ENGL 507 Fall 2013
Research Paper Assignment
Paper Proposal due Oct. 31 as homework;
Paper due (hard copy AND turnitin) by 5 PM Monday Dec 2.

The traditional assignment in a graduate-level English class is to write a critical paper, engaging with appropriate secondary scholarly research, that allows you to make an argument about some topic that you have evolved in the course of your studies. This must be a paper, not a set of lesson plans (undergraduate majors please note that this paper will have to be included in your ENGL 491 portfolio eventually). A number of students in the last three years have translated these papers into either Big SURS papers or conference papers at other venues, and since this is a graduate class, I encourage you to think of your papers in that way.

For your research paper, which is **due by 5 PM on Monday December 2 both in turnitin.com and in hard copy**, you will state a question or problem about the English language--the phonology, semantics, syntax of Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English, or Present Day English. The key to this question is to make sure it is narrow, and to use your research to answer this question in a clear way. The paper, however, should not just read like a report or synthesis of information; I **don't** want an info dump or Wikipedia entry. Instead, create a **critical argument** that deals with the implications of the answer to your question. (If you're not sure about the difference between an informative and a critical question, imagine Stephen Colbert responding to your thesis with "And your point is?") For instance, "The English language preserves a number of gender stereotypes" is an informative thesis. It can easily be demonstrated. But what are the implications of this thesis? What's important about realizing this situation? In other words, what's the **critical** point of this argument? Add that to your thesis and you'll have a great start.

Though it's sometimes hard, <u>keep language as your **focus** throughout the paper</u>, even if your topic may tap into larger issues about culture, education, etc. It's appropriate to consider these implications, but remember that you're writing this paper in a class focused on language study, so be sure to keep that in the forefront. (In other words, if you're writing about the current attempts in Arizona to fire teachers who have pronounced ethnic or cultural accents, focus on the linguistic consequences; don't focus on what should be done to/with the legislators who suggested such a policy.) The best questions for such a paper are not "yes/no" questions (such as "Is slang just lazy language?") but questions that are more nuanced and allow you to make an argument ("Why should lexicographers concern themselves with transient language use like slang?")

You must turn in a proposal for your paper with a preliminary Works Cited list of at least 5 sources (in correct 2009 MLA form) by classtime on Oct. 31 to Turnitin; I will have comments back to you over the weekend. The **proposal** should state your question at issue, why you're interested in pursuing this question, and how you expect to go about it. It can be fairly short--four or five sentences--but it needs to be clear and coherent so that I can give you good assistance. It also needs to contain a *preliminary bibliography*, correctly documented, showing that *scholarly* resource material to support your argument is available.

- Paper length will vary based on the approach and the topic, but you will probably end up with something **around 9 pages (or more)** as undergraduates. The number of sources will also vary based on what you're doing, but I'm expecting **at least five scholarly** secondary sources. (Depending on how your paper works out, these can be the same as the ones you turn in with

the proposal, or you may refine and alter the list as you work on the paper.) General sources, however, may supplement these, especially as you establish a context for your question. In other words, you may use the Wikipedia for your own information, but don't rely on it in the paper! And go way beyond JStor for sources--it doesn't have a large linguistics component.

- Students taking this course for **graduate credit** will be expected to write **at least** 12 pages and include seven or more scholarly secondary sources within their paper. Graduate students will also be expected to prepare an **abstract** of the essay and to identify a possible conference you might submit this paper to. You should conceptualize your paper as something that you could give as a conference paper at a scholarly conference; if you've never attended one of those, I strongly suggest that you Google a professional organization like the American Dialect Society, the Popular Culture Association of the United States, SC Teachers of English Association, the Mark Twain Society, etc., and see what kind of language topics scholars give as conference talks. (Rule of thumb is that a 20 minute talk is 8-10 double-spaced pages, so the paper will give you plenty of material to trim down for a conference talk.)   The University of Pennsylvania English Department maintains a **great website listing calls for papers** that will help you find a potential presentation venue.

- I have placed a number of standard reference works on the history and development of English **on overnight reserve at Dacus Library** so that you can get access to good recent works with extensive bibliographies to help you with your investigations. You should also use the **MLA International Bibliography** as a **starting** place for your research (**do NOT** start in a file cabinet like JStor--you'll miss far too many good sources that way). Our class **Resources** page has a number of suggestions for where you can find good scholarly materials for these investigations; use it frequently!

Topics
Here are some suggestions to get you started. They are based on ideas that are likely to work, and are not meant to limit your choice but to give you a sense of what might make a workable idea. Other ideas can be quite workable; please come talk to me about what you'd like to do.

1. **Language reform.** Study one aspect of language reform (spelling, grammar, vocabulary, usage), tracing its development and its present status. There's lots of library material available for this project. You'll find a lot of weird suggestions, like the guy who proposed restoring gender to English nouns (but wanted 10-15 different genders, to accommodate the varieties of natural gender he observed), or proposals like Jonathan Swift's to dump all borrowed words from English, replacing them with native ones. But you'll also find that some reforms seek to solve thorny language problems, like spelling and gender bias.

2. **A disciplinary group's use of language.** You could certainly write about a topic like Mark Twain's or Toni Morrison's use of eye dialects, or about Shakespeare's or Chaucer's language, since the literary discipline is very interested in such topic. But this might also extend to looking at how scientists use language differently than the general public and the conflicts those approaches can cause (for instance, when scientists talk about a "theory" of evolution, they use the word "theory" in a very specific scientific sense, whereas politicians, advocates, and the general public may interpret what "theory" means very differently). Or mathematicians and statisticians may use the language of risk and reward very differently than the general public does, etc. You could choose certain terms, or a certain case/issue, or

even certain viewpoints and analyze them in terms of language and understanding.

3. Language and gender. There is a vast bibliography on a variety of topics relating to sexism and language. Your investigation might look at reforms intended to create fairer, more sex-neutral language, sexism in the English vocabulary, or male-female language differences.

4. Language and race. Again, there is a vast bibliography on a variety of topics related to race/ethnicity and language. Your investigation might look at specific issues like the Ann Arbor court case and African American Vernacular English (then called Black English) or at larger anthropological questions (such as those involved with Gullah, "Chinglish," "Engrish," "Spanglish," and other hybrids, or at any number of other related questions). Shirley Brice Heath's notes for *Ways with Words* are in the Winthrop archives, if you're interested...

5. The standardization of English. Since the 18th century, conscious, formal attempts to standardize English usage have become fairly common. The schools, the literary community, dictionaries, and occasionally the courts, have been involved in attempts to fix, ascertain, and regulate how the language is used. Examine some of the usage controversies, discuss the role of language education in the schools (whole language, phonics, speech therapy, spelling bees, good English week, and so on), look at language laws and court decisions relating to language (trademark, English-only, minority language rights, bilingual education, TESL), or even discuss some states' proposals that teachers with heavy regional or ethnic accents be fired. **WARNING:** This is one of the areas where I may have to remind you to keep the focus on language--it gets personal for a lot of students, and that's great, but remember you're writing for a history of the language class, not for a political theory class.....

6. Created languages. J.R.R. Tolkien invented a series of languages for Middle Earth; Star Trek added Romulan and Klingon; and *Avatar* contributed Na'vi. Other interest groups (e.g. skateboarders, hip hop artists, www.icanhascheezburger.com) have evolved whole sets of linguistic rules and codes that can constitute a language, or at least dialect, of English. Such efforts are ripe for analysis; the challenge may be to find appropriate scholarly resources, so a comparison/contrast strategy might be necessary for this topic. [For instance, there are lots of articles on Tolkien's languages, but *Avatar* is so recent that there may not be much in print, so you may have to compare the creation of Na'vi to the creation of Elvish and bring in sources about Tolkien to meet the scholarship requirements for the paper.)

7. Language and Law/Politics. If you're interested in history, politics, and law, you might want to look into legal issues that involve language questions. Topics range from the limited and local to the universal, from the vexed notion of trademark protection (for example, the battle over the word Webster's), to legislation mandating the language of signs, of education, and of government. You could look at the official English movement in the U.S. There are some key U.S. Supreme Court language decisions, the protectionist laws of France and Québec, requirements for teaching English in Korea and Taiwan, the linguistic struggles of the European Union, and the various Declarations of Universal Language Rights that have been proposed.

8. Language and technology. As electronic means of communication become more endemic, questions such as "Should there be an official language of the Internet?" and "Does text messaging harm or help people's language skills?" have become more prevalent. So have questions about accessibility for the disabled, the accents of voices in GPS machines or on e-book readers, and the like. There is starting to be quite a bit of scholarly research in these areas, so you should be able to find enough sources for a

topic in this area.

9. The history of a script. There are lots of interesting topics involving fonts, simplified spelling systems, LOLcat speak, etc. And we've got untranslated texts in cuneiform in the Winthrop Archives; there are at least eight Indo-European languages that have never been decoded. If you're a puzzle solver and are interested in working on one of these problem scripts, please go ahead! I don't expect you to succeed where other scholars have failed, but you may be able to make a good argument out of critiquing the work of others. Or maybe you'll make history--that would be great!