Language and Identity
Humanities Seminars Program Fall 2022
Dr. Grace E. Fielder

All lectures and discussions are conducted in English.

Seminar Description
In this course we will explore the relationship between language and identity, that is, how individual and group identities interact with directly observable language use in everyday lives. Language can be used to indicate belonging/not belonging to a particular community, and this “self vs. other” distinction is both produced by speakers and interpreted by listeners. One of the major goals of sociolinguistics is to discover how specific “ways of speaking” become associated with particular groups of people, and how “ways of speaking” can be deployed not only to construct the speaker’s own identity but also to project identity on others.

Language was a critical part of the process of 19th century nation-building in which a “people” could be identified and thus assigned to a specific geographic territory, while in the 20th and 21st centuries the disintegration of empires has resulted in new nations and “new” languages. The disintegration of the USSR into a post-colonial landscape is one salient example. Pronoun use has become a hotly debated issues as well. Norwegian dictionaries will soon have a new gender-neutral pronoun "hen" in addition to the masculine "han" and feminine "hun". Despite the fact that the pronoun “they” has been used in English literature as a singular pronoun since the 14th century, today it is often seen as an abberation and a sign of the corruption of the English language. Are such controversies truly just about language? If language reflects how we perceive and understand the world around us, does changing language then actually change how we perceive and understand the world and others in it?

This course recognizes language as a lens through which a variety of phenomena in the social, political and cultural life of humans around the world can be explored. Because language is so often taken for granted, many of the ways in which it is deployed for identity work are often invisible. Upon closer examination, however, there are definite patterns that emerge and provide insights not only into language but into human nature itself. Seeking out these patterns between language and identity will be our goal as we read about different language issues and use different theoretical lenses to better understand them. Topics to be investigated include how language intersects with gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, age and class in a variety of contexts including everyday interaction, advertising, political speech, social media and literature.

The class format will be primarily discussion of the assigned readings with some short presentations on specific topics. Each week students will submit by email a written discussion question based on the readings 24 hours before the class meeting time. In addition each student will bring to class for discussion a real life example of the interaction of language and identity.
that they have observed or read about (for example, an illustration of one of the topics from the readings).

The following readings represent the “game plan” and are subject to change depending on a variety of factors including new developments in the real world as well as student interests.

For the first day of class, please write a linguistic autobiography of about a page (guidelines are provided in the “Linguistic Autobiography Assignment” in Week One Folder).

**Week One: Language & National Identity**


**Recommended**

Vladimir Putin 2021. "On The Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians". [17 pages]

**Week Two: Pronouns**


**Recommended:**


**Week Three: Gender**

1. Chapter 1 from Danesi 2018 *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things: An Introduction to Semiotics*. Springer [23 pages].


**Week Four: Race & Ethnicity**


**Week Five: Accents & Dialects**