

## LING-GA 2530 Linguistic Variation Syllabus

### 1. Course & instructor logistics

**Time & place** M 2–4:45p, Linguistics Department, 10 Washington Pl. Rm. 104

**Instructors** Gregory R. Guy  
[gregory.guy@nyu.edu](mailto:gregory.guy@nyu.edu)

Laurel MacKenzie  
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**Office hours** By appointment

By appointment via  
<https://calendly.com/laurel-mackenzie>

### 2. Course description and goals

This course is an intensive graduate-level introduction to the quantitative study of variation in language. The course has two goals:

1. Students will gain an understanding of some of the fundamental questions in variationist sociolinguistics, concerning how variation in language is structured and how it is represented formally.
2. Students will gain currency in methods for the analysis of variationist sociolinguistic data. This comprises quantitative and statistical techniques and the processing of corpus data.

In class, we will learn by reading and by doing. We will read and discuss classic and recent papers in the field addressing the two points above. Throughout the semester, we'll work on a group project studying the structure of a particular linguistic variable decided on by the class. Ideally, this will culminate in a co-written abstract to be submitted to a conference such as [NWAV 49](#) (deadline: May 15).

### 3. Course requirements

- **Readings and participation (10%).** All participants are expected to do the assigned reading and to participate in the discussion of the material in class. Readings that are not linked from the syllabus below are available on the NYU Classes page for this course. **Added 2/8:** All participants will also be expected to post questions about the week's reading to our NYU Classes discussion board, and to present a paper at some point during the semester.
- **Assignments (40%).** Approximately every two weeks, connected to the readings and/or the group project.
- **Individual project (50%).** Research some topic of interest to you, whether a continuation of the group project or something else. This can take the shape of a small empirical study, a synthesis of existing work, or a proposal for future research with some pilot data. Talk to Greg and/or Laurel at some point **by the middle of March** about your project idea. Give us a brief (10 minutes + 5 for questions) overview of your project **in the final class session**. Write up your findings in a paper (5–10pp) to be due on **5/17**.

#### 4. Syllabus

*This is a tentative syllabus. We may speed up, slow down, or move/change things as needed. Initials after each topic reflect the faculty member(s) leading the discussion that day.*

- Feb. 1 Intro & overview: what is variation, why study it. Identifying a variable for the class project. (GG & LM)  
Reading: Guy 2011, Labov 2006, Bayley 2013 up until the section “Extending the Variationist Paradigm”. **Additional reading for students with no background in statistics:** Work your way through ch. 1, 2, 4, 9, 7, and 12 in Levshina (2015). Additionally, work your way through the three days of [Betsy Sneller’s R tutorial](#). (This may fit best between ch. 2 & 4 of Levshina.) Set a goal to try to get through all of this by the middle of the semester.
- Feb. 8 Foundations of variation theory. Inherent variability, orderly heterogeneity. *Langue* and *parole*, competence and performance, grammar and usage. (GG)  
Reading: Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968; Newmeyer-Guy debate in *Language* (Letters, 2005, ’06, ’07)
- Feb. 18 **Note Thursday class meeting!** The sociolinguistic variable. Methods of data collection, corpora, experimentation. (LM)  
Reading: Wolfram 1993, Rickford et al. 1991, Dinkin 2016
- Feb. 22 Extending the sociolinguistic variable beyond phonology. Course project planning. (LM)  
Reading: Lavandera 1978, Labov 1978, Romaine 1984 (**just read up to pg. 422**)
- Mar. 1 Formalizing variation: variable rules, competition. (LM, w/presentation by SG)  
Reading: Cedergren & Sankoff 1974 (fine to skim §4–8), Kroch 1994 §1–3 and 6, Embick 2008
- Mar. 8 Quantifying the grammar: deterministic vs. probabilistic models. Usage-based models. Probabilistic OT models. Mathematical models of constraints. Logistic regression. Fixed & random effects. (GG)  
Reading: Sankoff 1978, Bybee 2002, Rousseau and Sankoff 1978, documentation on Goldvarb, Rbrul
- Mar. 15 The quantitative coherence of the speech community. The individual/community interface; language and identity. (GG)  
Reading: Guy 1980, Guy (ms Ch. 7, section 2, pp. 17-38), Guy ‘Variation and Change,’ §3.1
- Mar. 22 Project session. (GG & LM)
- Mar. 29 Variation and change; the dynamics of language change in progress; modeling change in the grammar; the constant rate hypothesis. (GG)  
Reading: Guy et al. 1986, Kroch 1989; Guy ‘Variation and Change’ §4.
- Apr. 5 Conditioning of variation, with a special focus on lexical frequency. (LM)  
Reading: Tamminga, MacKenzie, & Embick 2016, Coetzee & Kawahara 2013

- Apr. 12 Conditioning of variation, continued: social evaluation, change. (LM)  
Reading: Bender 2005, MacKenzie 2019
- Apr. 19 **No class! "Spring break"**
- Apr. 26 Variation and linguistic theory: formal vs. functional explanation. (GG)  
Reading: Guy 1996, Sankoff and Labov 1979
- May 3 Quantitative argumentation. Variable lexical phonology and the exponential model.  
Quantitative evidence about the mental grammar. (GG)  
Reading: Guy 1991, Guy & Boyd 1989
- May 10 Case studies connecting quantitative data & grammatical representation of variation. Student  
research reports. (LM)  
Reading: MacKenzie 2020, MacKenzie & Tamminga to appear