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UCSB Conference Explores Social, Cultural Aspects of Language in California

Scholars from across the country will gather at UC Santa Barbara for an interdisciplinary conference that examines language as a central component of California studies and establishes California as a crucial site for the investigation of language in social life.

"Vox California: Cultural Meanings of Linguistic Diversity" will take place on Friday and Saturday, April 3 and 4, in the McCune Conference Room, 6020 Humanities and Social Sciences Building. It is free and open to the public, although space is limited and advance registration is required.

"The idea behind the conference is that language is a big part of the state's identity," said Mary Bucholtz, professor of linguistics at UCSB and the conference organizer. "The goal is to understand how Californians use language in their everyday lives as well as how Californians are portrayed linguistically to the rest of the world, and what both of these issues tell us about California as a culture and as an idea."

"Vox California" is the first conference of its kind to focus on the full scope of California's linguistic resources, including indigenous and immigrant languages, regional and ethnic dialects, subcultural linguistic styles, and linguistically mediated

social activities. It seeks not simply to document the state's linguistic diversity but to investigate the cultural meanings of specific linguistic forms, representations, and practices.

"When people think of the language of California, what might come to mind are immigrant languages such as Spanish and Chinese, or ethnically distinctive dialects like Chicano English and African American English," Bucholtz explained. "These are languages and dialects that throughout the state's history have been the focus of controversy in education, politics, and law. Those controversies continue into the present day, so it's important to understand them."

Equally important, she noted, are the histories of Native California languages –– all of which are either extinct or endangered –– and of smaller immigrant languages, such as Armenian and, in Santa Barbara County, Danish. "We need to document this linguistic history, too, as part of the heritage of our state and its local communities," Bucholtz said.

She noted that some California dialects, such as surf slang and what she calls "Valley Girl talk," are often trivialized in the media but are actually important resources for the identities of many Californians. These dialects help linguists understand how language changes over time and how Californians might sound a hundred years from now. "And, of course, representations of surfer or Valley Girl language are widespread in the media, so they become tied to California in the global imagination as well," said Bucholtz.

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Vox California Conference

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