Please include this form with the completed proposal. You may either send your proposal electronically as an email attachment to seminars@fas.harvard.edu/or as hard copy to:

Freshman Seminars Program, 6 Prescott Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

The Faculty of the Committee on Freshman Seminars meets occasionally during the fall and regularly through the spring. All proposals will be reviewed by the Committee as soon as possible after they have been received.

Instructor’s Name: Andrew Nevins

Title and Harvard Affiliation: Associate Professor of Linguistics

Email: nevins@fas.harvard.edu Phone #: 5-8107 Fax #: 6-4447

Mailing Address: 317 Boylston Hall

Title of the Seminar: Slips of the Ear

State the semester and year in which you would prefer to hold the seminar: Fall 2009

Please attach to this cover sheet:

1) a 350-500 word course description

2) a draft syllabus outlining the structure, readings, and assignments of the course or, alternatively, a list of topics, required readings, and course assignments.

3) a list of projected course expenses (e.g., guest speakers, theater tickets, etc.); please list as well any course-related trips. A field trip proposal form must be submitted for any off-campus outing, once your seminar proposal has been approved

4) a C.V., if you are a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
Overview:

Reverend Spooner and Sigmund Freud made famous the existence of slips of the tongue, and what they can reveal about the unconscious thoughts that make their way to the articulators of speech. Significantly less scientific attention has been paid to "slips of the ear", during which listeners perceive something that was not what was actually said. Misheard song lyrics (or "mondegreens") provide some of the most well-known (and funny) cases, such as hearing "kiss this guy" instead of "kiss the sky", or "Don't cry for me. Marge and Tina". Noisy auditory environments, the distortions of singing on clear pronunciation, and the effects of two dialects coming into contact all can create ambiguity and uncertainty in the speech signal itself. But some of the real responsibility for slips of the ear comes from the listener, whose expectations about what they are likely to hear may warp their very perception of a clear signal. In this freshman seminar, students will keep a weekly journal of naturally occurring slips of the ear that they observe in their daily lives, report on them in class, and learn the methods of phonetic and semantic analysis that enable making sense of why these slips happen when and to whom.

Course requirements:

* Our class meets weekly for a two hour session (location TBA). Classes are discussion-oriented, and class participation is essential.
* Each week students must keep a weekly journal of naturally occurring slips of the ear, including information about the native language variety of the speaker and of the hearer, the context of conversation, the intended utterance, and the perceived utterance. The number of such weekly entries may vary, but my own experience suggests you will come across at least 10 per week, and this is what I expect for a passing grade.
* In addition to the weekly 'slips journal', some classes may begin with a short in-class writing exercise related to the reading.
* Students will be expected to produce a final (10pp) paper on a particular subphenomenon within slips of the ear (e.g. unstressed vowel misperception, dialect contact, semantic plausibility considerations), with a rough draft to be handed in for feedback by week 9.

Course schedule:

* Weeks 1-3: To understand the nature of this topic, it will be necessary to establish an initial background in phonetic transcription. The first three weeks of class will be devoted to training in phonetic transcription, via slips of the ear themselves.
* Weeks 4-6: As many slips of the ear arise under dialect contact, we will spend three weeks examining the major features differentiating dialects of English (e.g. r-drop in New England, monophthongization in the South, spirantization in Scotland).
Weeks 7-10: Slips of the ear often result from speaker's expectations about what would be a more plausible parse of the speech signal (e.g. "kiss this guy" is a more frequent collocation of words than the abstract meaning achieved by "kiss the sky"). We will spend these three weeks developing tools of semantic analysis and metrics for measuring the plausibility of one parse over another.

Week 11: Influence of syntactic boundaries on the possible slips of the ear.

Week 12: Students will present their individual projects in class and receive feedback from their peers.

Week 13: Finale; in-class "listening party" to famous misheard song lyrics.

Readings will be drawn from the following sources, and photocopies will be made available in class:


Overview: Reverend Spooner and Sigmund Freud made famous the existence of slips of the tongue, and what they can reveal about the unconscious thoughts that make their way to the articulators of speech. Significantly less scientific attention has been paid to "slips of the ear", during which listeners perceive something that was not what was actually said. Misheard song lyrics (or "mondegreens") provide some of the most well-known (and funny) cases, such as hearing "kiss this guy" instead of "kiss the sky", or "Don't cry for me. Marge and Tina". Noisy auditory environments, the distortions of singing on clear pronunciation, and the effects of two dialects coming into contact all can create ambiguity and uncertainty in the speech signal itself. But some of the real responsibility for slips of the ear comes from the listener, whose expectations about what they are likely to hear may warp their very perception of a clear signal. In this freshman seminar, students will keep a weekly journal of naturally occurring slips of the ear that they observe in their daily lives, report on them in class, and learn the methods of phonetic and semantic analysis that enable making sense of why these slips happen when and to whom.

Course requirements:  
- Classes are discussion-oriented, and class participation is essential.  
- Each week students must keep a weekly journal of naturally occurring slips of the ear, including information about the native language variety of the speaker and of the hearer, the context of conversation, the intended utterance, and the perceived utterance. The number of such weekly entries may vary, but my own experience suggests you will come across at least 10 per week, and this is what I expect for a passing grade.  
- In addition to the weekly 'slips journal', some classes may begin with a short in-class writing exercise related to the reading.  
- Students will be expected to produce a final (10pp) paper on a particular subphenomenon within slips of the ear (e.g. unstressed vowel misperception, dialect contact, semantic plausibility considerations), with a rough draft to be handed in for feedback by week 9.

Course schedule  
- To understand the nature of this topic, it will be necessary to establish an initial background in phonetic transcription. The first three weeks of class will be devoted to training in phonetic transcription, via slips of the ear themselves.  
- As many slips of the ear arise under dialect contact, we will spend two weeks examining the major features differentiating dialects of English (e.g. r-drop in New England, monophthongization in the South, spirantization in Scotland).  
- We will then connect slips of the ear to research in speech science, and to the general question of ambiguity and underdetermination in the speech signal, which arises especially in the case of whistled languages and talking-drum languages.
Slips of the ear often result from speaker’s expectations about what would be a more plausible parse of the speech signal (e.g. "kiss this guy" is a more frequent collocation of words than the abstract meaning achieved by "kiss the sky"). We will spend these three weeks developing tools of semantic analysis and metrics for measuring the plausibility of one parse over another.

We will then turn to the influence of syntactic boundaries on the possible slips of the ear. Finally, students will present their individual projects in class and receive feedback from their peers. We will conclude with an in-class “listening party” to famous misheard song lyrics.

Readings will be drawn from the following sources, and photocopies will be made available in class.


Weekly Schedule:
Week 1 (Sept 8): Meeting One Other; Playing “Telephone”; Introduction to the IPA
Week 2 (Sept 15): The IPA Continued, and Rules of English Allophony
Week 3 (Sept 22): Transcription Practice with Song Lyrics
Week 4 (Sept 29): Features of English Dialects: USA
Week 5 (Oct 6): Features of English Dialects: World Englishes
Week 6 (Oct 13): Speech Perception Experiments and Underdetermination
Week 7 (Oct 20): Ambiguity in Whistled Languages and Talking Drum Languages
Week 8 (Oct 27): Introduction to Semantic Plausibility and Frequency Analysis
Week 9 (Nov 3): Application of Frequency Metrics to Slips
Week 10 (Nov 10): Application of Plausibility Metrics to Slips
Week 11 (Nov 17): Influence of Syntactic Boundaries on Slips of the Ear
Week 12 (Nov 24): Presentation of Individual Projects in Class
Week 13 (Dec 1): In-class “Listening Party” to Famous Misheard Song Lyrics