

# LING 882: Language Acquisition Seminar

Language Variation and Language Acquisition



## Basic Course Information

**Schedule:** W 7:20-10 pm  
**Classroom:** Thompson Hall 1017  
**Professor:** Dr. Cynthia Lukyanenko  
**Email:** [clukyane@gmu.edu](mailto:clukyane@gmu.edu)  
**Office Hours:** Mondays 3-4:30 pm  
**Office:** Horizon Hall 3134 (or [on Zoom](#))

*[image: "Moonglow", quilt by Carol Ann Taylor]*

## Course Description

Language includes a lot of consistency – that’s why we can come up rules for semantics, syntax, morphology and phonology - but also a lot of variability. We’ll explore the intersection of the literature on linguistic variation and child language acquisition: What does variability look like in children’s input? In children’s language use? What does that tell us about how children learn language? About how variation in language persists from generation to generation? We’ll touch on topics in sociolinguistics and acquisition theory, explore corpus and experimental research, and think about variation at multiple levels of linguistic analysis.

## Course Goals

After completing this course, students should:

- Have a good understanding of the main themes and questions in the study of language acquisition and variation.
- Be able to effectively navigate the literature: e.g., find new papers on specific subtopics.
- Be able to think critically about primary research on the development of linguistic variation: e.g., evaluate methods decisions, relate new findings to prior results.

## Course Format

The course will be in-person. However, acknowledging the ongoing pandemic, I will do my best to provide workable virtual attendance options for days when you don’t pass the Health Check, but feel well enough to participate. The Blackboard site will be crucial. All assignments will be turned in on Blackboard, and course documents, readings, and other resources will be posted there.

## Student Responsibilities

The goal of this class is to delve deeply into a literature. I will lead discussion for the first two weeks to give an introduction and some general background. After that, responsibility for leading discussion will rotate. You are responsible for reading the assigned material every week, and some weeks for presenting a paper and leading discussion. Expect to ask questions, to think things through as a class, and to have input into what topics get covered.

## Textbook

There is no textbook. Readings will all be from the primary and secondary literature, and will be provided in PDF format on Blackboard at least 2 weeks before we discuss them.

## Evaluation

Over the semester, I want you to engage deeply with the literature we're exploring. By the later part of the semester I want to see that you are able to synthesize information from multiple papers to build a more nuanced understanding of a subtopic. Your grade will be based on the discussions you lead and a literature review paper.

## Course Schedule

### Schedule of Topics

Wk	Date	Content	Due (Friday at noon)
1	W Jan 26	Introduction: Linguistic Variation	
2	W Feb 2		
3	W Feb 9	Variation in Child & Child-Directed Language	
4	W Feb 16		
5	W Feb 23		Topic Ideas
6	W Mar 2	NO CLASS - Conferences	
7	W Mar 9	Variation in Child & Child-Directed Language	Topic & Initial Bibliography
8	W Mar 16	SPRING BREAK	
9	W Mar 23	Artificial Language Learning Studies	Bibliography & Outline [optional]
10	W Mar 30		
11	W Apr 6	NO CLASS – Writing Day/Conferences	
12	W Apr 13	Topic TBD: Class Choice	Manuscript Due
13	W Apr 20		Reviewer Report Due
14	W Apr 27	Broader Impacts: Education, Language	
15	W May 4	Disorder Diagnosis	
16	W May 11	EXAM WEEK	Revise & Resubmit due

This schedule is tentative and may be updated as we progress through the semester. The alignment of topics with weeks may change, due dates are unlikely to change. An up-to-date version will always be available in the syllabus on Blackboard.

### Important Dates

Last day to add	Jan 31
Last day to drop with full tuition refund	Feb 7
No class – Spring Break	Mar 14-20
Selective withdrawal period ends	Apr 11
Last day of classes for Spring 2022	May 7

## Grading and Evaluation

### Goals

Priorities in this class are engagement and critical thinking. I encourage you to save perfectionism for other classes and engage in messy speculation, lots of wondering and exploration, and creative connection-making.

## Components

### Discussions Led

You will be leading discussion of 7-8 papers over the course of the semester. Each presentation will be rated on a scale of 1-3.

3 = well-prepared: clearly engaged with paper, includes brief summary, discussion prompt, visual

2 = somewhat prepared: clearly read paper, includes summary and a discussion prompt or visual

1 = unprepared: appears to have skimmed paper, presentation is superficial

Visuals can include a simple handout or a few slides and do not need to be elaborate. You should upload them to the shared folder before class.

### Literature Review

The major assignment in this class is a literature review. You'll choose a topic, find related papers and write a literature review. Your review should cover 5-8 core papers on your topic that are discussed in some detail, and include an additional 5-8 peripheral citations.

The literature review includes 5 assignments: Topic Ideas, Topic Choice and Initial Bibliography, Manuscript, Reviewer Report, and Revise & Resubmit. Optionally, you may also turn in an outline for feedback before submitting your manuscript. The manuscript-review-revision sequence introduces you to academic publishing norms. Your final version (Revise & Resubmit) will be graded on the following scale:

**Accept/Minor Revisions** = The reviewers' comments have been adequately addressed. There may be a few small issues still, but the paper is strong and they would be easy to address.

**Major Revisions** = The reviewers' comments have not been adequately addressed or major new issues have been introduced. The paper is promising, but still needs substantial work.

**Reject** = The reviewers' comments have not been adequately addressed or major new issues have been introduced. The paper is not promising in its current form and needs rewriting and/or rethinking.

### How I'll Grade

Your final grade is determined using a threshold system. You get the highest grade for which you have completed all the requirements in the table below.

I won't be giving minuses. You can earn a B+ by meeting the criteria for an A in one area. An A+ can be earned with exceptional work in either area.

To get	Discussions Led	Lit Review
A	at least six 3s no 1s	all 5 assignments final: accepted/minor rev.
B	at least four 3s max one 1	at least 4 assignments final: major revision
C	at least one 3 max four 1s	at least 2 assignments final: major revision
F	doesn't meet criteria for C	doesn't meet criteria for C

## Other Course Policies

### A Selection of Things I To Which Have Absolutely No Objection

Children with you during class or office hours. Laptops in class for notetaking and collaboration. Stepping out of class when necessary. Study groups. Lots of questions. Respectful disagreement. If you're being considerate of me and your classmates, you're fine.

### **Absences & Extensions**

**Absences** If you are sick, I expect you to stay home, even if it's just the sniffles. If you're up to it, you should attend virtually. If you're not, rest up and get better. Either way, don't infect your classmates. Try to avoid absences for other reasons. Class is only once a week, so missing a class means missing your best opportunity to engage with a lot of material, as well as discussion time where your presence and thoughts are important to the group. If you are going to miss class or would like to attend virtually, please email me ahead of time, so that I can plan our session accordingly.

**Extensions.** If you need more time to complete an assignment, just let me know. We will choose a reasonable new due date together. Your work will be graded for full credit. Please email me, even if we discuss it in office hours, so that I have it in writing and don't forget!

Deadlines that will be difficult to extend and should be respected if at all possible include: Manuscript, Reviewer Report and Revise & Resubmit.

### **Communication**

There are lots of ways to stay in touch! Your responsibilities are (1) to ask questions and meet with me about assignments and course content *before* they've stressed you out and (2) to check your email at least daily, since I will occasionally send email to your Mason account with important information.

**Office Hours** These times are set aside for you. If you'd like to meet for any reason (questions, grade concerns, to say hi, etc.) just pop in!

**Email** I usually respond within a few hours during the workday, but if you email in the evening or on the weekend (which you should feel free to do), I probably won't see it before the next weekday around 11 am.

### **Access and Accommodations**

I am committed to providing an accessible learning context that everyone can participate in. This isn't only for students with disabilities, but also for those with caretaking responsibilities, difficult home contexts, or in any other situation that might make class more challenging.

All students should feel free to take breaks during class as needed: to visit the restroom, get some water, or just to refocus. I ask that you minimize distraction and disruption for your classmates by, if possible, leaving and returning quietly, and timing your breaks to coincide with transition points.

I plan to provide materials in accessible formats (e.g., screen-reader friendly, captioned) and to check the accessibility of outside material I link to. If I mess up and link to something inaccessible, or if my materials aren't accessible to you, please let me know so I can fix it!

If there are other specific accommodations you would find helpful, please let me know (before or after class, during office hours, in a private meeting, or by email). Small accommodations (e.g., content warnings) will be happily and promptly made. Larger accommodations (e.g., assignments turned in as audio recordings) will also be happily and promptly made to the best of my ability but should be supported by documentation from the Disability Services. They can be reached at (703) 993-2474, [ods@gmu.edu](mailto:ods@gmu.edu) or <https://ds.gmu.edu>. *You do not need to inform me of your disability unless you wish to, only the accommodations you require.*

Any student who experiences barriers to learning in this course is encouraged to contact me.

Language in this section was developed with help from material provided by Project Refocus (<http://www.projectshift-refocus.org/syllabus.htm>) and Dr. Lydia Brown (<https://autistichoya.net/resources/syllabus-language/>)

## **Academic Integrity**

It is expected that students will adhere to the George Mason University Honor Code. The Honor Code reads as follows:

*To promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of the George Mason University community and with the desire for greater academic and personal achievement, we, the student members of the university community, have set forth this honor code: Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work.*

The penalties for academic dishonesty are severe and can include a 0 for the assignment, a failing grade in the course, or further disciplinary action. All suspected honor code violations will be reported.

Be especially careful about plagiarism! Acknowledge contributions. You should, for instance, cite ideas you got from the literature (e.g., “children may achieve high accuracy with some morphemes before others (e.g., Brown, 1973)”), and footnote or otherwise credit ideas from classmates (e.g., “The author thanks A. Rodriguez for pointing out this possible interpretation”). If you’re not sure what counts as plagiarism, just ask!

More information about the Honor Code, including definitions of cheating, lying, and plagiarism, can be found at the Office of Academic Integrity website at <http://oai.gmu.edu>.

## **Diversity and Inclusion**

As you know, George Mason University is an incredibly diverse institution. This course will provide an inclusive environment for learning about the science of language. Please show respect for your fellow students and the experiences and identities they bring to our classroom. Many related resources are available for students at Mason, including through the [Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Multicultural Education](#) (ODIME), [International Programs and Services](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning Resources](#), and the [Military Alliance Program](#).

## **Sexual Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, and Interpersonal Violence**

Your education should be free from all forms of interpersonal harassment and violence. If you have been harassed, assaulted, or subjected to sexual misconduct or any other form of interpersonal violence, please seek assistance.

Please note that as a faculty member and designated “Responsible Employee,” I am required to report all disclosures of sexual assault, interpersonal violence, and stalking to Mason’s Title IX Coordinator per university policy 1412. If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact the [Student Support and Advocacy Center](#) (703-380-1434), [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) (703-993-2380), [Student Health Services](#), or [Mason’s Title IX Coordinator](#) (703-993-8730; [cde@gmu.edu](mailto:cde@gmu.edu)).

## **Coronavirus Resources**

Mason’s website on Coronavirus/COVID-19 is the official source for university updates. It also provides information and resources regarding the university’s response for students, faculty and staff. Please check this webpage regularly for updates. If you have individual concerns about the university’s response, please contact [safety@gmu.edu](mailto:safety@gmu.edu).