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Carpinteria High School Students Conduct Original Research Through UCSB Linguistics Project

A pilot project at UC Santa Barbara has 15 Carpinteria High School students conducting original linguistics research in their own community. The students are enrolled in a course called Language in Society, and are being guided in their work by a team of UCSB graduate and undergraduate students in linguistics, education, and Spanish.

Most recently, the high school students have been producing video ethnographies of social settings within their community –– stores, restaurants, organizations, groups –– and discovering how language is part of culture in social settings. They will present their video projects at 9 a.m. on Tuesday, May 17, in the McCune Conference Room, 6020 Humanities and Social Sciences Building at UCSB. The event is free and open to the public.

"They're collecting data and learning about linguistic concepts, which is something high school students almost never get a chance to do," said Mary Bucholtz, professor of linguistics at UCSB and director of the project. "We're especially targeting students from linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse backgrounds because we think they are the ones who can benefit the most academically by exploring their language and culture."

While the project benefits the high school students, it is also a boon to UCSB, according to Bucholtz. "The students are finding new knowledge that we can use to further our linguistic understanding. These kids have access to communities that we as outsiders don't have. So they're already linguistic and cultural experts, and we are giving them the academic tools to communicate that knowledge. Their findings are very valuable for UCSB as a research university," she said.

As part of the project, each of three linguistics graduate student teaching fellows goes into the classroom twice a week with a master teacher in social studies. In addition, a rotating team of nine undergraduate students visits the classroom every day to assist the high school students with the nuts and bolts of their research.

"There is a lot of one-on-one or small group work," Bucholtz said. "There is a significant use of technology, so they're learning how to use video equipment, how to edit video and audio, and how to do technical linguistic transcription of speech."

Besides the video ethnographies, the students have completed a unit on linguistic histories in which each conducted an oral history of a family member to find out what role language played in that person's life. In addition, the class produced a dictionary of slang, which will be accessible online. "It is similar to Urban Dictionary, but it's based on empirical data collection and analysis," she noted. "It uses linguistically sound research on current slang in Carpinteria High School."

With her own research focusing on the use of language among youth and young adults, Bucholtz has long wanted to implement an initiative such as the one at Carpinteria High School. "College students always have this ‘Aha!' moment, that changes the way they think of language in their lives," she said. "They feel pride in their linguistic heritage or they go back and find the language their grandparents spoke. Or they gain insight into their own variety of English. It helps them to explore the whole range of ways they use language and to connect that to academic learning in a whole new way. I've always thought that if college students can learn linguistics, high school students can, too–– they're both coming to the discipline with a lot of real-life expertise, from which they can draw."

The Language in Society course at Carpinteria High School, which was created specifically for this project, is the first of its kind in California. Bucholtz plans to expand the project to include additional schools throughout Santa Barbara County.

"There are a lot of prospects. Different kinds of schools are going to come up with different linguistic findings," she said. "It would be exciting to have a learning community that spans the entire country."

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† Middle photo: UCSB undergraduate Adra Bowman assists a linguistics student at Carpinteria High School

Photo: George Foulsham, Office of Public Affairs

†† Bottom photo: Bucholtz studies the work of a student in the Language and Society class

Photo: George Foulsham, Office of Public Affairs

About UC Santa Barbara

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