English 402 Final Essay, Fall 2015

General instructions:

please name your file: lastname402final.docx
where lastname is your last name

example: if a student named Rajan were submitting it, the filename would be rajan402final.docx

you may also use file extensions .doc, .rtf, .txt, .pages, or .pdf

Don’t forget to put your name on your essay, give it an appropriate title, and number the pages.

Email your essay to me as an attachment: debaron@illinois.edu

Your exam is due by 4 p.m. on December 16, the date of our scheduled final. You may send it earlier, of course.

Exam Instructions:

Answer each of the questions, giving specific examples as needed. Don’t forget the bonus question at the end (optional, for extra credit). Approximate length, 2500 words. Each essay is worth 20 points. The Bonus question is worth 10 points.

1. How words mean.

In Through the looking-glass, Humpty Dumpty tells Alice, “When I use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.” But for most of us, meaning is more nuanced, more interactive. There’s the dictionary meaning—assuming that the word is in a dictionary; there’s the meaning that the speaker or writer intended; and the meaning that the hearer or reader inferred.

Consider the meaning of the words man and woman in the following dictionaries:

Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language 1755
Noah Webster’s An American dictionary of the English Language 1828
The Century Dictionary 1890
Webster’s Third New International Dictionary 1961
The American Heritage Dictionary 5e
The Oxford English Dictionary
Urban Dictionary

Discuss the ways that these dictionaries differ in defining these words? What important information about meaning do the dictionary definitions of these words fail to capture?
2. How words act.

Words perform actions: everything from “Can I have the salt?” to the words of a wedding ceremony to the Miranda warning shows language performing work. In order for such work to be successful, certain conditions—called happiness conditions—must be met. Giving specific examples, write an essay discussing the happiness conditions that must occur for the following speech acts to be effective:

- a promise
- a threat
- a bet
- giving something or someone a name
- a presidential oath of office

3. How style impacts meaning.

Curzon and Adams present several kinds of style analysis, from a poem by e. e. cummings, to a short comic essay by David Sedaris, to a patient intake medical form (not all style is literary). In addition, we looked at a stylistic choice in the Declaration of Independence and at some of Lincoln’s stylistic choices in the Gettysburg Address.

Some people would argue that English majors have a style of communicating that’s different from that of scientists, artists, or engineers. In your essay, describe in detail some significant stylistic features that distinguish the speech or writing of someone you know who is majoring in English or some other subject. How can such stylistic analysis enrich our understanding of language?

4. The more things change . . .

Language variation is built into language use. Languages change across time and space, and they change across social time and social space as well. Even though such variation is natural, it is often resisted: new words and expressions are condemned, variants from some geographical areas or dis-favored social groups are stigmatized, and uniformity in speech and writing is praised. But such standard speech and writing is only the variant, or dialect, of the group that calls the shots and sets the styles. Discuss the problems inherent in enforcing regularity in language when the system of language seems built on variation.

5. Speak English—it’s the law.

Actually, it’s not—English is not the official language of the United States, but some people wish it were.

In your essay, consider why a single record should cause so much fuss. Consider the provisions of the English Language Unity Act in the context of Better American Speech
Week, the Babel Proclamation, the backlash against bilingual education, and the uproar over a Spanish-language version of the Star-Spangled Banner. What does this reaction to a translation of a patriotic song tell us about the status of English and minority languages in the United States. If English is the global language, spoken by up to 750 million people, can it really be in such danger at home that translation must be forbidden?

**Bonus:**

Explain this XKCD cartoon in light of what you’ve learned about English, the notion of correctness, and the social implications of language: