



Undergraduate Scholars Research Project Outlines 2020/21

This year we have 7 research projects that students can sign up to. This document provides abstracts for each of the projects. You will need to specify which project you are applying to on your application form.

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Key Dates:

- **Monday 23rd November: Deadline for Applications**
- **Friday 18th December: Students informed of success**
- **Semester 2: Week 1, Wednesday 10th Feb, 2-5pm, first UG Scholars session (after this most UG Scholars sessions will take place on Wednesday afternoons)**

Women's autobiographical filmmaking

Project Lead: Dr Felicia Chan

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Autobiographical filmmaking refers to films created by filmmakers that tell stories about their lives, experiences and memories. These may be truthful or partially fictionalised, remembered clearly or misremembered, or a combination of these, usually in ways that also explore how film as a medium can do this — a form of practice-as-research, if you like. I'm interested in exploring with students whether there is / can be a gendered nature to this mode of filmmaking / life-remembering? Do women filmmakers tell different stories about their lives from men, or do they do so in a different way? The intention is not to enforce a gender binary but to explore how a critical dialogue may be enacted through the mode of the autobiographical film.

Posthuman Pedagogies: What does the digital do?

Project Lead: Dr Hannah Cobb

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A range of recent philosophical approaches have argued that rather than seeing humans as being at the centre of everything, as active subjects framed against a backdrop of passive objects, it is more fruitful to understand how people and things mix and merge, and how this is a constant and ever shifting process. These approaches, which fall roughly under the philosophical schools of New Materialism or Posthumanism, might sound abstract when described this way, but as some of the leading thinkers in this area have argued, their application for rethinking feminism (Braidotti), the environment (Tsing) and capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari) amongst other things, are phenomenal.

In this project we will explore how these ideas have value for understanding pedagogy (that is the processes and practices of teaching and learning). In particular, we will consider how a posthuman approach might be of value for examining the role of the digital in Higher Education. Using our current state of online and blended learning as the basis for our analysis we will ask; what does the digital do? Does it democratise learning? Or the opposite? Does it allow the mixing and merging of people and things in new ways? And if so, how? Does the use of online learning and digital technologies allow us to push the boundaries of convention and develop more politically and pedagogically radical teaching and learning? Or does it "black box" some modes of enquiry? The aim of this project will be to consider these questions and more. As well as our final presentation for the UG Scholars programme, we will also work toward developing an article for submission in the *International Journal of Educational Research*.

Further details to follow

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Further details to follow

Visual Storytelling for Language Documentation

Project Leads: Dr Vera Hohaus and Dr Margit Bowler

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How many languages do you think there are? While counting languages is hard, Simons & Fenning (2018) estimate the number of languages currently spoken on the planet at around 7,000 languages, a number that speaks to the incredible diversity of what is possible within the human mind. It is also a number that might make you wonder whether there's anything that all of these languages have in common.

Worse-case scenarios predict that 90 percent of these languages will have become extinct by the end of this century (Krauss 1992). At the same time, we lack written and recorded data for a majority of the existing languages in the world (Velupillai 2012). Projects aimed at documenting the languages of the world have arisen in response to this crisis of language loss. Language documentation is the project of collecting data from understudied languages with the goal of describing the language's grammar and use. The linguistic data that is collected can take many different forms, grammatical description, traditional narratives, oral histories, songs, and so on. As such, language documentation is an interdisciplinary enterprise that can benefit from insights from anthropology, musicology, and the visual arts. Given both the urgency of language documentation efforts and the interdisciplinary nature of documentation projects, we propose a UG Scholars course on this topic.

Topics that we will discuss will include the factors leading to language loss, the ethics of carrying out documentation projects in marginalised language communities, best practices for language documentation, and pros and cons of particular documentation methods. We will ultimately focus on one particular methodology: the use of visual storyboards to collect short narratives in a target language, typically with the goal of studying a particular component of the language's grammar (Burton & Matthewson 2015)¹. We will train students in how to develop, test, use and publicise storyboards for language documentation. This will involve working collectively with other students in the course to test and apply the storyboards to the languages that they speak. We hope to submit the storyboards developed in the course to the Totem Field Storyboards website, and as a journal article to the *Semantic Fieldwork Methods* journal. This UG Scholars course was run previously in 2020; see the Fieldwork Hub website for the storyboards that were developed by students in the course: <https://fieldworkhub.wordpress.com/storyboards/>.

Creating storyboards requires not only linguistic insight, creative writing skills and a talent for visualisation, but also curiosity and cultural awareness. We therefore expect that this course will be of interest to linguistics students as well as students in anthropology, creative writing, and the visual arts. The project will give students an opportunity to engage with the unique multilingual landscape of the University of Manchester, and also learn about open access and best practice for managing language documentation data.

¹ For examples of such storyboards, see the Totem Field Storyboards website at <http://totemfieldstoryboards.org/>

References

- Burton, Strang & Lisa Matthewson (2015), "Targeted Construction Storyboards in Semantic Fieldwork," in M. Ryan
- Bochnak & Lisa Matthewson (eds.), *Methodologies in Semantic Fieldwork* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 135-156.
- Simons, Gary F. and Charles D. Fennig, eds. (2018), *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (Dallas: SIL International).
- Krauss, Michael (1992), "The World's Languages in Crisis," *Language* 68 (1): 4-10.
- Velupillai, Viveka (2012), *Typology* (Amsterdam: Benjamins).

The Language of Alienness in Science Fiction

Project Lead: Dr Wendell Kimper

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Extra-terrestrial characters in the Science Fiction genre often play an important narrative role in representing the Other, and the language used by and for these characters helps to construct that sense of *alienness*. This practice can in turn shed light on how linguistic structure is represented in the mind, and what kinds of implicit knowledge language users are able to draw on. For example: do names that sound 'alien' to English speakers use sound sequences that are rare in English, or sound sequences that violate more universal principles of phonological markedness?

This project will take an inter-disciplinary approach, welcoming contributions from a variety of perspectives and skill sets, and students will be encouraged to identify (and come up with) specific questions within the broader project that interest them. Some of the ways that students can be involved in the project include (but are not limited to):

- Expanding and analysing a phonological corpus of alien names.
- Visual character design for experimental stimuli.
- Conducting online experiments to test specific questions about how linguistic structure creates alienness.
- Connecting with insights from literary and film studies.
- Sociolinguistic case studies and analysis.

The culmination of the project will involve an element of science communication, helping to bring the insights of the project into the wider discourse of Science Fiction fandom.

How the Story of Our Words Informs and Distorts Present Knowledge

Project lead: Prof Alexander Samely

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We often use words to justify scholarly and scientific knowledge, aesthetic judgments, policy decisions or law that have a surprising and revealing history. Thus what these words meant in earlier generations may point to meanings that still linger, but are not on the surface, or they can point to changing attitudes. The story of words or phrases can show that terms of apparent description carry or have acquired unacknowledged ideological loads

In this research project you will select terms that play a key but unquestioned role in a particular document for investigation, delving into their recent or earlier history. You will do this in two ways: you will explore some of the linguistic usages of earlier times, to develop a critical sense of semantic variety, changes in usage, or cultural background. And you will draw upon studies that provide a critical historical perspective on the field of knowledge, law, art or politics in which the text is located that you use as primary evidence. This will allow you explore some of the unacknowledged contributions which word choices can make to a particular contemporary claim to knowledge or in a decision making process.

Through this work you will enhance your ability to read contemporary documents critically by exploring the story of the words they use, to engage with advanced methods in critical studies and their theoretical background and to collaborate in independent research.

Examples of documents which might be explored in various projects:

- a party political manifesto (see below)
- a policy paper on measures to develop the economy or protect the environment
- a report on the legal status of refugees
- an OFSTED school inspection report or similar official report
- a statement on the purpose of a state-sponsored public monument or ceremony

Here is an example of what may be involved. Three recent election manifestos of political parties in Britain use terms such as “**development**”, “**national/global**” and “**environment**”. You could examine the history of such terms and the ways in which their meaning interacts with other themes in these manifestos by:

- identifying and familiarizing yourself with two scholarly articles/chapters on the history of the economic relations and environmental impact of Britain and countries of the global South
- selecting key terms of the Lib Dem, Labour and Conservative manifestos (available online) regarding the relationship of Britain to “developing World” countries and environmental impacts, and
- examining the background of these terms by drawing upon sources that address the role they played in similar discourses in earlier periods (using, e.g. contextual historical studies, dictionaries).

The tasks involved in such a project may be divided along the lines of individual group members’ interests (e.g. different terms in the same document), or may involve close cooperation in examining shared linguistic or historical dimensions of the evidence chosen. Students may also address theoretical angles, such as diverse frameworks to assess the value of such an analysis, assessments of the soundness of its methodology, and the role of theoretical positions deriving from post-colonialism, critical discourse analysis, materialism, historicism, post-modernism or gender studies.

How to conduct corpus-based research on spoken language

Project lead: Dr Richard Zimmerman

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Studying the language of written texts is relatively straight-forward: Collect lots of texts, look for the linguistic expressions you are interested in, and investigate your results. The study of spoken language, however, is a whole different animal. First, speech does not come in objective categories, but must be transcribed. This is not a trivial task but requires some theory and great effort. Secondly, there are many aspects of language that are exclusive to the spoken mode, such as errors or fillers (think of all the *uhms* and *you knows*). Such difficulties must be treated carefully within an explicit framework. Thirdly, the processes in uttering spoken words are multi-faceted and complex, involving factors such as attention to speech (you speak differently when you read or talk to others), speech participants, dialect, and much more. In this Undergraduate Scholars Research Programme, students learn how to deal with all of these difficulties and how to analyse spoken language professionally and competently.

Specifically, students will become familiar with ...

- (1) ... the relevance of theoretical transcription guidelines, involving issues such as time stamps, tokenization, disfluencies and spelling conventions,
- (2) ... the state-of-the-art “tier transcription system”, with different levels for speakers, extra-linguistic noises, comments, etc., associated software, as well as text and audio formats,
- (3) ... ways to find a speech samples from public sources,
- (4) ... the importance of proper documentation of a speaker, including dialect, age, social, individual and situational variables,
- (5) ... basic analysis techniques in the study of linguistic features that are predominantly found in speech (e.g., quotative *be like, I was like, “Yeah, definitely.”*, the *is is* construction, *But the reality is is nobody knows the answer*, or the use of emphatic *literally, I literally couldn’t open my mouth.*).

Each student will contribute two transcriptions of 5 minutes and 25 minutes of speech, resulting in the main outcome of this project – a professional, publicly accessible corpus of high-quality transcripts. In addition, students will then use the corpus to analyse one feature of spoken language of their choosing.