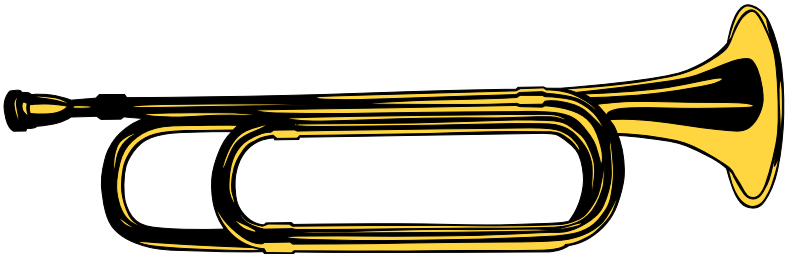
BUGLE V ABSTRACTS

November 14th, 2026



Author: Laila Muhanna

Title: Michelle Obama and Style Shifting

Abstract: Though numerous publications have studied stylistic variation in speech of President Barack Obama (Alim & Smitherman, Sheveleva, Lei & Liu) throughout his political career, few exist examining the speech of First Lady Michelle Obama. This paper aims to explore style-shifting by Mrs. Obama through the lens of her identity as the first Black First Lady of the United States. A quantitative analysis was conducted on word-final -ING and its two variants [ɪŋ]/[ɪn], due to its being a common feature of African American English (AAE). The analysis examined Mrs. Obama's speech across two different contexts, her speech at the 2024 Democratic National Convention and an episode of her podcast, The Look, themed around Black womanhood and identity. Mrs. Obama used more [ɪn] in the podcast setting than she did in the formal speech setting, though she used more

[ɪŋ] overall in both contexts. Qualitative variables, such as co-occuring laughter and contextual placement of AAE forms, were also studied. In conclusion, Mrs. Obama skillfully uses stylistic features to index her identity as a Black woman across political, social, and community contexts.

Author: Bryce Massey

Title: "Sounding Southern in the Midwest: a Sociophonetic Case Study of Southern Illinois English"

Abstract: Southern Illinois is administratively Midwestern but historically linked to the upland South. Accordingly, it has been described as a transitional zone between Midland and Southern American English. This case study examines the vowels of three long-settled, white speakers from a single household in Pulaski County, Illinois. It uses read word lists with their F1/F2 measurements, Milroy and Llamas's (2013) social network framework, and an adapted version of Reed's (2020) Rootedness Metric. All three speakers appear to show a variable rather than categorical LOT-THOUGHT merger, and none shows the TRAP-DRESS reversal associated with the Northern Cities Shift. Contrary to the initial prediction, the most rooted speaker, who described his own speech as "Appalachian," kept LOT and THOUGHT the most distinct, while the least rooted speaker produced the most merged forms. Given the small sample, a tentative interpretation is that rootedness reflects how strongly a speaker is attached to a regional identity, but not which identity, or which set of phonetic norms, that attachment points toward.

Author: Jaya Thekdi

Title: Style-Shifting and the Phonetic Progression of the LOT–THOUGHT Merger in Rhode Island

Abstract: In many American English dialects, the vowels in words like cot (LOT) and caught (THOUGHT) have merged into one sound. In Rhode Island, the distinction between them is still socially salient and has been linked to a working-class stereotype. This study examines the phonetic progression of the merger using interview and word list data from 33 Rhode Island speakers. The data show a gradual progression of the merger in apparent time: younger speakers produce a backer LOT (lower F2) and a lower THOUGHT (higher F1) than older speakers. I also find a population-wide style effect: after controlling for age and vowel duration, both vowels are backer in the word list than in the interview; however, it is unclear whether this reflects deliberate style-shifting or hyperarticulation. Finally, older speakers exaggerate the distinction in word list speech by lowering LOT, while younger speakers do not. Together, these findings show that the merger's progression is complex, involving both an apparent-time change and a style difference shared by all speakers. They also raise the possibility that style-shifting toward a more distinct LOT is a feature of older speakers' speech that is disappearing along with the distinction itself.

Author: Aditi Borra

Title: Uncovering The Hidden Grammar of Crossword Clues

Abstract: This project investigates the role of question marks and modifiers in crossword puzzle clues, uncovering a core element of the

hidden grammar of crossword puzzles. Like everyday speech, crossword puzzles have an implicit grammar that solvers learn through exposure and practice. Drawing on over 30 years of New York Times crossword puzzles, we examined how punctuation, such as the question mark, and modifiers, such as “maybe” and “perhaps,” shape how clues are interpreted. We focused on how clues use different types of ambiguity, as opposed to underspecification or vagueness, to create the “aha” moment that makes an entry satisfying for solvers. We found that the question mark signals wordplay and directs solvers to the less apparent meaning of an ambiguous word, while “maybe” and “perhaps” mark the entry as part of a broader category.

Author: Spencer Caplan, CUNY Graduate Center, BUGLE V Keynote Speaker

Title: Discrete linguistic knowledge in a variable and continuous world

Abstract: A foundational insight of linguistic theory is that our knowledge of language is comprised of abstractions and discrete categories. Nevertheless the physical signals and distributions of usage we encounter in the world are, by nature, graded, continuous, and subject to noisy variability. I will argue that to resolve this apparent tension, we must study the intermediate representations constructed during learning and processing rather than any simple Input/Output mappings. In this talk, I illustrate the approach across three domains (or four depending how you count and how time goes). First, in phonetic perception, I show that listeners rapidly discard incoming acoustic detail from very early stages in favor of a category-level encoding and demonstrate that a new framework

I call “Discrete Sampling” actually predicts a range of graded behavior previously taken as evidence against categories. Speech perception is best understood as a Markovian process which encodes a state of belief over categories rather than maintaining the distributional cues that led to that belief. Second, moving from perception to higher-level (logical) reasoning, I discuss experimental evidence from a syllogistic inference paradigm showing that we naturally reason over intermediate representations which are “denotationally underspecified.” Third, turning to the lexicon and grammatical rules, I walk through both synchronic and diachronic data from Swahili noun classes supporting a strong distinction between statistical patterns in language usage and a categorical / “satisficing” notion of linguistic productivity. Finally, time permitting, I will more directly test the satisficing approach to productivity (drawing a distinction between what learners treat as an “adequate” linguistic analysis as opposed to an “optimal” one) via large-scale coordination experiments and corresponding comparative computational modeling. Only by considering the local mechanisms through which discrete categories are perceived, reasoned over, acquired, and transmitted, can we achieve a principled bridge between competence (psychological knowledge of language) and performance (how this manifests in graded behavior).

Author: Quintessa Frisch

Title: The Times They Are A-Changing: What conditions Bob Dylan's use of the a- prefix?

Abstract: After 1964, the a- prefix disappears from Bob Dylan’s songs. This paper argues that the prefix in Dylan’s folk-era lyrics (1962–1964) is a

systematically conditioned variable, constrained by the grammar of Appalachian English and selected for its semantic and expressive force. The analysis begins with a distributional puzzle: within a single song, and often within a single line, one present participle takes the prefix while a structurally parallel one does not. Three competing accounts are evaluated, based on prosody, morphology, and semantics. Prosody proves insufficient as a general explanation, since its influence is confined to metrically regular songs. Morphology defines the environments where prefixation is permitted, and semantics determines where it occurs, favoring verbs of motion, intensity, and sustained action at points of narrative prominence. Ultimately, the prefix's disappearance after the folk period shows that it was a deliberate marker of register rather than a feature of Dylan's native grammar, and that a borrowed vernacular form can remain grammatically faithful while serving new stylistic purposes.

Author: Nate Chinman

Title: Two Potential Solutions to Meet and Join Based Noun Conjunction

Abstract: In English, conjunction can occur between two expressions of nearly any syntactic category (as long as the two expressions have the same category). This is what motivates the usage of the meet and join operations for describing the semantics of conjunction. While this works well in many situations, it causes issues in some particular instances of noun conjunction (for example with the sentence "Every cat and dog slept."). I propose two potential solutions. The first is a relatively straightforward pragmatic argument that attempts to explain why some readings are preferred over others. The other solution changes the syntax

of noun conjunction in order to limit its application and avoid predicting unaccessed readings. This talk will go over each solution and discuss the benefits and drawbacks of both.