

# Student-directed learning through assignment choice in two linguistics courses

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# Motivation

- Develop grading that:
  - Fairly addressed diverse preparation
  - Encouraged intrinsic motivation
  - Encouraged exploration
- Courses emphasized *having experiences* rather than *learning skills*
  - New for us (as linguists)!

# Context

- Small, highly-selective liberal-arts college
- 10-week terms
- 25-30 students
  - Introduction to Sociolinguistics: 26
  - Language in the US: 29
- No prerequisites
- Students with and without linguistics backgrounds

# Syllabus goals

## Sociolinguistics

- ... be more aware of how language is **used across different contexts** in their own daily lives.
- ... to critically discuss the **reasons for language variation**
- ... to understand and argue the sociolinguistic perspective on **language attitudes**.

## Language in the US

- ... explain similarities and differences among language varieties with respect to the **methods and findings** of historical linguistics and linguistic geography
- ... **quantify linguistic variation to draw inferences about American society**
- ... analyze the use of language to **index systems of power**

# Course structure

## Sociolinguistics

- Daily readings & discussion
- Final project, scaffolded in stages
- 1-2 article presentations
- Choose from:
  - 0-5 article reviews (2-3 pages)
  - 0-2 video essays
  - 0-5 reflections (1-2 pages)
  - 0-3 short papers (~5 pages) from 3 genres

## Language in the US

- Two weeks of linguistic analysis
  - Two practice assignments
  - One problem set
- Daily readings & discussion
- Final proposal, scaffolded in stages
- 5 short papers (~3 pages) from 5 genres

# Sociolinguistics: points accumulation

Assessment	Point for each	Total possible
Article Review (up to 5)	10	50
Video Essay (up to 2)	10	20
Reflection (up to 5)	5	25
Article Presentation (up to 2)	20	40
Short paper (up to 3)	15	45
Final Project	50	50
Total Available:		230

One of each required;  
“Traditional” grading  
(up to 70 pts baseline)

## Sociolinguistics: points to final grades

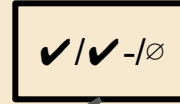
130 and above	A
125-129	A-
120-124	B+
115-119	B
110-114	B-

105-109	C+
100-104	C
95-99	C-
90-94	D
Below 90	F

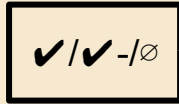
# Language in the US

Your grade will be calculated as follows:

- Practice Assignments and Response Posts: 20%
- Short Papers (6): 50%
- Proposal: 30%
- Of which: Topic Ideas 5%, Annotated Bibliography 5%, Sketch 5%, Final Draft 15%



Simple  
rubric





# Language in the US: sample short paper rubric

## *A successful scholarly response will...*

- ... begin with an introduction outlining the rest of the paper.
- ... summarize the main claims, motivation, and key supporting evidence of the article.
- ... clearly distinguish between the author's ideas and their own ideas.
- ... offer thoughtful responses with supporting reasoning.
- ... organize information into paragraphs with strong topic sentences.

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.

# (Bi)weekly rhythm

## Sociolinguistics

- Weekly theme
- Class Tuesday/Thursday
  - Pre-class readings
  - In-class group discussions
  - Student presentations
- Friday noon: deadline for any assignments for that week's topic

## Language in the US

- Biweekly theme
- Class Tuesday/Thursday
  - Pre-class readings
  - Pre-class response posts
  - In-class group discussions
- Tuesday class: deadline for Short Paper from previous week

# Syllabi

## Sociolinguistics syllabus

### Student A submits:

3 article reviews:	30
3 reflections:	15
1 presentation:	18
2 short papers	30
1 final project	40
total: 133	= A

### Student B submits:

0 article reviews:	0
4 reflections:	20
2 presentations	40
3 short papers	45
1 final project	32
total: 137	=A

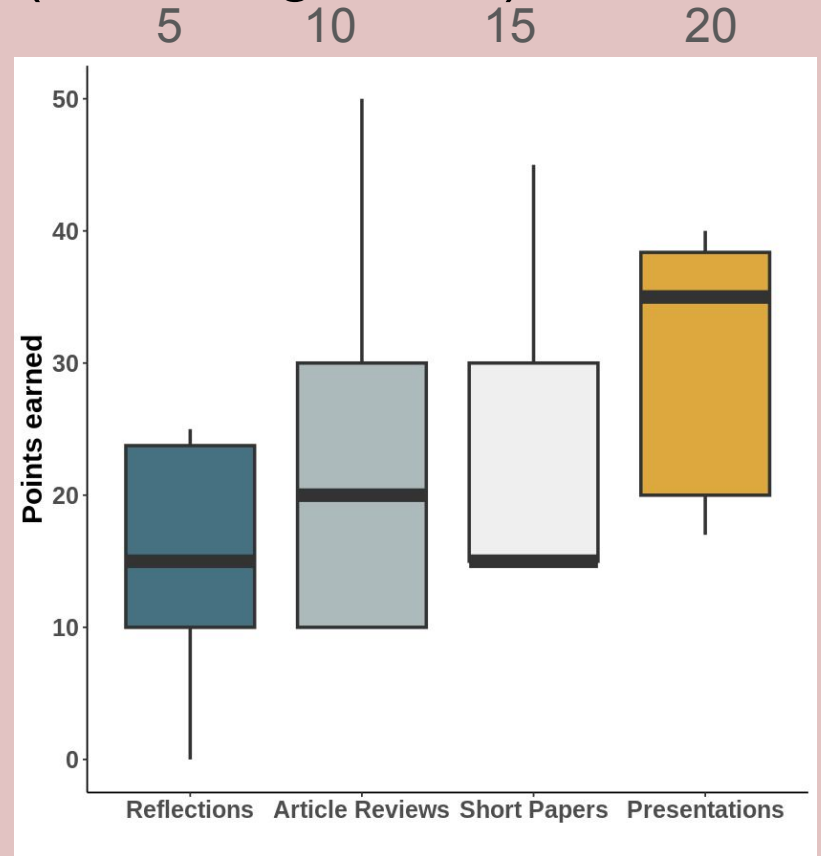
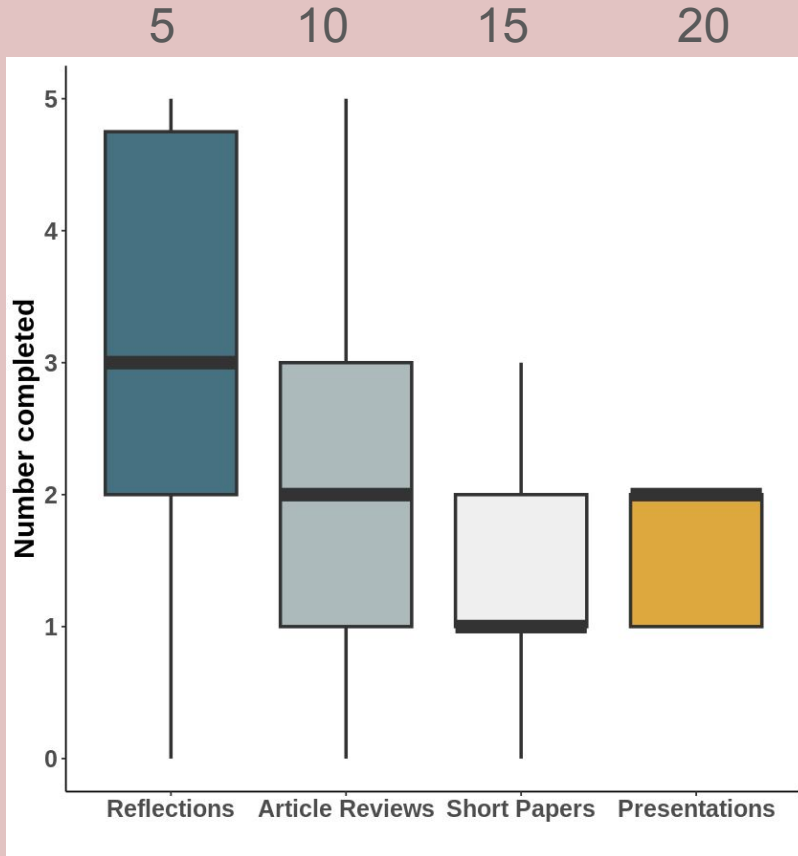
## Language in the US syllabus

Power	Tu: Bucholtz*2 Th: <u>Rickford&amp;King</u>	Tu: <b>Short Paper: Variation</b> , Posts Th: Posts
	Tu: <u>Engman&amp;King</u> Th: Nichols	Tu: <b>Short Paper: Power</b> . Posts Th: Posts
	Tu: <u>Silver&amp;Miller Ch12</u>	Tu: <b>Short Paper: Power</b> , Posts

# Questions

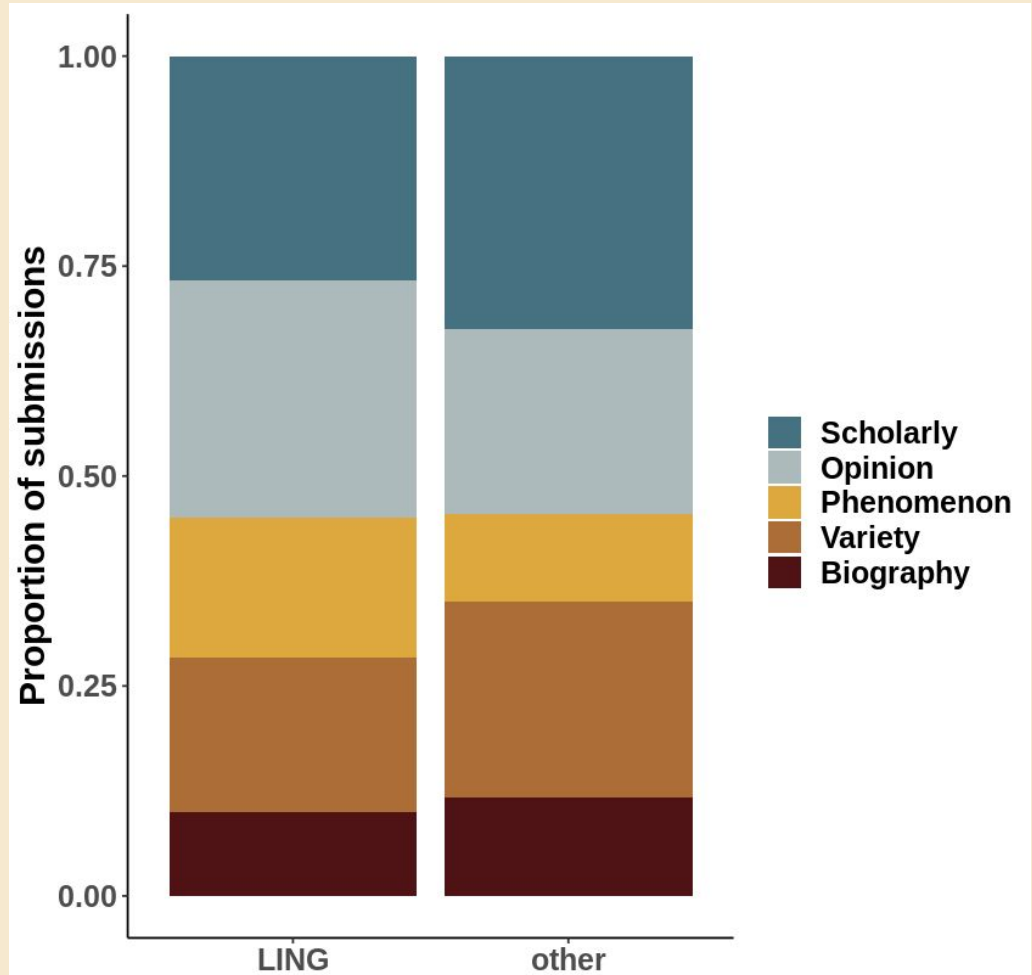
- What would students choose?
- Would majors and non-majors choose differently?
- What would the final grades be?
- How would the students describe their experience?
- How would we instructors describe our experience?

# What would students choose? (Sociolinguistics)



What would students choose?  
(Lang. in the US)

Would majors and non-majors choose differently?



# What would the final grades be?

## Sociolinguistics

- A: 24
- B+: 1
- B: 1 (first-year, fail to plan?)

Note: most had *more* points than needed for “A” (average: 16; seven had 25+)

## Language in the US

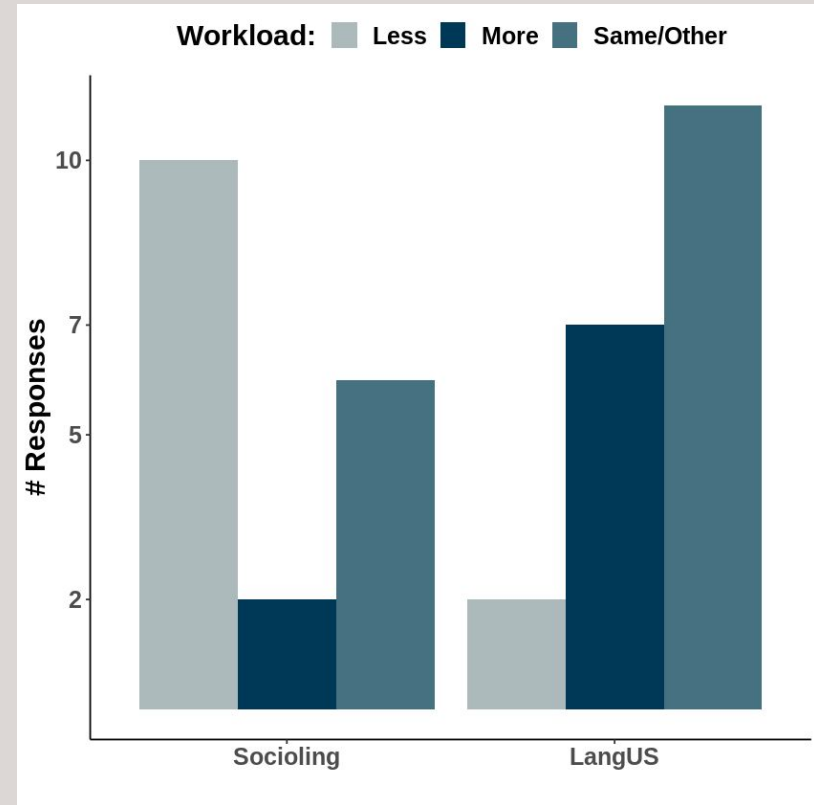
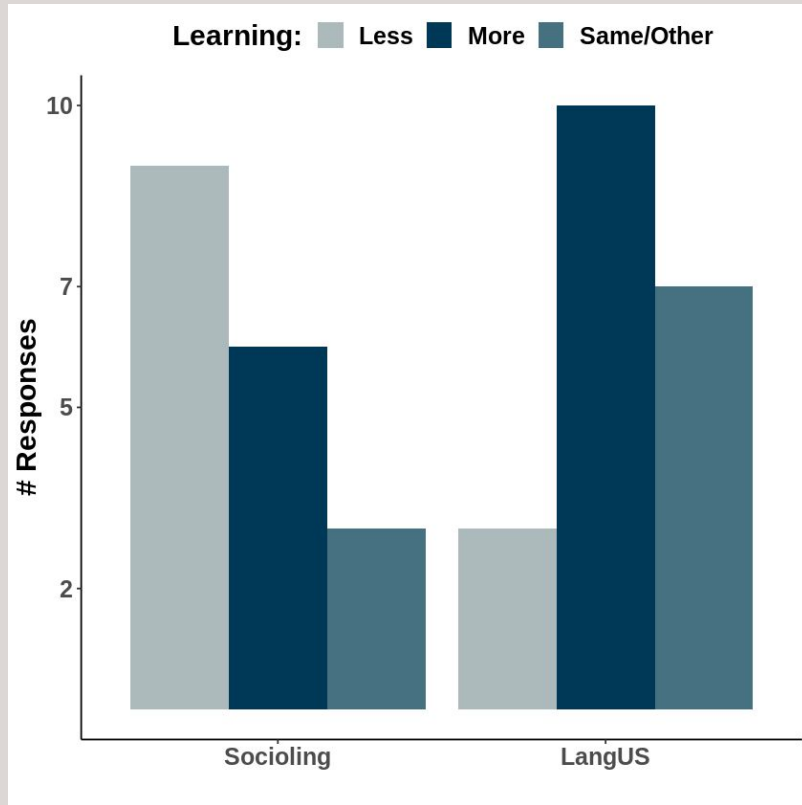
7 “S” (pass/fail option—6 non-linguists)

- A: 17
- A-: 1
- B: 2
- B-: 1
- D+: 1

Note: Spring semester weariness!

Did you **learn** more, less, or about the same...

Was the **workload** more, less, or about the same...



... as at a typical 100-level course at Carleton?



# Student qualitative responses

- Choice improved engagement
- Students felt respected to choose own *topics*

## Sociolinguistics

- Some stress about flexibility
- “Knew what we needed to do”
- Planning (encouraged) helped
- Adding assignments was disliked (“A” points was easier by the end)
- 17/18 would do again

## Language in the US

- “Crash course” in linguistic analysis was overwhelming
- Desire for more spaced-out papers
- Desire for more scaffolding on some short paper types
- 17/21 would do again

# Instructor experience

- No assignment-making mid-term!
- Feedback focused on content; felt “genuine” and ... pleasant
- “Rhythm” of assignments/grading important
- Student submissions were *excellent* (including final projects!)

## Sociolinguistics

- Having a dedicated weekly grading time was helpful
- Changes mid-term were unhelpful
- Earlier & later submissions “even out”

## Language in the US

- Lacking a dedicated weekly grading time was unhelpful
- Simplicity good
- Classroom observer remarked on growth as linguists

# For next time?

## Sociolinguistics

- Attendance/Participation grade?
- No changes once the term starts
- Count rubric- and points-graded items separately

## Language in the US

- Reorder topics: interleave linguistic analysis
- Rework assignments to even out time commitment—consider adding assignment to find & annotate articles
- 1 paper per 2 weeks (easier with 14-week term than 10-week!)
- Dedicate time each week for grading

# Take-home lessons

- Choice encouraged: intrinsic motivation, quality submissions
- Individuals' choices will vary, but collectively achieve breadth
- Simple grading → feedback on ideas
- Different grading systems to different buckets
- Match time commitment to final grade contribution
- Recommended for introductory and advanced-topic courses, but not for foundational or sequence courses

Thank you!