Project Descriptions

The following are brief descriptions for semester projects for small groups. They are designed for students to carry out their own observations of language in use around them every day, without reference to library sources. Students should turn in a written report on their findings, including an introduction explaining the topic and questions they investigated; a design section detailing how data was collected; a findings section showing what was found; a discussion of the findings; and a conclusion. If instructors require students to cite the textbook, then a references or works cited section should be included. Appendixes may be needed in some cases. (See the sample report guidelines following the project descriptions, for reference only. Follow the requirements your instructor gives you.)

All of these topics have been used successfully many times before. While working on a specific topic, students may have to read ahead of the course schedule, and see their instructor with questions they run into. Students should feel free to modify the topics, in consultation with their instructor. Instructors and students may, of course, think up other good topics to be investigated.

When collecting naturally occurring data, do not record people without their permission, and do not give participants' real names in the written report. Review Chapter 1 on how to present linguistic examples in your report.

Code-switching (psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, morphology, syntax)

What do you call it *nihongo de*? (What do you call it in Japanese?)
Only small prizes *moratta ne*.   (We got only small prizes, you know.)
Camp-seikatsu ga made him rough.   (The camp life made him rough.) (Examples from Nishimura, 1986, as cited in Romaine, 1995, pp. 145, 149.)
We've got . . . all these kids here right now. *Los que estan ya criados aqui, no los que recien venidos de* Mexico. They all understood English. (Those that have been born here, not the ones that have just arrived from Mexico.) (Example from Gumperz, 1982, as cited in Romaine, 1995, p. 163.)

Here you have some examples of changing codes within a sentence, and then of changing codes between sentences or across turns in a conversation. (In the first three examples the other language is Japanese; in the last example it is Spanish.)

For this project you need to collect your own examples like the ones above from real conversations. You will want to make audio recordings of your examples whenever possible, and then transcribe them. Then analyze your data in the light of

questions we could ask about code-switching, such as

Why do people change codes when they speak? Who does this?   Under what circumstances do they do this? What factors are relevant to switching and mixing (e.g., fluency in the codes used, relationship between the speakers, formality or informality of the situation, the topic of conversation, age, gender)? How do the two codes fit together grammatically? How do people feel about code-switching and mixing?

It should not be difficult to find examples. Many people often switch back and forth between Mandarin and Taiwanese, and between Mandarin and English, for instance. Listen to your classmates and teachers, family and friends; go places where you think code-switching might occur.

Gestures (psycholinguistics)

For this project, you will need to observe people speaking and gesturing. From your observations, try to figure out how gestures and spoken language are related. Some possible questions to consider: Are gestures necessary for spoken language? Can people speak without using any gestures? What functions do gestures have? Why do people gesture? When, in relation to spoken language, do gestures occur? Is there any relationship between when gestures occur and the structure of the spoken language? How do the meanings communicated by the spoken language and the gesture(s) relate to each other? Are there different types of gestures? (Consider gestures which may be instinctive, and others which may be learned. Also consider gestures which may function like words, such as the "come here" gesture, and others which may be directly representative, such as making a circle with your fingers to indicate "circle.")

For your report you may use drawings, photographs, descriptions, or video to illustrate gestures. To gather data you might observe people all around you speaking and gesturing in natural situations, and you could also do more controlled observation, for instance, asking people to watch a short cartoon and then retell the story from the cartoon, as you observe (without telling them) their spoken language and gestures.

Pauses (psycholinguistics)

For this project you will investigate pauses and related phenomena in a language or languages you know. You will need to tape-record and transcribe conversations. You should look at the following things:

1. **Pauses**:

   A. the silences in one person's speech

   B. the silences between the speech of two or more people in a conversation

Of particular interest is the length of pauses, so you will need to time pauses in the

conversations you record. You might also look at the frequency of pauses. How long do pauses last, and how often do they occur? How do languages compare in these respects? For example, do English and Mandarin speakers pause for about the same length of time? Does one group pause more frequently than the other? When, at what points in sentences (in the structure of sentences), do people typically pause?

2. "Filled pauses":
Sometimes pauses are filled by sounds, such as *uh*, *um*, and *oh*, or by words like *well* and *say*. Find examples of such filled pauses. What are the functions of these sounds and words? Are the sounds used to fill pauses the same in English and Mandarin? In Mandarin and Taiwanese? (And in Cantonese and in . . . ?).

3. Overlap:
Do people sometimes talk at the same time? How long does it last? How do English and Mandarin compare in this respect?

You want to record natural conversations, of course. If you have trouble doing so, you might try recording conversations among several classmates (you don't want them to know that you are interested in pauses), your own group discussions about this project (or about other class assignments), student-teacher conversations, and your own conversations with friends (it is best if they last long enough so that you forget about the recording and converse freely).

Computer-mediated communication (sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, syntax, morphology, writing)

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is very widespread these days, and when communicating through computers, people often use language differently than they do in other contexts. For this project, choose <u>one form</u> of CMC, such as e-mail, bulletin board systems (BBS), discussion boards, websites, or instant messaging (such as MSN, ICQ, chat rooms). Collect some samples of the communication in that medium (being sure to protect the privacy of the people involved), and then examine the language used. How does it compare to the language used when people talk face to face, or engage in written communication through letters, notes, newspapers and magazines, formal documents, and so on? What similarities and differences are there?

You might want to consider looking at elements such as the use of abbreviations, sentence structure, errors, the use of special symbols, formulaic expressions, language choice (e.g., Chinese or English, and code-switching), the effects of the technology (e.g., typing, computer equipment, software, network speed, access to computers and the internet), speaker identification, openings and closings, turn taking, politeness, topics, and gender. Of course, you may also discover other elements worth discussing.

Cell phone talk (sociolinguistics)

Nowadays cell phones, which have more functions than traditional phones, are very common. How is talk on cell phones different from talk on traditional phones? How do people begin their conversations on cell phones? How do they close, or end, their conversations? How do they talk when they leave voice messages? What other functions do cell phones have (such as text messaging) and how is people's way of talking affected by them? Choose one aspect of talk on cell phones and collect real examples of it (from your own talk on cell phones, that of your friends and family, or others, but only with their permission). Analyze the examples to see what they can tell us about social factors and cell phone talk.

Mandarin in the mouths of learners (phonetics and phonology)

Anyone who learns another language is bound to have some trouble with pronunciation. For this project you will investigate what Mandarin sounds are difficult for nonnative speakers. (You may investigate speakers of any language learning Mandarin.) Try to come up with an explanation of why some phonemes are difficult, and if possible, recommend teaching methods that might help nonnative speakers avoid or overcome problems with those phonemes. Also consider combinations of phonemes.

A good place to begin would be with the charts of English and Mandarin consonants and vowels in Chapter Four. When you gather data from learners, pay attention to getting data from their normal spoken performance (rather than from reading aloud, for instance, which may test their reading ability more than their pronunciation.)

Sample guidelines for written project reports

GUIDELINES FOR REPORTS   Introduction to Linguistics

Note 1: For a score of 80 or above, a report must follow <u>all</u> guidelines. (Merely following all guidelines does not guarantee such a grade, however. The report in itself must be good.)
Note 2: Late reports will not be accepted, unless you explain your legitimate reason <u>in person</u> to the professor on or before <u>the due date</u>.

*No library sources (including internet sources)

*MLA format (see especially *page numbers 4.6; heading and title 4.5; parenthetical documentation 6.1-6.4; Works Cited format 5.1, 5.2, 5.4, 5.5; labeling of figures 4.7; format and punctuation of quotations 3.71, 3.72; ellipsis 3.7.5*)

*See Chapter 1 of the textbook on the presentation of linguistic examples.

*The textbook must be cited, in MLA format. (***Be careful about plagiarism; see MLA Chapter 2.***)

*Include the following sections, with headings, in your report:

Introduction

What is the topic or question that was investigated?

Brief summary of background information on the topic

Design

Explain carefully and clearly how you collected data; include all materials (such as questionnaires, tests, instructions to participants).   ***Do not give the real names of participants.***

Findings

Complete and explicit findings/results.   Be sure to tabulate questionnaire, test, or other data collection results, and to include this information in your report.

Any figures (tables or graphs; **see MLA for format**). Tell the reader when to refer to a certain figure or table (e.g., *"see Fig. 3"*).

Discussion (of findings/results)

Interpretation (in relation to what we have studied, and to the introduction); alternative interpretations

Problems you met in your investigation

Conclusion

Works Cited—for *Discovering Language.   (See the citation requirement above.)*

[**Appendixes**]—some material from Design or from Findings may be too long to

include in the text of the report. Give each appendix a letter designation (e.g., **Appendix A, Appendix B**) and a title (e.g., Interview Questions), and in the report tell the reader when to refer to an appendix (e.g., "*see Appendix A*").

Group member work distribution—a brief description of the work each group member did for the report.