

# African American English

(Taught as “Senior Capstone”)

LING 495R    Spring 2025  
JKB 1013    MWF 2:00–3:50pm  
Last Updated: April 28, 2026

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Here is the official course description for this course:

Integrative, culminating experience for linguistics majors; topics vary.

However, this is a very general statement 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 description then for this iteration of these courses is:

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

Since we are approaching a particular variety of language from a variety of linguistic angles, I hope this serves as a useful integrative, culminating experience for all.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

*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.

## PREREQUISITES

This is a senior capstone course for linguistics majors. The official prerequisites are that you have completed LING 210, 220, 230, and 240 (sounds, structure, meaning, and tools, respectively).

## 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. It may also be one of the very few textbooks you read written by a Black woman. 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 25 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.

## ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES

The grade breakdown for this class is pretty simple:

**Homework (40%)** There will be about 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 %	Grade	Minimum %	Grade	Minimum %
A	93	B–	80	D+	67
A–	90	C+	77	D	63
B+	87	C	73	D–	60
B	83	C–	70	E	0

## COMMUNICATION

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

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.

## OFFICE HOURS

My office hours are 9:00–11:00am on Thursdays or by appointment. I am happy to meet in-person at 4059 JFSB or via Zoom.

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! 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 of course 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 and how to get funding for it, guidance on picking a research topic, talking about your future after graduation, shooting the breeze about breadmaking, knitting, succulents, or playing the organ or whatever else you want. This is your chance to have dedicated one-on-one time with me to talk shop, regardless of whether it has to do with this class (or any class). I love it when students come by and you should definitely feel comfortable doing so, for whatever reason.

They're also good ways for me to get to know you. If you end up applying to a future job, a PhD program, law school, or med school and 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.

## **CLASSROOM POLICIES**

### *Late Policy*

There are only four people in this class and you've all taken at least one class from me before. Let's be chill this semester. Turn your homework in before finals week.

### *Remote Learning*

Because there are just four of you, I very much prefer that you attend in-person as much as you can. For this class, I will not record lectures by default. But if you will miss class, I can record the lecture on Zoom and make the recording available on LearningSuite. You're welcome to attend live or watch the recording afterwards. You can find the link and the recordings by going to Learning Suite > Online. With enough clicking (usually there's an eye icon), you should be able to see the password

Please be aware that your online experience may be less than ideal. I may forget to share my screen (particularly if I have to jump back and forth between PowerPoint and something else), share the sound, or position the camera. I may even forget to turn on Zoom entirely. My focus is on the in-person attendees, so I cannot guarantee a good user experience for online participants.

To reiterate, I very much prefer that you attend in-person, and I believe you will have a better experience by doing so.

## *Overlapping Work*

Though not as common in this course or during Spring term, occasionally, students propose a final project that overlaps to some degree with a project they are doing or have done for another class. In general, this may be acceptable under the following conditions:

1. You get prior approval both from me and from the instructor of the other course.
2. The paper/project you submit for this course meets all the requirements for this course and should be written in such a way that I wouldn't be able to tell that it was used for another course. This typically means substantially rewriting the paper.
3. Your paper/project demonstrates that you have gained new knowledge in this course, and/or you have completed additional analysis. This means turning in something that was mostly done in a previous semester will not work out unless there's a substantial new development.
4. You are honest in your representation of the work you have done.

Let me know if you have any questions about this policy or wish to discuss a project proposal.

## **USING AI**

My views on AI are constantly evolving. I find it easier to write them in one place and then link to it, rather than have it stored in individual course syllabi. Please see this course's AI policy [here](#).

## **SOME PRELIMINARIES ABOUT THE COURSE**

### *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.

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.

## SCHEDULE

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	Topic	Reading	HW Due
4/29	Introduction and Overview		
5/1	Language and identity	Rickford (1985)	
5/4	Lexicon	Green ch 1	
5/6	Tense	Green §2.1–2.2	<i>Talking Black in America</i>
5/8	AAE in legal settings	Rickford & King (2016)	
5/11	BE and BIN	Green §2.3 through pg. 60	
5/13	Other TAM	The rest of Green Ch 2	CORAAL
5/15	Ideology and attitudes	TBD	
5/18	Grammar I	Green §3.1–3.4	
5/20	Grammar II	The rest of Green Ch 3	Translation
5/22	Pragmatics and usage	Green ch. 5	
5/25	Memorial Day (no school)		
5/27	Segmental phonology	Green §4.1–4.6	Sermon analysis
5/29	Literature and media	Green chs. 6–7	
6/1	Intonation	Green §4.7	
6/3	Variation	Wolfram & Kohn (2015)	Media representation
6/5	Oakland Ebonics Controversy	Wolfram (1998)	
6/8	The Creole Hypothesis	Rickford (2015)	
6/19	The English Origins Hypothesis	Van Herk (2015)	Layman's explanation
6/12	Education (problems)	Green ch 8	
6/15	Education (solutions)	Green ch 8	

## References

- All readings labeled “Green” come from our textbook.
- All 2015 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). 99–125. DOI: 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. DOI: 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*

*The health and well-being of students is of paramount importance at Brigham Young University. If you or someone you know has experienced sexual harassment (including sexual violence), there are many resources available for assistance.*

In accordance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, BYU prohibits unlawful sex discrimination, including sexual harassment, against any participant in its education programs or activities. The university also prohibits sexual harassment by its personnel and students. Sexual harassment occurs when

- a person is subjected to unwelcome sexual speech or conduct so severe, pervasive, and offensive that it effectively denies their ability to access any BYU education program or activity;

- any aid, benefit, or service of BYU is conditioned on a person's participation in unwelcome sexual conduct; or
- a person suffers sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, or stalking on the basis of sex.

University policy requires all faculty members to promptly report incidents of sexual harassment that come to their attention in any way, including through face-to-face conversations, a written class assignment or paper, class discussion, email, text, or social media post. Incidents of sexual harassment should be reported to the Title IX Coordinator at [t9coordinator@byu.edu](mailto:t9coordinator@byu.edu) or (801) 422-8692 or 1085 WSC. Reports may also be submitted online at <https://titleix.byu.edu/report> or 1-888-238-1062 (24-hours a day).

BYU offers confidential resources for those affected by sexual harassment, including the university's Sexual Assault Survivor 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 Harassment 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 Opportunity Office at 801-422-5895, [eo\\_manager@byu.edu](mailto:eo_manager@byu.edu), or visit <https://hrs.byu.edu/equal-opportunity> for help.

### *Plagiarism*

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. 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. 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.

### *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.

### *Compliance Hotline and BYU Policies*

If you have questions about university policies, including those discussed in this syllabus, please visit <https://policy.byu.edu>.

If you observe any non-emergency dangerous, illegal, or suspicious activity occurring on campus or by a member of the BYU community, please report it through the BYU Compliance Hotline at <https://hotline.byu.edu>. Emergencies and ongoing criminal activity should be reported directly to BYU Police at 801-422-2911.

### *Diversity and Inclusion in the Classroom*

“Because we feel the depth of God's love for His children, we care deeply about every child of God, regardless of age, personal circumstances, gender, sexual orientation, or other unique challenges” (President Russell M. Nelson, "The Love and Laws of God," September 2019). As a university community we strive to foster an educational environment that promotes the personal dignity of every student and accept individual responsibility to eliminate racism, sexism, and nationalism. Our course participation reflects our understanding that every individual is a child of Heavenly Parents. We create learning environments in which every individual is motivated to express their opinions and perspectives and ask questions to augment discussions and learning. We listen to, learn from, and strive to consider thoughtfully the opinions of others. We use language that is polite, considerate, and courteous—even when we strongly disagree.

### *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. (<http://cdd.la.psu.edu/education/The%20CD%20Deliberation%20Guidelines.pdf/view?searchterm=deliberation%20guidelines>)

### *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](http://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>.

### *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. It is also unethical to post your own work (study sheets, papers) from the course on file sharing websites as you are encouraging others to engage in plagiarism. These policies continue indefinitely (not limited to the duration of the semester or term you take this course).

### *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
- Use 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 use language to connect and heal rather than to divide and harm. 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).

### *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

### *Devotional Attendance*

Brigham Young University's devotional and forum assemblies are an important part of your BYU experience. President Cecil O. Samuelson said, "We have special and enlightening series of devotional and forum assemblies...that will complement, supplement, and enrich what will also be a very productive period in your classrooms, laboratories, and libraries. We look forward to being with you each Tuesday...and hope that you will regularly attend and bring your friends and associates with you...A large part of what constitutes the unique 'BYU experience' is found in these gatherings where the Spirit has been invited and where we have the opportunity to discuss and consider things of ultimate worth and importance that are not afforded to the academic community on almost any other campus" (from the address "The Legacy of Learning", 30 August, 2005). Your attendance at each forum and devotional is strongly encouraged.

### *BYU College of Humanities Statement on Respect and Equity*

The BYU College of Humanities strives to become a community of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual maturity. All participants in classes offered by our college are expected to contribute to a respectful, welcoming, and inclusive environment for every other member of the class. As President Oaks has advised, "Followers of Christ should be examples of civility." In keeping with this guidance, class members should eschew insults and slurs of any variety; should engage openly and respectfully in dialogue with other members of the class, especially when discussing emotionally-charged issues; and should refrain from making assumptions based on gender, economic status, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other groupings. Let our

classrooms be places where we follow President Nelson's call to "lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice." Let us use sensitivity when discussing Church policies related to gender, in "ways that show empathy and understanding for everyone," in Elder Holland's words. In addition, please be careful to treat all instructors and teaching assistants with due respect for their position and qualifications ([studies](#) suggest that students consistently evaluate instructors differently based on gender). We urge members of our community to embrace a professional ethic, and to recognize that all of God's children bring something unique and valuable to our collective experience.