Multimodal assessment in linguistics

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Advances and challenges in teaching linguistics at university

An example

- English morphophonology:

1. atom → atomless → atomless**ness**
2. home → homeless → homeless**ness**

3. atom → atomi[k] → atomi[s]ity
4. home → *homic → *homicity

- Differences between Latinate and Germanic suffixes.
  - sign ~ si[g]nature, muscle ~ mus[k]ular, etc.

An example

- Excerpts from Violette D's 2021-22 LEL2A **Unessay**.

- William the Conqueror berating Anglo-Saxon peasants.

Now that I'm reigning over England, I'll make French the administrative language
Guess I better start teaching my kids French then...

Wait, you're taking those too?
Hey WAIT! What are you doing to their pronunciation!
sign muscle
divine

But you can't even relate these words to each other phonetically! Why are you saying "muscle" with a silent c but in "muscular" it's not silent!

YOU'RE GOING TO END UP WITH AN ASYMMETRIC LANGUAGE WHERE LATIN SUFFIXES AREN'T AS PRODUCTIVE AS NATIVE GERMANIC SUFFIXES! YOU'LL SEE! YOU'LL BE SORRY THEN!
... weirdly enough, he was right.

Up next

1. Background
2. The multimodal assignment
3. Discussion

- Many of us in this room are already doing something similar!

What is assessment (claimed to be) for?

1. Motivate learning.
2. Evaluate learning.
3. Provide feedback (improve learning).

Assessment needs to be marked. Marking should be:

- Fair.
- Not a source of stress (for students or staff).
- Easy to carry out.

(e.g. Zuraw et al 2019)

Traditional vs multimodal assessment

	Traditional assessment	Multimodal assessment

(Cordell 2015; Awan 2019; Bayne et al 2020; Gannon 2020; Ross et al 2020)

Traditional vs multimodal assessment

	Traditional assessment	Multimodal assessment
	Carry out a specific task	
Typical examples	Essay, exam, lab report, annotated bibliography, multiple choice question	
Motivation	No intrinsic motivation, “learning for the test”	
EDI	Often inequitable (especially exams)	
Skills	Not usually connecting to the real world	
Creativity	Limited	

(Cordell 2015; Awan 2019; Bayne et al 2020; Gannon 2020; Ross et al 2020)

Traditional vs multimodal assessment

	Traditional assessment	Multimodal assessment
	Carry out a specific task	Respond to a prompt using any number of different modalities
Typical examples	Essay, exam, lab report, annotated bibliography, multiple choice question	Podcast, poster, short video, comic strip, poem, game
Motivation	No intrinsic motivation, “learning for the test”	Self-motivated
EDI	Often inequitable (especially exams)	Students choose what works for them
Skills	Not usually connecting to the real world	Lets students integrate data from different sources and modalities
Creativity	Limited	Substantial freedom

(Cordell 2015; Awan 2019; Bayne et al 2020; Gannon 2020; Ross et al 2020)

In action: Formal linguistics

- Not about multimodality as such.
- Students had a choice of topics for traditional essays (1,500 words).
- Or choice of one “Unessay” topic (multimodal submission).
- 2020-21, Sem2, *Syntax: Theory and Practice* (advanced UG / MSc)
  - Topic: universals vs language-specific patterns.
  - Chosen by 7/43 students.
  - Self-reflection, podcast (submitted jointly by two students), poem, short story, soliloquy and regular essay.
- 2021-22, Sem1, *LEL2A: Linguistic Theory and the Structure of English* (early UG)
  - Topic: synchrony and diachrony in the English lexicon.
  - Chosen by 5/154 students.
  - Two comic strips, two podcasts and one Prezi presentation.

mutual understanding. I agree, it might be hard to see **a**

10 tree for the forest, the features for the surface. A **rigid** understanding might not be the way to go, **and**

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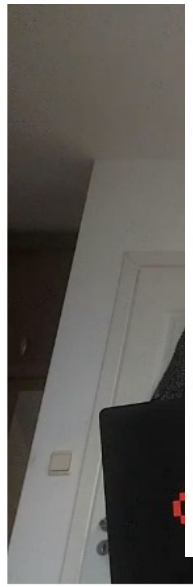
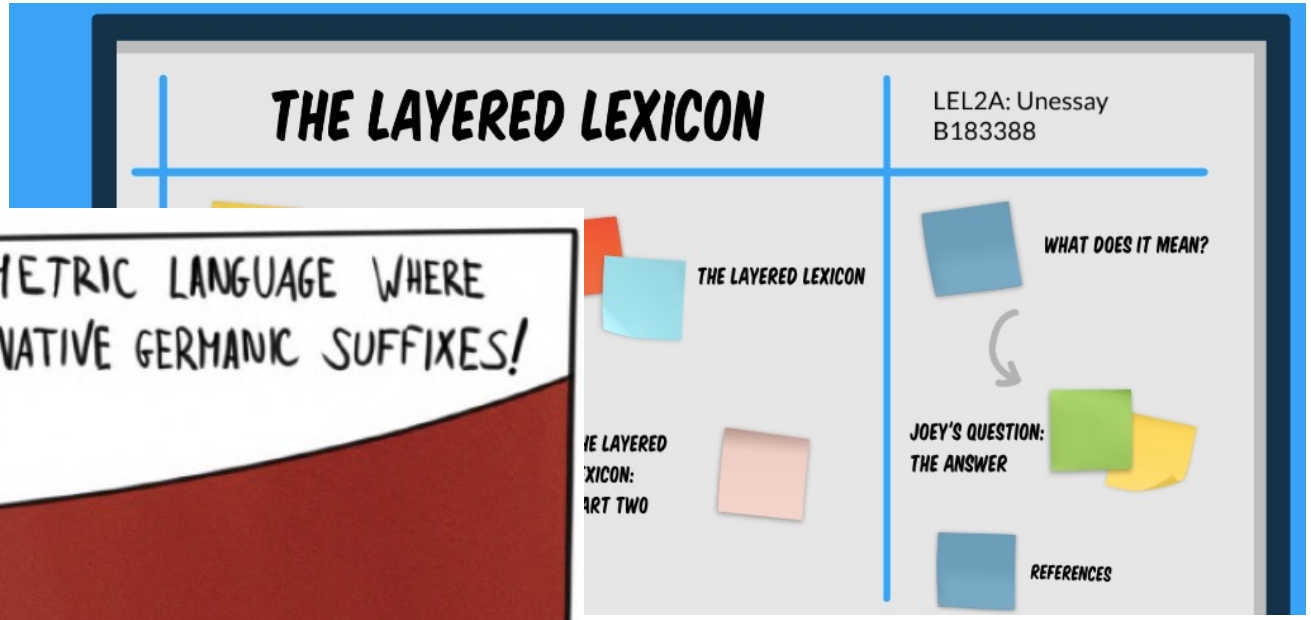
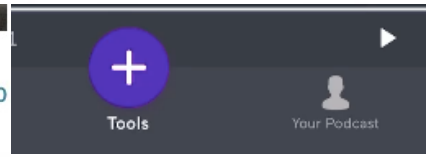




Syntactic Soliloquies: A Short Play with Few Arguments and Many Adjuncts



In action: Multimodality

- Knowledge is produced in increasingly multimodal forms throughout society.
- For Sumin's 2020-21 advanced UG/MSc seminar on multimodality, multimodal coursework was a natural choice.
  - Directly relating the material and the assessment.
  - *Authentic assessment* in which the coursework reflects real applications (Sambell et al. 2017).
- Students were evaluated on their ability to communicate linguistic ideas to a lay audience.
- Submissions included comic strips, a website, a multimedia science "tabloid", a whiteboard animation video, video essays and other multimodal visual essays.

GESTURE
YOU KNOW, CONVERSATION IS MUCH MORE
THAN JUST THE WORDS WE SPEAK
OR THE SOUNDS WE MAKE WITH OUR MOUTHS
A LOT ACTUALLY COMES FROM GESTURE
LOOK AT THAT COUPLE OVER THERE
THEY'RE JUST HAVING A NICE CHAT, BUT LOOK AT HOW THEIR HANDS ARE CONSTANTLY IN MOTION
I'VE... NEVER REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT THAT
WHEN I THINK BACK, I CAN'T REMEMBER EVER USING HANDS
AH! I'M DOING IT RIGHT NOW !!!
THERE'S ACTUALLY A WHOLE RANGE OF GESTURES
THERE ARE GESTICULATIONS, SPEECH-LINKED GETURES, EMBLEMS, AND PANTOMIMES
AND THEN THERE ARE SIGN LANGUAGES
SO, WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?
WELL, PRIMARILY HOW INTERLINKED WITH SPEECH THEY ARE! SOME OF THEM NEED TO APPEAR TOGETHER WITH IT WHILE OTHERS CAN EVEN STAND ON THEIR OWN! THE LESS COMBINED WITH SPEECH THEY ARE, THE MORE THEY TAKE ON PROPERTIES OF LANGUAGE THEMSELVES. GESTICULATIONS NEED SPEECH WHILE SIGN LANGUAGES ARE ACTUAL LANGUAGES!

Interim summary

- We offered multimodal coursework (“unessays”) in which students could:
  - Be intrinsically motivated.
  - Demonstrate what they’ve learned.
  - Express themselves.

- Remaining questions:
  - How did the students like it?
  - How do you mark these assignments?
  - What is the relevance for the broader themes of assessment and feedback?

Student feedback

- “The Unessay was **100% my favourite assignment I've had at uni** so far“
- “I thought it was great to have the opportunity to write an unessay last semester - it felt like an **active attempt to move towards decolonising** academia and increasing accessibility.”
- “Thank you for **giving us a creative outlet** last semester in this unessay!”

- Trudy Kalvinaitė‘s LEL2A comic strip was presented at ULAB 2022 and won **Best Poster**.
- Marlene Willinger's comic strip on gestures was later **re-published** in a student journal at Lancaster University, and drew attention from gesture researchers on social media.

Discussion

- Works well, with or without links to the course material.
  - But particularly useful when there are connections, as with Multimodality.
- Technical setup needs to be figured out in advance.
  - We already have some experience from online teaching.
- How to mark?
  - Not more difficult than a traditional essay.
  - Clear marking criteria so students are not disadvantaged for lacking the ”cultural capital”.
  - Important to align expectations in advance with students and markers.
  - Then students get involved in the process (cf. *curriculum co-creation*)!
- Marks:
  - Not substantially higher than traditional essays.
  - But a little higher – correlates with greater motivation.
  - Not that marks are what’s at stake pedagogically anyway.
- Bigger question: what are marks and assessment even for?

Discussion

- What is assessment supposed to be for? Some typical answers:
  1. Motivate learning.
  2. Evaluate learning.
  3. Provide feedback (improve learning).

- Assessment needs to be marked.
- Marking should be:
  - Fair.
  - Not a source of stress (for students or staff).
  - Easy to carry out.

(e.g. Zuraw et al 2019)

Discussion

- More freedom for students mean we give up some control.
  - Next step: students free to choose their own essay topics.
- How would this work for non-essay courses? We do some of this already:
  - Choose your own paper topic.
  - Bring your own dataset to analyse.
  - Compile your own dataset.
- There are various ways of relinquishing some control, handing agency over to students.
  - Multimodal coursework
  - Skills grading
  - Self-assessment
  - Syllabus co-creation
  - …
- The elephant in the room: do we even need grades? (Blum 2020)

Thank you!

- Our students: Carl Alexandersson, Hester Carpenter, Valerie Creasy, Flame Darinov, Violette Daures, Trudy Kalvinaitė, Lydia Partenio, Marlene Willinger and others.
- Supportive colleagues on the teaching teams for these courses:
  - Lisa Gotthard
  - Patrick Honeybone
  - Bettelou Los
  - Craig Sailor
  - Rob Truswell
  - Wataru Uegaki