:00–4:00 on Wednesdays and Thursdays or some other time by appointment. I am happy to meet in-person at 4059 JFSB or via Zoom. For in-person meetings, you are more than welcome to drop by without making an appointment. If my door is closed, please don't hesitate to knock. For Zoom, that should be set up at least a few minutes beforehand.

What are office hours for, you ask? Well, they're for YOU! This is time that I have set aside each week to dedicate to helping students. Do not feel like you are taking my time by coming by—that is what that time is for! Don't feel like you need to stop by exactly at the start time—any time during the entire window is fair game. And don't feel pressured into making it quick: if you want to spend the whole block of time hashing out some things or getting help for whatever reason, that's okay!

You may think that office hours are only for help with homework or if you didn't understand the lecture. Not true! I mean, if you'd like to meet for those reasons, that's certainly fine. But, you can come into office hours to talk about whatever—other things related to the class, other linguistics classes, some fun project idea you're thinking about, guidance on picking a research topic, talking about PhD programs, shooting the breeze about breadmaking, organ music, looking at my succulents, etc, etc, etc. This is your chance to have dedicated one-on-one time with me to talk shop, regardless of whether it has to do with my class, any class, or no class. I love it when students come by and you should definitely feel comfortable doing so, for whatever reason. (Plus, I try to have food...)

They're also good ways for me to get to know you. If need letters of recommendations, I can't really write a good one if you were "just" another student in my class. But if you've come into office hours and given me a chance to get to know you a little bit better, I can definitely write a better letter for you, if needed.

Schedule

The course is broken up into three broad units. In the *Description* unit, we will get into the nitty-gritty of the language itself. In the *Development* unit, we'll discuss the controversial topic of the origins and development of AAE. Finally, on most Fridays we'll jump to the *Society* unit where we talk about miscellaneous sociolinguistics topics. The homework assignments, which are always due before class on Wednesdays, are based on one of the topics from the previous week. Please note that this is tentative outline; expect deviations as the semester progresses.

Date	Unit	Topic	Reading	HW Due
5/3	Intro	Intro and Overview		
5/5	Description	Lexicon and meaning	Green 1	
5/8	Description	Tense, aspect, and mood	Green 2	
5/10	Description	More verby topics	(cont.)	
5/12	Society	Language and identity	Rickford (1985)	<i>Talking Black in America</i>
5/15	Description	Grammar	Green 3	
5/17	Description	More grammar	(cont.)	CORAAL
5/19	Society	AAE in legal settings	Rickford & King (2016)	
5/22	Description	Vowels & consonants	Green §4.1–4.6	
5/24	Description	Prosody	Green §4.7	Translation
5/26	Society	Usage, speech events, interaction	Green 5	
5/29	—	Memorial Day (no school)	—	
5/31	Description	Variation	Wolfram & Kohn (2013)	Sermon analysis
6/2	Society	AAE in literature and the media	Green 6 and 7	
6/5	Development	Creole hypothesis	Rickford (2013)	
6/7	Development	English Origins Hypothesis	Van Herk (2013)	Media representation
6/9	Society	The Oakland Ebonics Controversy	Wolfram (1998)	
6/12	Development	Substrate hypothesis	Mufwene (2013)	
5/14	Development	Continued Development	Winford (2013)	Layman's explanation
5/16	Society	AAE in educational settings	Green 8	
6/19	—	Juneteenth (no school)	—	
6/21	—	(Reading Day)	—	Position paper

References

- All readings labeled “Green” come from our textbook.
- All 2013 readings come from the *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language* and are available as PDFs through the library’s website.
- Rickford, John R. 1985. Ethnicity as a Sociolinguistic Boundary. *American Speech* 60(2). 99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/455300>.
- Rickford, John R. & Sharese King. 2016. Language and linguistics on trial: Hearing Rachel Jeantel (and other vernacular speakers) in the courtroom and beyond. *Language* 92(4). 948–988.
- Wolfram, Walt. 1998. Language Ideology and Dialect: Understanding the Oakland Ebonics Controversy. *Journal of English Linguistics* 26(2). 108–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/007542429802600203>.

University Policies

Honor Code

In keeping with the principles of the BYU Honor Code, students are expected to be honest in all of their academic work. Academic honesty means, most fundamentally, that any work you present as your own must in fact be your own work and not that of another. Violations of this principle may result in a failing grade in the course and additional disciplinary action by the university. Students are also expected to adhere to the Dress and Grooming Standards. Adherence demonstrates respect for yourself and others and ensures an effective learning and working environment. It is the university's expectation, and every instructor's expectation in class, that each student will abide by all Honor Code standards. Please call the Honor Code Office at 422-2847 if you have questions about those standards.

Preventing & Responding to Sexual Misconduct

In accordance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Brigham Young University prohibits unlawful sex discrimination against any participant in its education programs or activities. The university also prohibits sexual harassment—including sexual violence—committed by or against students, university employees, and visitors to campus. As outlined in university policy, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking are considered forms of “Sexual Misconduct” prohibited by the university.

University policy requires all university employees in a teaching, managerial, or supervisory role to report all incidents of Sexual Misconduct that come to their attention in any way, including but not limited to face-to-face conversations, a written class assignment or paper, class discussion, email, text, or social media post. Incidents of Sexual Misconduct should be reported to the Title IX Coordinator at t9coordinator@byu.edu or (801) 422-8692. Reports may also be submitted through EthicsPoint at <https://titleix.byu.edu/report> or 1-888-238-1062 (24-hours a day).

BYU offers confidential resources for those affected by Sexual Misconduct, including the university's Victim Advocate, as well as a number of non-confidential resources and services that may be helpful. Additional information about Title IX, the university's Sexual Misconduct Policy, reporting requirements, and resources can be found at <http://titleix.byu.edu> or by contacting the university's Title IX Coordinator.

Student Disability

Brigham Young University is committed to providing a working and learning atmosphere that reasonably accommodates qualified persons with disabilities. A disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Whether an impairment is substantially limiting depends on its nature and severity, its duration or expected duration, and its permanent or expected permanent or long-term impact. Examples include vision or hearing impairments, physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, emotional

disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety), learning disorders, and attention disorders (e.g., ADHD). If you have a disability which impairs your ability to complete this course successfully, please contact the University Accessibility Center (UAC), 2170 WSC or 801-422-2767 to request a reasonable accommodation. The UAC can also assess students for learning, attention, and emotional concerns. If you feel you have been unlawfully discriminated against on the basis of disability, please contact the Equal Employment Office at 801-422-5895, D-285 ASB for help.

Inappropriate Use of Course Materials

All course materials (e.g., outlines, handouts, syllabi, exams, quizzes, PowerPoint presentations, lectures, audio and video recordings, etc.) are proprietary. Students are prohibited from posting or selling any such course materials without the express written permission of the professor teaching this course. To do so is a violation of the Brigham Young University Honor Code.

Academic Honesty

The first injunction of the Honor Code is the call to “be honest.” Students come to the university not only to improve their minds, gain knowledge, and develop skills that will assist them in their life’s work, but also to build character. “President David O. McKay taught that character is the highest aim of education” (The Aims of a BYU Education, p.6). It is the purpose of the BYU Academic Honesty Policy to assist in fulfilling that aim. BYU students should seek to be totally honest in their dealings with others. They should complete their own work and be evaluated based upon that work. They should avoid academic dishonesty and misconduct in all its forms, including but not limited to plagiarism, fabrication or falsification, cheating, and other academic misconduct.

Plagiarism

Intentional Plagiarism Intentional plagiarism is the deliberate act of representing the words, ideas, or data of another as one’s own without providing proper attribution to the author through quotation, reference, or footnote. Intentional plagiarism is a form of intellectual theft that violates widely recognized principles of academic integrity as well as the Honor Code. Such plagiarism may subject the student to appropriate disciplinary action administered through the university Honor Code Office, in addition to academic sanctions that may be applied by an instructor. Inadvertent plagiarism, which may not be a violation of the Honor Code, is nevertheless a form of intellectual carelessness that is unacceptable in the academic community. Plagiarism of any kind is completely contrary to the established practices of higher education where all members of the university are expected to acknowledge the original intellectual work of others that is included in their own work. In some cases, plagiarism may also involve violations of copyright law.

Inadvertent Plagiarism Inadvertent plagiarism involves the inappropriate, but non-deliberate, use of another’s words, ideas, or data without proper attribution. Inadvertent plagiarism usually results from an ignorant failure to follow established rules for

documenting sources or from simply not being sufficiently careful in research and writing. Although not a violation of the Honor Code, inadvertent plagiarism is a form of academic misconduct for which an instructor can impose appropriate academic sanctions.

Students who are in doubt as to whether they are providing proper attribution have the responsibility to consult with their instructor and obtain guidance. Examples of plagiarism include:

- *Direct Plagiarism*: The verbatim copying of an original source without acknowledging the source.
- *Paraphrased Plagiarism*: The paraphrasing, without acknowledgement, of ideas from another that the reader might mistake for the author's own.
- *Plagiarism Mosaic*: The borrowing of words, ideas, or data from an original source and blending this original material with one's own without acknowledging the source.
- *Insufficient Acknowledgement*: The partial or incomplete attribution of words, ideas, or data from an original source.

Plagiarism may occur with respect to unpublished as well as published material. Copying another student's work and submitting it as one's own individual work without proper attribution is a serious form of plagiarism.

Respectful Environment

“Sadly, from time to time, we do hear reports of those who are at best insensitive and at worst insulting in their comments to and about others... We hear derogatory and sometimes even defamatory comments about those with different political, athletic, or ethnic views or experiences. Such behavior is completely out of place at BYU, and I enlist the aid of all to monitor carefully and, if necessary, correct any such that might occur here, however inadvertent or unintentional. I worry particularly about demeaning comments made about the career or major choices of women or men either directly or about members of the BYU community generally. We must remember that personal agency is a fundamental principle and that none of us has the right or option to criticize the lawful choices of another.”
President Cecil O. Samuelson, Annual University Conference, August 24, 2010.

“Occasionally, we ...hear reports that our female faculty feel disrespected, especially by students, for choosing to work at BYU, even though each one has been approved by the BYU Board of Trustees. Brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be. Not here. Not at a university that shares a constitution with the School of the Prophets.” Vice President John S. Tanner, Annual University Conference, August 24, 2010.

Deliberation Guidelines

To facilitate productive and open discussions about sensitive topics about which there are differing opinions, members of the BYU community should:

1. Remember that we are each responsible for enabling a productive, respectful dialogue.
2. To enable time for everyone to speak, strive to be concise with your thoughts.
3. Respect all speakers by listening actively.
4. Treat others with the respect that you would like them to treat you with, regardless of your differences.
5. Do not interrupt others.
6. Always try to understand what is being said before you respond.
7. Ask for clarification instead of making assumptions.
8. When countering an idea, or making one initially, demonstrate that you are listening to what is being said by others. Try to validate other positions as you assert your own, which aids in dialogue, versus attack.
9. Under no circumstances should an argument continue out of the classroom when someone does not want it to. Extending these conversations beyond class can be productive, but we must agree to do so respectfully, ethically, and with attention to individuals' requests for confidentiality and discretion.
10. Remember that exposing yourself to different perspectives helps you to evaluate your own beliefs more clearly and learn new information.
11. Remember that just because you do not agree with a person's statements, it does not mean that you cannot get along with that person.
12. Speak with your professor privately if you feel that the classroom environment has become hostile, biased, or intimidating.

Adapted from the Deliberation Guidelines published by The Center for Democratic Deliberation.

Mental Health

Mental health concerns and stressful life events can affect students' academic performance and quality of life. BYU Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS, 1500 WSC, 801-422-3035, caps.byu.edu) provides individual, couples, and group counseling, as well as stress management services. These services are confidential and are provided by the university at no cost for full-time students. For general information please visit <https://caps.byu.edu>; for more immediate concerns please visit <http://help.byu.edu>.

BYU College of Humanities Statement on Inclusion

We strive to cultivate mutual respect and empathy for all people, no matter their ethnic, racial, or cultural background, or sexual orientation. Elder Ballard said at a BYU devotional in Feb. 2020: "Through discrimination, racism, sexism, and other social ills, we will often impose

false identities on others that keep them and us from progressing. This can stop when we see all people as children of God. We consider every person divine in origin, nature, and potential. Each possesses seeds of divinity. And ‘each is a beloved spirit [child] of heavenly parents.’ ”

We invite all to participate in open and honest inquiry in our classrooms where we deal with complicated social and moral issues. In these conversations we seek to

- Respect and value the contributions of people from backgrounds, religions, and cultures other than our own
- Be aware of hurtful words and phrases
- Learn about and understand different cultural traditions
- Acknowledge discomfort when participating in class discussions about difficult topics
- Speak up on behalf of those who may be hurt by harmful speech
- Show willingness to work in groups with people of diverse backgrounds
- Respond with humility and teachability when our words offend
- Approach these issues with sincerity, respect, and compassion
- Express tolerance, love, and understanding

We fall short of our ideals when we

- Behave as if one is morally superior for treating someone of another race with kindness or not recognizing that benevolent stereotypes can be condescending or paternalistic
- se words without understanding social context or the full range of a term’s meanings
- Expect that everyone in the Church shares similar cultural or political values
- Tacitly accept derogatory, racist, or sexist language without calling it into question
- Excuse or minimize the damage done by others—including leaders—who discriminate or who are biased
- Make assumptions about someone’s abilities or attributes based on the color of their skin or national origin
- Assume on the basis of a person’s appearance or accent that they come from another country or have a certain immigration status
- Presume that those who suffer from famine, poverty, crime, environmental disasters, or war brought these conditions upon themselves

The College of Humanities is attuned to the reality of an increasingly diverse Church membership. We aspire to better understand our own language and history, and to remain aware that some groups benefit from immunity from discrimination and implicit biases. We invite students, staff, and faculty to use their time in our college to strive toward conduct worthy of Christian discipleship, where we are “no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19).