Language, Religion, and Ethnicity

Class code
FRSEM-UA XXX

Instructor Details
Professor Benjamin Hary
benjamin.hary@nyu.edu
Office: TBA

Office Hours
Mondays 2–4

Class Details
Language, Religion, and Ethnicity
Time: Wednesdays 11:00–1:30
Place: TBA

Prerequisites
No prerequisites

Class Description
This is a first-year seminar asking fundamental questions such as: What is a language? What is religion? What is ethnicity? And above all, what is the connection between them? The seminar offers a linguistic view of religion and ethnicity and looks into the sociolinguistic history, society, and culture of the United States as well as other case studies.

We will consider the great diversity of communicative systems we encounter both as a source of enrichment for individuals and the nation as a whole, and as a basis for problems, and will consider possible resolutions of these problems. In addition, we will study the universal phenomenon of language change and how it affects our understanding of language behavior religiously and ethnically.

Students will be introduced to basic concepts of linguistics with an emphasis on descriptive linguistics and sociolinguistics. Students will be exposed to sociolinguistic methods to examine the relationship between language and religion, language and nationalism, language and power, language and ethnicity, language and gender, and language and education.

The course includes lectures, discussions, recitations and a field trip.

Desired Outcomes
Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:

- Critically examine the concepts of language, dialect, sociolect, religiolect, ethnolect and the connection between them.
- Develop new thinking and understanding of languages and dialects.
- Critically analyze the mechanism of language change.
- Describe and decipher the International Phonetic Alphabet and its application to American English.
- Critically understand the concepts of religion and ethnicity and their relations to language
- Critically develop skills in sociolinguistic field work and make connections between language and gender; language and age; language and religion; language and socioeconomics, and more.
- Describe and analyze the notions of religiolect, including Jewish English; Musilm English and Christianese (=Christian English).

Assessment Components

I. Regular **attendance and participation** are essential for the creation of a stable, stimulating learning environment. Each unexcused absence will result in a reduction of your final grade. You will be held responsible for all material presented in class, as well as all reading assignments. Because class discussion will revolve around the readings, you will be expected to complete all of the reading in a thoughtful way before each class.

This is how the participation grade is determined:

a. Quantity (regular participation in classroom discussions).

b. Quality (comments show understanding of and engagement with the material).

c. Evidence of preparation: reading in an engaged way and answering **guiding reading questions** on the readings in writing.

d. Overall contribution to the class discussions (not overbearing, not distracted, no inappropriate use of electronics, contributes positively to the class vibe) and written discussions in classes.

e. Presentation for Assignment #3.

II. Assignments:

- Assignment #1: Language, race, religion and identity autobiography (2 pages).
- Assignment #2: Linguistic interview (3–4 pages).
- Assignment #3: (in groups): Analysis of a film or TV show, focusing on issues of language and identity (5–6 pages) [in lieu of a final].

III. Mid-Term Quiz and Take-Home Exercise

**Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component results in failure of the class.**

Grading:

Your grade in the course will be calculated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepared class participation</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation of Assignment #3</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Guiding Questions</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing assignments</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Assignment #1</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Assignment #2</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Assignment #3</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm quiz and take-home exercise</td>
<td>20%</td>
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</tbody>
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Assessment Expectations

**Grade A:** Active participation, excellent oral and written work, originality of thought

**Grade B:** Active participation, good oral and written work

**Grade C:** Active participation, complete oral and written work

**Grade D:** Participation, complete oral and written work

**Grade F:** Incomplete participation or work
| Grade conversion | A=94-100  
|                 | A-=90-93  
|                 | B+=87-89  
|                 | B=84-86   
|                 | B-=80-83  
|                 | C+=77-79  
|                 | C=74-76   
|                 | C-=70-73  
|                 | D+=67-69  
|                 | D=65-66   
|                 | F=below 65 |

| Grading Policy | No-shows for presentations in class and assignments due after the deadline without requesting an extension may receive zero grades. |

| Attendance Policy | **NYU Policy on Religious Holidays states**  
|                  | 1. Students who anticipate being absent because of any religious observance should, whenever possible, notify the instructor in advance of such anticipated absence.  
|                  | 2. Whenever feasible, examinations and assignment deadlines should not be scheduled on religious holidays. Any student absent from class because of his/her religious beliefs shall not be penalized for any class, examination, or assignment deadline missed on that day or days. In the event that examinations or assignment deadlines are scheduled on a religious holiday, any student who is unable to attend class shall be permitted the opportunity to make up any examination or to extend any assignment deadline missed on that day or days.  
|                  | 3. That no adverse or prejudicial effects shall result to any student who avails him/herself of the provisions of the resolution.  
|                  | 4. A violation of these policies and principles shall permit any aggrieved student to bring forward a grievance, provided under the University Grievance Procedure. |

| Late Submission of Work | All works must be submitted on time unless you have received an explicit extension. Any late submission may result in grade deduction at the sole discretion of the instructor. |

| Plagiarism Policy | Plagiarism is the presentation of another person’s words, ideas, judgment, images or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Plagiarism constitutes an academic offence for which you can be disciplined. Punishment may include a failing grade, suspension or expulsion. In all confirmed cases, a report will be sent to the student’s Dean. |

| Required Text(s) | Selected chapters from:  
|                  | 4. Readings are available on Classes.  

*Disclaimer note:* some of the films and the materials to be studied in class may include “R-rated” themes and language. This is a linguistic/sociolinguistic course and as such, we need to investigate, at times, taboo words and unusual (“not PC”) use of language. We are not using such language casually; we investigate its sociolinguistic use and meaning.
It is hard to overestimate the importance of the internet to the build up of contemporary knowledge of the world around us. But it needs to be used wisely. This means that one must be selective and careful when relating to internet-based sources, identifying and distinguishing opinions from facts, and journalism from academics. One should make clear reference to internet sources, allowing the reader the opportunity to consult these resources as and if required. As with all sources of information, use the internet critically.

Please also note that the ‘world-wide web’ – www – exists in many languages. Many sources about language, for instance, will be aimed at the general public and, as noted above, you need to develop critical skills to differentiate between myths and academic arguments.
Week 1

September 2  
Introduction  
What is Linguistics and what is Sociolinguistics?  
What are languages, dialects, religiolects, and ethnolects?  
What is “correct” language?  
Speech varieties  

Readings:  
Yule, chapter 18, pp. 264–282.

Week 2

September 16  
Language and Dialects  
The dialects of English  
English in New York City and in the US  
Migration and Language  

Film:  
Do you speak American?  

Video:  
2 video clips to be shown in class: Saturday Night Live – Leslie Jones and Louis C.K. – This is How I Talk; second clip-a strange wedding:  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8PXvqYpGCM  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cbwr37tHu24  

Readings:  

Reading Questions 1 (to be submitted):  
• What are the properties of American English? How do you respond to Prince Charles’ speech about American English in March 1995? (Kövecses)  
• Write up activity 1.2 on p, 10 (Mooney and Evans)  
• Think of 5 characteristics that distinguish your own English; if you are not a native speaker of English, think of specific characteristics that distinguish your own language

Week 3

September 23  
Language, Religion, Ethnicity, and identity  
What is Religion? What is Ethnicity? What is their connection to language? How do they draw boundaries through the use of language? Are the boundaries firm?  
Language and identity autobiographies  

Readings:  

Video:  
Benor on Language and Religion: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0Lu1UYUlZU  
Students’ present in class  
Preparations in class for assignments #1
Week 4

October 7

*Linguistics and Phonetics*

The disciplines of linguistics
Introduction to IPA
The sounds of language; IPA and its application to English

**Readings:**


***Reading Questions 2*** (to be submitted):

- Exercises 2–4 on p. 37

Assignment #1 is due

Week 5

October 14

*Review and Test*

IPA review
Use of vowels in Bernie Sander’s speech:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waSXbCkuL8

***Reading Questions 3*** (to be submitted):

- Exercises 5–6 on p. 37 and handouts in class.

Week 6

*October 18

**Please notice:** This class is on Sunday because of the High Holidays

*Linguistic Landscape*

So far, we have looked at *what is language?* We now turn to investigate *where is language?* Language is constantly around us. Recently, linguists have become particularly interested in the use of language in the everyday semiotic landscape, in what might normally be considered banal or mundane contexts. Linguistic Landscape (LL) refers to language displayed in public spaces on signs, advertisements, instructions, buildings, streets, billboards, etc. *Language* within LL refers not only to written forms but also to other sources that interact in public spaces such as images, video, graffiti, moving advertisements, sounds (‘sound-scapes’), and even people and buildings. Furthermore, LL considers multilingualism; ideologies that signs may carry and the division between online and offline linguistic landscape.

**Possible walk to a near-by neighborhoods to explore Linguistic Landscape. Please bring along digital cameras (or smart phones) to record examples of LL.

**Readings:**

*Language, Society and Power*, 86–107 (Linguistic landscapes)

***Reading questions 4*** (to be submitted):

- Complete exercise 5.5 (p. 103) using information and analysis from the chapter
Week 7

October 21  

Language variation  
How do we study the connection between language and gender? What is sex and what is gender and how are they related to language use?
How do we study language and age? Language and class? Language and religion? Do people use language differently if they are of different ages? Different religions? Different socioeconomics?

This session will be partly led by students; details in class.

Readings:  
Language, Society and Power, 108–130. (Language and gender)  
Language, Society and Power, 157–176. (Language and age)  
Recommended: Language, Society and Power, 177–197. (Language, class and symbolic capital)

Reading questions 5 (to be submitted):  
Complete exercise 6.4 (p. 114); 6.7 (p. 124); 8.7 (p. 170); and 8.8 (p. 176), using information and analysis from the chapter

Test #1

Week 8

October 28  

Language change  
How does it happen? Does it have to happen? Why do we view it so negatively?  
How do linguists analyze it?

Readings:  
McWhorter, John. The Word on the Street: Fact and Fable about American English, chapters 1–2, pp. 7–58.

Assignment #2 is due

Week 9

November 4  

Standard language ideology, language discrimination  
What is standard language? Is this simply a dialect with power? How does validating the importance of standard language strengthen social order? What is, in fact, language discrimination and how is it connected to standard language? What is the language subordination order?

Readings:  
The shibboleth story; The parsley massacre

Reading questions 6 (to be submitted):  
- Read “Help for today’s Eliza Doolittles,” a newspaper article that appeared in the Christian Science Monitor (Gardner 1999). How does this article demonstrate the language subordination process? What steps are used? Why is the tone relevant?
- In Kyomugisha v. Clowney and the University of Wisconsin, Clowney asked the following question during her deposition: “How about the burden on the other person to go and take courses and study and to be understood as well why should the burden be on the recipient?” How would you characterize Clowney’s position? How do you think someone in her position might fail to see the flaws in her arguments?
Week 10

November 11  
*Language and Ethnicity*

How is language manifested in various ethnicities? What is the connection between language and ethnicity?

African American English (AAE)

**Film:**

The Story of English, Part 5: *Black on White*

The Blaccent: What Does It Mean to Sound Black? (John McWhorter on Lexicon Valley, episode 84)

[http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon_valley/2016/05/blaccent_is_there_such_a_thing_a_sounding_black.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon_valley/2016/05/blaccent_is_there_such_a_thing_a_sounding_black.html)

**Readings:**

*English with an Accent*, p. 183 (Table 10.1).


**Reading questions 7** (to be submitted):

- Write up several characteristics of AAE in phonetics, morphology and syntax

Week 11

November 18  
*Language and Religion I*

The Jewish Linguistic Spectrum (Jewish English in New York City)

**Film:**

Watch a clip about Jewish English: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsprndwjSzQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsprndwjSzQ)

**Readings:**


**Reading questions 8** (to be submitted):

- What is the Jewish Linguistic Spectrum according to Hary?

What are distinctiveness and repertoire according to Benor and how do they fit into the larger picture of the phenomenon of Jewish language varieties?

Week 12

November 25  
*No class*

Take-Home Exercise is due

Week 13

December 2  
*Language and Religion II*

Application to Christian and Muslim language varieties

*Christianese* in the US


Week 14

December 9

*Summary*

Students’ presentations

Summary of course

Assignment: Assignment #3 is due
Assignments

Assignment #1 (2 pages): [due: October 7]
Describe your identity in terms of race/ethnicity (and religion, if applicable) and other dimensions, and discuss how it relates to language.

To help you get started, consider some of these guiding questions:

Who are you in relation to the social categories of race and ethnicity, as well as gender, age, socioeconomic status, sexuality, religion, location, and/or ancestral heritage? Which of these categories are important to how you see yourself and how you think you are viewed by others? Why and how? What role does language play in how you see yourself and how others see you? What roles do physical appearance, music, home decoration, and/or food play? What strategies do you use to deal with any tensions between multiple aspects of your identity?

We are not seeking straight answers to these questions; they are merely here to guide you in addressing the underlined prompt above. If race/ethnicity/religion are not central to how you understand your identity, you can focus more on other dimensions (gender, age, etc.); even so, please make sure to discuss your race/ethnicity/religion, the way you talk, and how you differ from people of other racial/ethnic/religious groups. We are looking for evidence that you absorbed the concepts covered in class and are thinking deeply about race, ethnicity, religion, identity, and language. Be yourself, and be creative. This paper could take the form of an essay, a letter, a dramatic monologue or dialogue, a poem, or something else. Be concrete, and include specific anecdotes or interactions. Don’t just say “I speak differently” or “she used Ebonics.” Give examples of specific linguistic features (e.g., “She said things like, ‘They goin’ home’”). Finally, make sure to be clear and concise in your writing.

After you write the paper, set it aside and come back with fresh eyes to edit it twice (if possible), removing extraneous words, phrases, and even paragraphs.

You will be graded using the following rubrics:
(30 points) Discussion of identity, ethnicity, religion, and language demonstrates understanding of early class concepts
(20 points) Structure, including unifying argument or concept, logical organization, and appropriate transitions
(20 points) Writing style: clarity, conciseness, word choice, no repetition or unnecessary words
(20 points) Mechanics: grammar, tense, punctuation, spelling, title, name, page numbers
(10 points) Creativity and engaging writing

Assignment #2 (3–4 pages): [due: October 28]
Conduct an interview of a person whose first language is something other than English and whose language background is different from yours. This could be a friend of yours, someone in this class (each student should be interviewed by only one person!), a neighbor, someone who works at a store you go to, a person we meet in our co-curricular activities, etc.

Ask this person to tell you a linguistic history of his or her life. These are some possible questions:

- What language or languages were spoken in her household as a child?
- What language or languages did he learn at home, at school, and at other relevant points in his life?
- If she was born in another country, what were the circumstances of her coming here?
- When did he start to learn English, and how?
- If she is not or was not fluent in English at some point while in the US, did she (or does she) suffer from this?
- What role do his other languages play in his life now?
- Which languages can she write?
- If she grew up here, what degree of education did she get in her other language(s)?
- Is his way of speaking his other language very different from the language as spoken in his country of heritage? In what ways is it different? How does he feel about this?
- If she has children, or young siblings, are they learning other languages or English only? Does she want them to know her childhood language?
- What does he think about his other language(s)? What do they mean to him?
If she is now bilingual, what does her bilingualism mean to her?

If he immigrated with his parents, did he or does he play the role of translator and go-between for his family? How did this affect his life? What is the future of his mother tongue, at least within his family?

Is there something special about his or her language?

You don’t have to ask all of the questions above. Let the person you are interviewing guide your questioning: there may be other questions that are relevant specifically to this person’s story. You should take copious notes during this interview, or if you like, record it and then write your report based on the recording. Begin your report with an introduction describing who this person is (please do not give her real name; we would like to make sure that people retain their privacy), and what the circumstances are that led you to interview her. The report can be 4–5 pages long, and if you are able to record it, you may include quotations from the person with whom you worked.

Assignment #3 (in groups; 5–6 pages): [due: December 9]

Analysis of a film or TV show, focusing on issues of language and identity, to be presented in class and written up in 6–7 pages. This assignment is to be done in groups. Your essay should have a unifying thesis about ethnicity, identity, inter-group relations, transitions, or some combination of these elements, and you should support this thesis in part with analysis of language. Here are some questions you might consider as you work on your analysis:

- How does your selected work use language to represent an ethnic, immigrant, or other social group or the relations between groups?
- How do the characters change over the course of the film? Do they change their sense of self? Do they progress from one class/group/society into another?
- How are the characters depicted as belonging to two or more groups? Do they experience a sense of double consciousness? Do they feel as if they are stuck in a borderlands?
- How does the film portray conflict between groups or generations?

As part of your analysis, please discuss at least two of the following sociolinguistic phenomena (which will be discussed and mentioned in class) as they are portrayed in your selected work:

- Inter-speaker variation: Sociolinguistic variation among characters according to socio-economic class, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, generation from immigration, etc.
- Intra-speaker variation: Individual style shifting or code switching (according to situation, audience, or topic) used to negotiate identities
- Metalinguistic conversation: Conversation about language that represents (possibly conflicting) language ideologies and/or language discrimination

Please include some linguistic analysis: when discussing inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation, please give examples of distinctive features, offering quotes as evidence where appropriate. If any of the readings we have done are relevant to your analysis, please cite them.

Some ideas for films/shows to choose from: (however, you can propose many other possibilities)

Orange is the New Black, Transparent, Master of None, Blackish, Fresh Off the Boat, Modern Family, Down to Earth, Barbershop, My Big Fat Greek Wedding, Bringing Down the House, Spanglish, Undercover Brother, Driving Miss Daisy, Clueless, Malibu’s Most Wanted, The Joy Luck Club, Smoke Signals, The Lion King, A Shark Tale, Good Will Hunting, Annie Hall, West Side Story, Real Women Have Curves, Do the Right Thing, Avalon, The Producers, Dreamkeeper, Bamboozled, Mi Familia, American Desi, Boys Don’t Cry, Better Luck Tomorrow, Jungle Fever, My Cousin Vinny, Eight Mile, Catfish in Black Bean Sauce, The Debut, The Namesake, Harold and Kumar (Whitecastle or Guantanamo).

Presentation stemming from Assignment #3:

In groups, students will summarize their analysis, present excerpts from the film and offer questions for class discussion. The entire presentation (including discussion) should not last more than 15 minutes. Students should practice their presentations in advance.
Proposals for Assignment #3:
Each group will send the following information:
1. People who will be working on the project together
2. Name of film/show #1
   a. Ethnic/social group(s) it deals with
   b. Some sociolinguistic phenomena you would discuss

Contribution Evaluation of Assignment #3:
Students will evaluate their own contributions to the paper/presentation and those of their partners
(2–3 sentences).

Grading of the paper:
(40 points) Examines identity and language (at least two sociolinguistic phenomena), shows deep understanding of class concepts
(20 points) Analysis, arguments, evidence from the texts
(20 points) Structure, including unifying thesis, logical organization, and appropriate transitions
(10 points) Writing style: clarity, conciseness, word choice, no repetition or unnecessary words
(10 points) Mechanics: grammar, tense, punctuation, spelling, title, name, page numbers

Classroom Etiquette
Please turn off all cell phones in class. Do not use computers unless directly related to class work.

Your Instructor
I am a Professor at the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and the Director of NYU Tel Aviv. Until 2014 I was a Professor of Hebrew, Arabic, and Linguistics and the Director of the Program in Linguistics at Emory University. I am the author of Multiglossia in Judeo-Arabic (1992), Translating Religion (2009) and Daily Life in Israel (2012, with R. Adler). I am also the editor and co-editor of Judaism and Islam (2000), Corpus Linguistics and Modern Hebrew (2003), and Esoteric and Exoteric Aspects in Judeo-Arabic Culture in 2006. I also published over 50 articles and book reviews on Judeo-Arabic, as well as Arabic and Hebrew linguistics, and has lectured widely in Europe, Israel, Egypt and North America. During the fall, my co-edited volume, Languages in Jewish Communities, Past and Present (Berlin: E. J. Verlag Walter de Gruyter) will appear and we may have a celebration for it in November, to which you will be invited.

My research concentrates on Language and Religion, including Jewish language varieties in general and Judeo-Arabic in particular; Jews in the Islamic world; politics of Arabic language use in Israeli society; corpus linguistics; language and ethnicity; dialectology; and sociolinguistics. I have recently focused my research on issues such as why and how Jews (and for that matter, Christians and Muslims as well) speak and write differently from people who are not Jews (or Christians and Muslims). I am working now on completing my book, Sacred Texts in Egyptian Judeo-Arabic. Furthermore, I am a strong believer in Global Education. During my career I created semester programs in Israel, Prague and Istanbul and summer programs touring Europe and Israel while developing a “hands-on” method to teach language use and history on location. I am currently the Director of NYU Tel Aviv using all these methods there.

Bibliographical List
The following bibliography is important for our seminar. You will be asked to read selected chapters from the following list; some readings are recommended and you will probably use other readings to guide you through in your assignments and in your final project.


O’Grady et al. *Contemporary Linguistics.*
