

## Short Paper Instructions: Linguistic Biography

LING 140: Language in the US

Spring 2024

In this Short Paper, you will interview a person and write a short biography focusing on their experiences with language. You can submit this kind of paper for either of the Short Paper assignments in the “Power” section of the course. As always, there is no minimum or maximum length, but I expect about 500-750 words (2-3 double-spaced pages).

Choose a person you know and ask if you can interview them for this assignment. They can be anyone other than yourself—a family member, an elder in one of your communities, a friend. If you’ve been wanting to ask someone (your grandma, your roommate) about their life but haven’t gotten the chance, this is an excuse to do so! Find a place and time to meet that makes sense for both of you. Meet in person if possible, or on a video call, or on the phone if necessary.

Before you meet, come up with a list of questions you want to ask. The list below can help you get started, but you’ll need to come up with your own. Try to get the person talking; you can ask questions in any order, skip some, add more, circle back later on—listen and follow their lead. You may choose to record the interview, but **only do so with the person’s explicit permission**; either way, take notes as well. In your paper, you can use the person’s real name or a pseudonym, according to their preference. You can also adjust the level of detail to preserve anonymity as appropriate (e.g. “a commuter town in the suburbs of New York City” instead of “Maplewood, New Jersey”).

Your paper will report the results of your interview. Do not simply list questions and answers—organize what you learned into a coherent paper. Unlike other assignments for this course, you can write in any style that you find appropriate: that might be the style of a formal/academic paper, or something else.

Your paper should reflect the fact that you are taking this class. That might mean referencing specific concepts from the course, or just that you are thinking critically about language, society, and power. You may, but are not required to, explicitly include your own reflection on the person's biography or the process of this assignment. You may, but are not required to, cite scholarly research related to the language varieties or other topics referenced in the interview.

Below are some questions to get you started. You do not need to ask all of these, and you can ask questions that aren't listed here. You should also ask the questions in your own words and in an order that makes sense to you.

- What language(s) do you speak, sign, read, and/or write? What dialects (regional or otherwise) do you identify with?
- In what settings do you use these languages? How has that changed over time?
- What other languages/dialects are present in your family (or family history)? What is your relationship to these varieties?
- What speech communities have you belonged to in your life? How has your language use been affected by these social groups?
- How does the way you use language differ from other people you know? Why do you think that might be?
- Do you use language differently in different settings, or with different groups of people?
- How has your language use changed over time?
- How have other people commented on your language use? In what ways was the commentary positive, negative, or neutral?
- What language beliefs/stereotypes were you raised to believe? What language beliefs/stereotypes do you believe now?
- Do you have childhood memories that involve language? Adult memories?
- How has your language affected your opportunities—your work, your social standing in communities, your relationships with other people?
- What are some places (or communities, or interactions) in which you have felt particularly comfortable in terms of language? Particularly uncomfortable?

### **Grading Rubric**

The rubric for this assignment is intentionally vague, because the submissions may vary considerably. There is no one “right way” to do this assignment. You will be graded according to the following criteria:

***A successful Linguistic Biography will...***

- ... provide basic information about a person’s language experience.
- ... discuss how that person perceives differences in their language use.
- ... illustrate ideas/themes with anecdotes/description/evidence.
- ... organize information in a logical way appropriate to the subject matter.
- ... adopt a style appropriate to the subject matter.

For each of these points, the paper will be rated “2” if it succeeds in this area, “1” if it partially succeeds, and “0” if it does not succeed. Rewrites are welcome and re-graded.