

Internet Linguistics: How the Internet Helps Us Understand Languages and Ourselves

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Description:

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. It aims at understanding the subconscious patterns and mechanisms behind language use by exploring both the commonalities between human languages and the uniqueness of each of them. Internet linguistics is a recently developed subfield of linguistics that studies new forms of language use that emerged as a result of the development of the internet, social media, and other modes of communication (e.g. texting). Besides studies of new phenomena, it offers new insights into the existing studies and theories of linguistics and other social and cognitive sciences. While it had been traditionally difficult to gather and analyze data of naturally produced language and human interactions, the internet offers nearly unlimited amounts of unfiltered data and examples, which can then be used to study various phenomena in a new context: it allows real-time observation of language change, detailed study of regional variations, social interactions, psychological/cognitive effect of languages, and many more.

This seminar will be an exploration of the forms, structures and implications of language use online and via digital interpersonal communication. The seminars will be structured in a way that internet linguistics - the subfield that is presumably more accessible to a more general audience - is used as a lens to understand the broad picture of languages, linguistics, and communication. It will start with a general introduction to the field and to patterns of online language use, which will transition into materials interwoven between internet linguistics, other related fields/subfields, and broader questions related to languages and human interactions.

The proposal of this seminar is motivated both by efforts to increase multilingual accessibility on campus and the general misunderstanding regarding informal language, underrepresented language varieties, and language change, all of which have a strong presence on the internet. Hence, the primary goals for this seminar include demystifying facts about languages and linguistics and fostering an understanding of language diversity. Students of this seminar are encouraged to reflect on their past usage of and judgments on language, consider their relations to language and the internet individually and socially, as well as embrace the creativity and liveliness of human's unique way of communication.

This seminar would be most directly applicable to students who study social sciences, including but not limited to majors such as linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. Considering the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, students of various academic backgrounds would be able to connect this seminar to their fields and hence engage in and benefit from related discussions: for example, students of language and culture studies (e.g. East Asian Languages and Cultures) could focus on the internet of particular geographical areas/cultures of interest and contribute intercultural perspectives; students of psychology and cognitive sciences could examine how new usage of language and/or the internet may affect human mind and behaviors; students of computer science would be able to gain new perspectives on current topics of technology (e.g. how AI and Large Language Models might shape our ways of communication or understanding of languages).

Preliminary Syllabus:

This seminar mostly fits the format of past student seminars, centered around discussions of topics and texts with a potential field trip and potential guest speakers.

Session 1: Seminar Introduction, Intro to Linguistics, Mythbusting

(introduction to linguistics; prescriptivism vs. descriptivism; informal writing)

- What is Linguistics?: Crash Course Linguistics #1 <https://youtu.be/3yLXNzDUH58>

- Grammar Not-zi - The Vocal Fries Podcast <https://radiopublic.com/the-vocal-fries-GOoXdO/s1!4d505>
- Because Internet Linguistics <https://youtu.be/pGFmYilzSnc>

Session 2: Internet Expressions

(features of internet lang; computing such features; psychological impacts of new communication norms)

- AbuSa'aleek, Atef Odeh. "Internet Linguistics: A Linguistic Analysis of Electronic Discourse as a New Variety of Language." *International Journal of English Linguistics*, vol. 5, no. 1, Jan. 2015, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v5n1p135>.
- Emojis Are Weird (Linguistically Speaking) <https://youtu.be/6Q4Rfk1fCJ4>
- Gawne, Lauren, and Gretchen McCulloch. "Emoji as digital gestures." *Language@ Internet* 17.2 (2019).
- McCulloch, Gretchen. *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*. Penguin, 2020. Ch. 4
- Korpela, Jukka K. *Unicode explained*. "O'Reilly Media, Inc.", 2006. Ch. 1
- Liu, Moyu. "Are you really smiling? Display rules for emojis and the relationship between emotion management and psychological well-being." *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 372

Session 3: Language Change

((internet) language change; psychological/cognitive implications of language and the internet)

- How languages evolve - Alex Gendler <https://youtu.be/iWDKsHm6gTA>
- Why "No Problem" Can Seem Rude: Phatic Expressions <https://youtu.be/eGnH0KAXhCw>
- Crystal, David. *Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide*. Routledge, 2011. Ch. 4
- Gershon, Ilana. "Language and the Newness of Media." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 46, no. 1, Oct. 2017, pp. 15–31, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102116-041300>.
- Harley, Trevor A. *Talking the Talk: Language, Psychology and Science*. Psychology Press, 2009. Ch. 4

Session 4: Language Variation and Multilingualism

(language variation, social prestige, and the internet)

- What makes a language... a language? - Martin Hilpert https://youtu.be/_Z_F0tfKyfo
- Labov, William. "The social stratification of (r) in New York City department stores." *Dialect and language variation*. Academic Press, 1986. 304-329.
- Are There Internet Dialects? | Idea Channel | PBS Digital Studios <https://youtu.be/SDPasRas5u0>
- McSweeney, Michelle. "I Text English to Everyone: Links between Second-Language Texting and Academic Proficiency." *Languages*, vol. 2, no. 3, June 2017, p. 7, <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages2030007>.
- Soffer, Oren. "Liquid language? On the personalization of discourse in the digital era." *New media & society* 14.7 (2012): 1092-1110.
- Rymes, Betsy, and Andrea R. Leone. "Citizen sociolinguistics: A new media methodology for understanding language and social life." *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics (WPEL)* 29.2 (2014): 4.

Session 5: Big Picture and the Future of Language (could change depending on group interest)

(potentially: artificial intelligence/LLM; theory of knowledge and philosophy of language)

- Kosinski, Michal. "Theory of mind may have spontaneously emerged in large language models." arXiv preprint arXiv:2302.02083 (2023).
- Piantadosia, Steven T. "Modern language models refute Chomsky's approach to language." <https://lingbuzz.net/lingbuzz/007180> VS. Kazir, Roni. "Why large language models are poor theories of human linguistic cognition. A reply to Piantadosi (2023)." <https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/007190>
- Cole, David, "The Chinese Room Argument", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/chinese-room/>.
- Knowledge of Language <https://iep.utm.edu/knowlang/>

Additional Information:

Potential Guest Speakers

[Gretchen McCulloch](#): internet linguist and author of the New York Times bestselling *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*. She's been the Resident Linguist at *Wired* and *The Toast* and is the co-creator of *Lingthusiasm*, a podcast that's enthusiastic about linguistics.

[Kory Stamper](#): writer and lexicographer. She works as a general definer at Merriam-Webster, where she spends her days reading citations and trying to define words like "Monophysite," "bodice ripper," and "God." In addition to defining, she appears in Merriam-Webster's Ask the Editor video series, and travels the country giving lectures on the history of English and English dictionaries.

Potential Field Trip

[Planet Word](#) in Washington D.C.: Planet Word is the only museum in the country dedicated to renewing and inspiring a love of words and language. Located in the historic Franklin School on the corner of 13th and K Streets in downtown D.C., Planet Word opened in 2020 as a new kind of interactive and self-guided museum. Using the museum's state-of-the-art technology, visitors determine their experience through their own words and choices. Planet Word is a bold and imaginative response to the life-long importance of literacy and to the challenge of growing a love of language.