

*Marisa Brook
& Emily Blamire*

*Mondays and Thursdays
1:05 PM – 2:30 PM*

381: Topics in Sociolinguistics and CMC



**Lecture 6: Language variation and creativity online
July 11, 2019**

LSA Institute, UC Davis

Olson Hall 267

variation and creativity

Before all else: we owe everyone an apology. We really dropped the ball on inclusion last time.

The issue is that in the discussion of the Pavalanathan and Eisenstein (2015) paper, we displayed two slides that contained racially charged language and failed to acknowledge this.

Two of these are spellings of a word referring to Black folks that is “still a racial epithet when used by whites” (Smitherman 1977:42, cf. Spears 1998:239, Widawski 2015:27).

While African-Americans have the option of using it in a reclaimed way, no one else does (Smitherman 1977:42, cf. Spears 1998:239, Widawski 2015:27).

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The study does not pinpoint who used these words and also says nothing about them.

The decisions a) to make those words prominent on the slides and b) to not say anything about them were the wrong calls.

It's especially not okay for a white authority figure at the front of the classroom to just shrug this off.

Here's what we have done: we've removed the slides in question before posting the PowerPoint from Monday on Orbund, and we're going to take a big step back from Eisenstein's work here.

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Thank you so much to those who spoke up about this and invited us to do better. That's exactly what we would want you to have done. We're sorry that anything necessitated it.

We apologize for doing harm.

If anyone would like to discuss this (or anything else!) further, please let us know.

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We've already seen that online nonstandardness can be employed for the sake of **identity, affiliation, self-expression, gatekeeping**, etc.

Sometimes it's sheer playfulness (not at all mutually exclusive with the above).

As it turns out, humans are creative and humorous (Huizinga 1938, etc.), and might mess with **anything** for the sake of entertainment, bonding, parody, mockery, etc. **Anything.**



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Computer-mediated communication is an excellent place to catch humorous language. CMC may even be **more conducive to it** than other media are (Danet et al. 1997, Crystal 2001, Georgakopoulou 2006:549, Baron 2008, etc.).

If so, why might that be?

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Just a few possibilities:

- There are **a lot of people** around who could jump in.
- It's often **fast, brief, interactive, and/or anonymous**

(Danet et al. 1997).

- Written CMC "allows users to reflect on their communication – and play with language – in ways that would be difficult in speech" (Herring 2007, Maybin and Swann 2007:509, Lefler 2011:23).

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Two possibilities for studying the crossroads of **language and humor**:

1. When people are being humorous, what linguistic resources are they drawing on as part of that? (We'll call this '**language of humor**'.)
2. How do people mess with language itself? (We'll call this '**language play**'.)

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Language of humor: e.g.
Vásquez (2019):

Several case studies in
online humor and what
linguistic elements go into
these.



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1. Novelty Twitter accounts (accounts maintained and written by humans, but intended to be entertaining, thought-provoking, and/or satirical).

Vásquez examines e.g. **@birdsrightsactivitist** (parody of online anti-feminists) and **@KimKierkegaardashian** (an unexpected juxtaposition).

Other examples: **@A_single_bear** (a bear in a forest), **@SICKOFWOLVES** (“NOT A WOLF”), **@dog_feelings** (“Thoughts of Dog”), **@RikerGoogling** (Google history of William T. Riker from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*)

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2. Tumblr chats

“[A]rguably less mainstream” than other platforms:

- usernames are typically pseudonyms;
- flexible – between microblogging and blogging;
- multimodal – GIFs load automatically;
- community is young and free-spirited; focus on “acceptance and inclusivity”, arts and crafts, and progressive politics;
- gathering place in particular for LGBTQIA+ folks.

(Vásquez 2019:29).



despicabledane:

chill-oh:

sometimes-butts:

ibnuprofen:

hotdog-friend:

is that butter

no it's stonehenge

I can't believe it's not butter

I'm so done with this site

God i thought it was cheese is something wrong with me

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Tumblr has received less attention than other platforms, but it has a distinctive userbase, collective identity, sense of humor, etc.

Previous slide suggests room for research on (e.g.):

- total lack of punctuation;
- minimal capitalization;
- humorous violations of Gricean maxims;
- what is assumed to be in the Common Ground?

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3. Amazon parody reviews

Items on Amazon that attract bogus reviews, for the sake of:

- political commentary
- entertainment
- propagating a meme (often a snowball effect)

Can anyone think of any examples?

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Three Wolf Moon T-shirt (Vásquez 2019): One person posted a goofy pretend review in 2008, and now there have been **more than two thousand** that have followed suit.

Often said to confer the wearer with various properties of conventional mainstream heterosexual masculinity.

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Hutzler 571 Banana Slicer (Vásquez 2019):



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Chandler, AZ

★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆ **3 bananas at most! No way to slice 571 bananas at one time...**

May 9, 2017

Package Quantity: 1 | Size: 11.25" | **Verified Purchase**

My expectations may have been a little high, but I have not been able to successfully slice more than 3 bananas at one time. Not sure how Hutzler can claim to slice 571 bananas with this model. A video demonstrating the proper technique would help.

For that reason I'd rate this item only 3 out of 571 stars, but Amazon's rating system does not seem to be compatible with this product so I dropped an additional star.

200 people found this helpful

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Marisa's favorite: the book *How to Avoid Huge Ships* by John W. Trimmer.



Dan

★☆☆☆☆ **TOO Informative.**

December 25, 2010

Format: Paperback

Read this book before going on vacation and I couldn't find my cruise liner in the port. Vacation ruined.

7,514 people found this helpful

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So that's language *of* humor.


How about messing *with* language for the sake of humor – i.e. language play?

 **ace-nyctophyle**

any noun can become a verb if you don't care enough

 **yupokaysuremhm**

This point is invalid unless you use an example in your sentence

 **ace-nyctophyle**

I CAN SENTENCE HOW I WANT THANK

 **yupokaysuremhm**


BEAUTIFUL

 **mysterytinyfox**

you see thats why i love english

 **ailithnight**


I like to velociraptor around my house at 2 in the morning.

 **ace-nyctophyle**

GOOD

 **not-to-be-a-tea-but-brit**

My headache makes me want to clothesline into a wall

 **enquires-state-building**

why do these make some semblance of sense 😬

 **roseverdict**

Because brains don't brain logically

 **couldbeglorious**

Brains do brain logically! But when english doesn't logic englishly, brain brains by itself to logic that english !

 **swampxwitchxhattie**

I hate that this makes sense

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Language play appears to be a cultural universal
(Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Sherzer 1976:1, Crystal 1998:53).

But there has been **very little work on it** from the
direction of linguistics (Crystal 1998).

Not exclusive to the Internet, but CMC affords a
gazillion opportunities to study it.

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Some studies target **emergent CMC registers**.

These are shared ways of being nonstandard that might start as memes but turn into a **way of using language** more generally.

A few examples from English...

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Leetspeak or **leet** or **1337** (Blashki and Nichol 2005):

1|= \|0u |{4N r34|) t|-|15
t|-|3N \|0u i5 t3|-| |_337

"If you can read this
then you is teh leet" (Blashki and Nichol 2005:83)

Typographical play and some language play.

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<https://www.google.com/?hl=xx-hacker>

The Google logo is displayed in its standard multi-colored font: blue 'G', red 'o', yellow 'o', blue 'g', green 'l', and red 'e'.

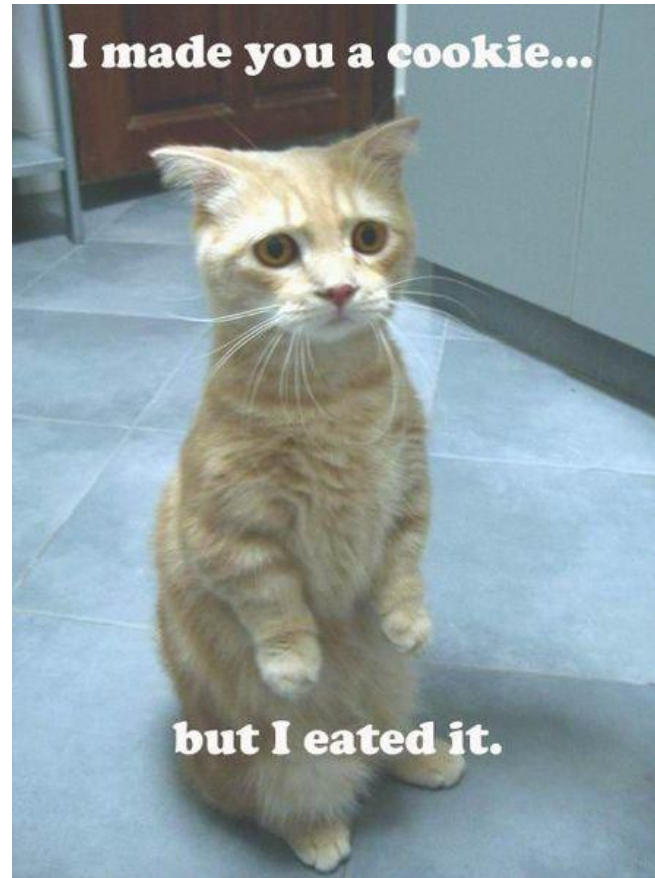
Google s3a|2ch

EyE Am ph33|1n6 |u(ky

Google offered in: [English](#)

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LOLspeak or LOLcats or LOLcatspeak (Lefler 2011, Gawne and Vaughan 2011):



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Dis mah hoomin. Hez ossim. (Lefler 2011:31)

"This is my human. He's awesome."

kittehs can see in teh dark An not tripz over nethin"

(Gawne and Vaughan 2011:102)

"Cats can see in the dark, and not trip over anything."

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gorpman/bleemer 2020 stan account @Theophite · 4h

one of my favorite technical problems of the 2010s is that it's very difficult to screen lolcats out of training sets about cats, so you get stuff like this in every GAN output set



1



18



53



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Doge (McCulloch 2014):



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Peterson (2014): these registers “develop so quickly, and leave such an extensive record, they offer linguists a chance to observe linguistic change with a precision that would be impossible [otherwise].”

Sometimes begin life as the equivalents of **secret codes**, but might go mainstream (Peterson 2014).

No one learns these in L1-like ways, so the ways in which they bend/break the rules must be something adults can **learn** to do.

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The “locus” of the nonstandardness in playful English registers of CMC has shifted from **typography/spelling** to **morphosyntax** over time (McCulloch 2014).

Plenty of room here to probe further: e.g.:

- Is this a **coincidence**, or a predictable effect of technological change?
- Is it happening in CMC in **other languages** as well? (Research on other languages’ online incarnations is **sorely lacking**.)
- Are there any **analogues** of e.g. leetspeak now that we’re well into the era of GIFs, videos, and emoji?

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There has been a bit of work on deliberate nonstandardness across languages. Peterson (2014) offers a little overview of a couple of them (...and a sample of some mainstream language ideologies, e.g. the American South being considered worthy of contempt, and an unusual definition of 'dialect').

- *Fakatsa* (typographical play) in young women's Hebrew blogs in Israel;
- 'Martian' language: used by Mandarin speakers in China online, both for entertainment and in order to get around Internet censorship. Now officially banned by authorities.

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Your professors are at work on a quantitative investigation of language play across forums. Preview from Brook and Blamire (2018a, 2018b) presentations!

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Examples from advertising:

We deliver *clever*Ø along with cookies

Suck on that ice cold popsicle of *awful*Ø

Dorky music gets injected with *awesome*Ø

Your kid stole all the *adorable*Ø

My voice changes when I see *cute*Ø

Conversion common in English (Lieber 2005:418; Szymanek 2005:433), but discussion mainly about noun-verb conversion (*to impact*) or vice versa (*an ask*).

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Modra (2018) in *The Guardian*: “The new thing is turning adjectives into nouns. Use Nutella and you’re **‘spreading the happy’**; shop at Sephora and you’re **‘celebrating your extraordinary’**; connect to the internet with AT&T and you’re **‘rethinking possible’**. If you cannot keep up, La Trobe University will help you to **‘find your clever’**.”

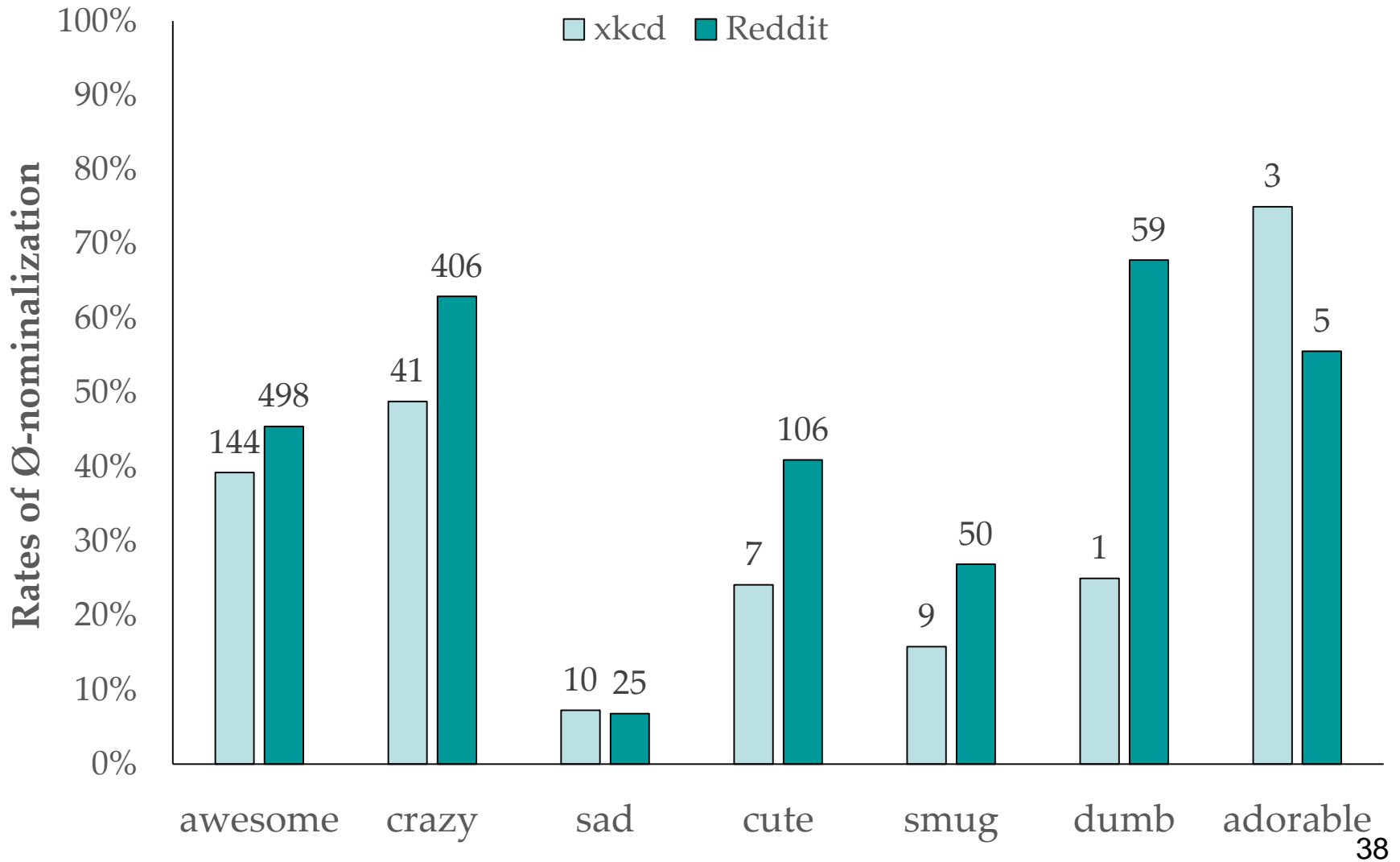
Lighter (2015): adjective-noun conversion becoming very common and is ultimately “syntactical rather than lexical”.

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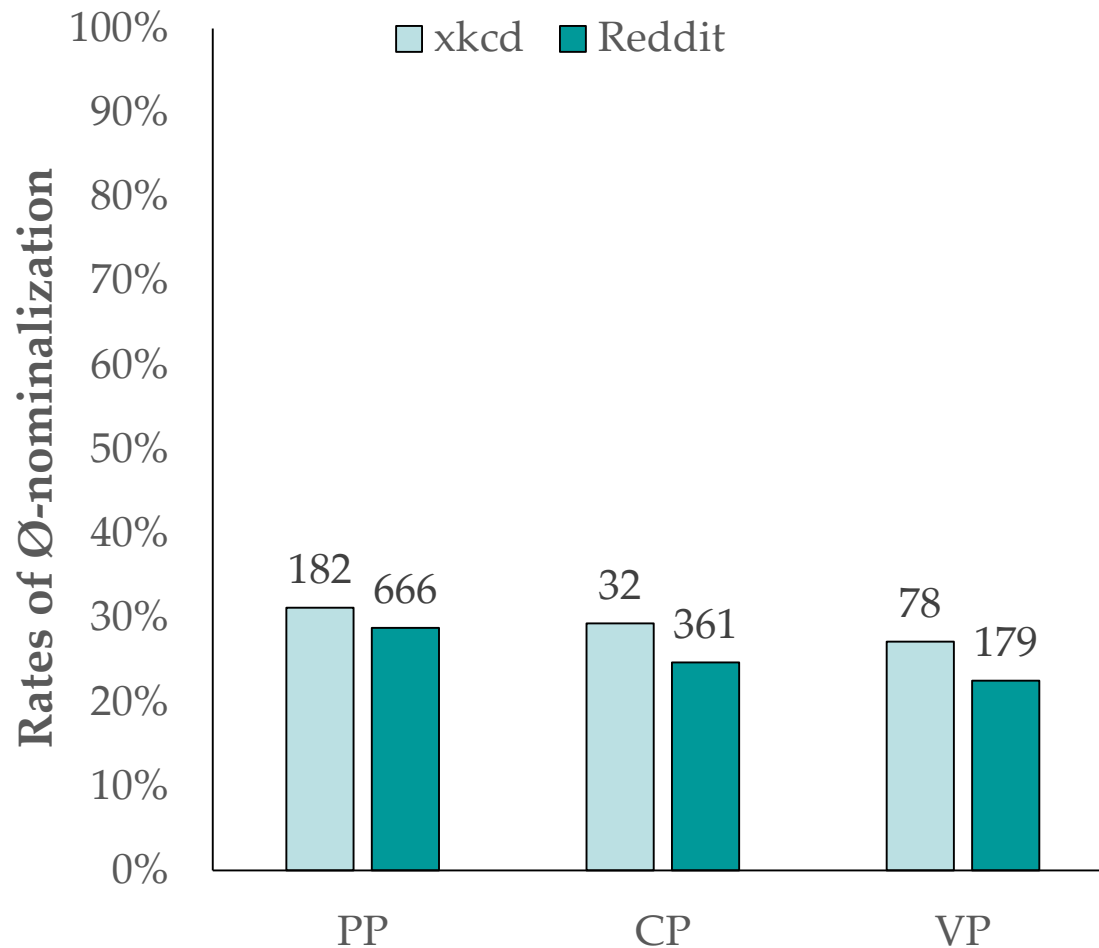
We scraped the *xkcd* forum (2006-2015) and also used a sample from the Complete Public Reddit Comments Corpus (Baumgartner 2015).

No one here is identified: all in aggregate.

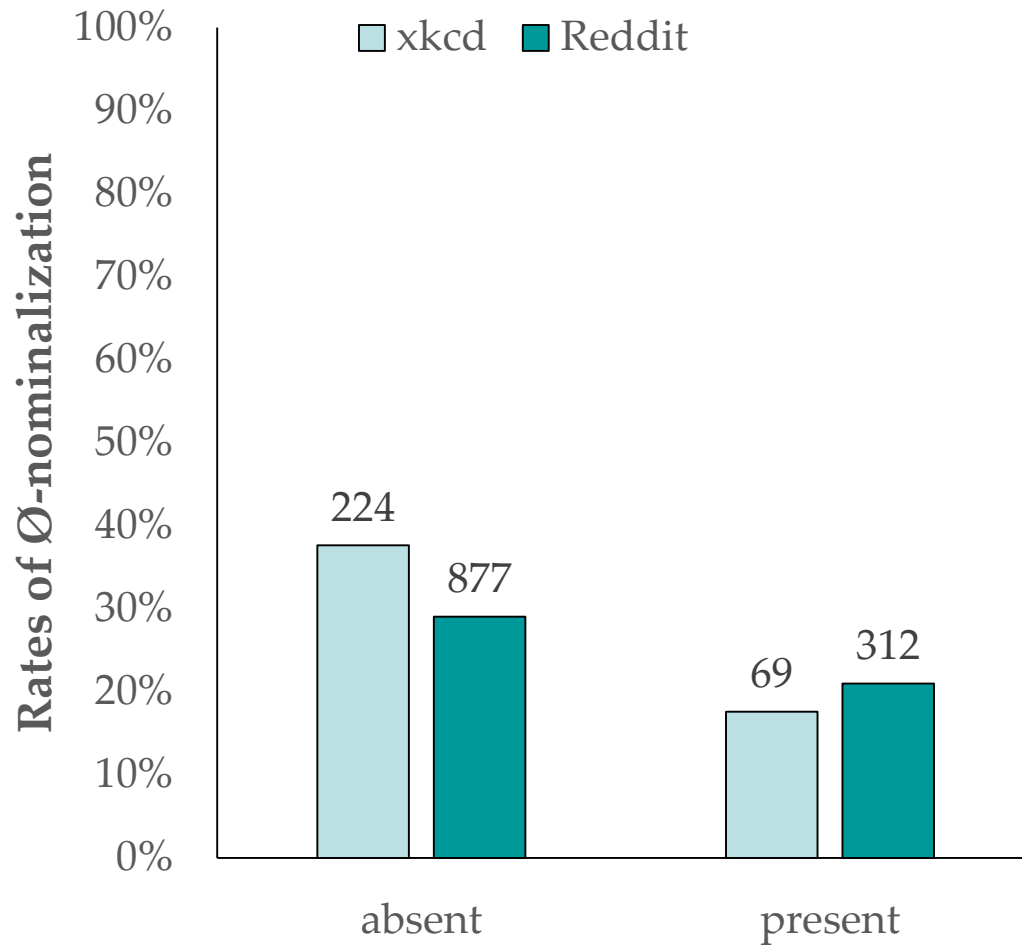
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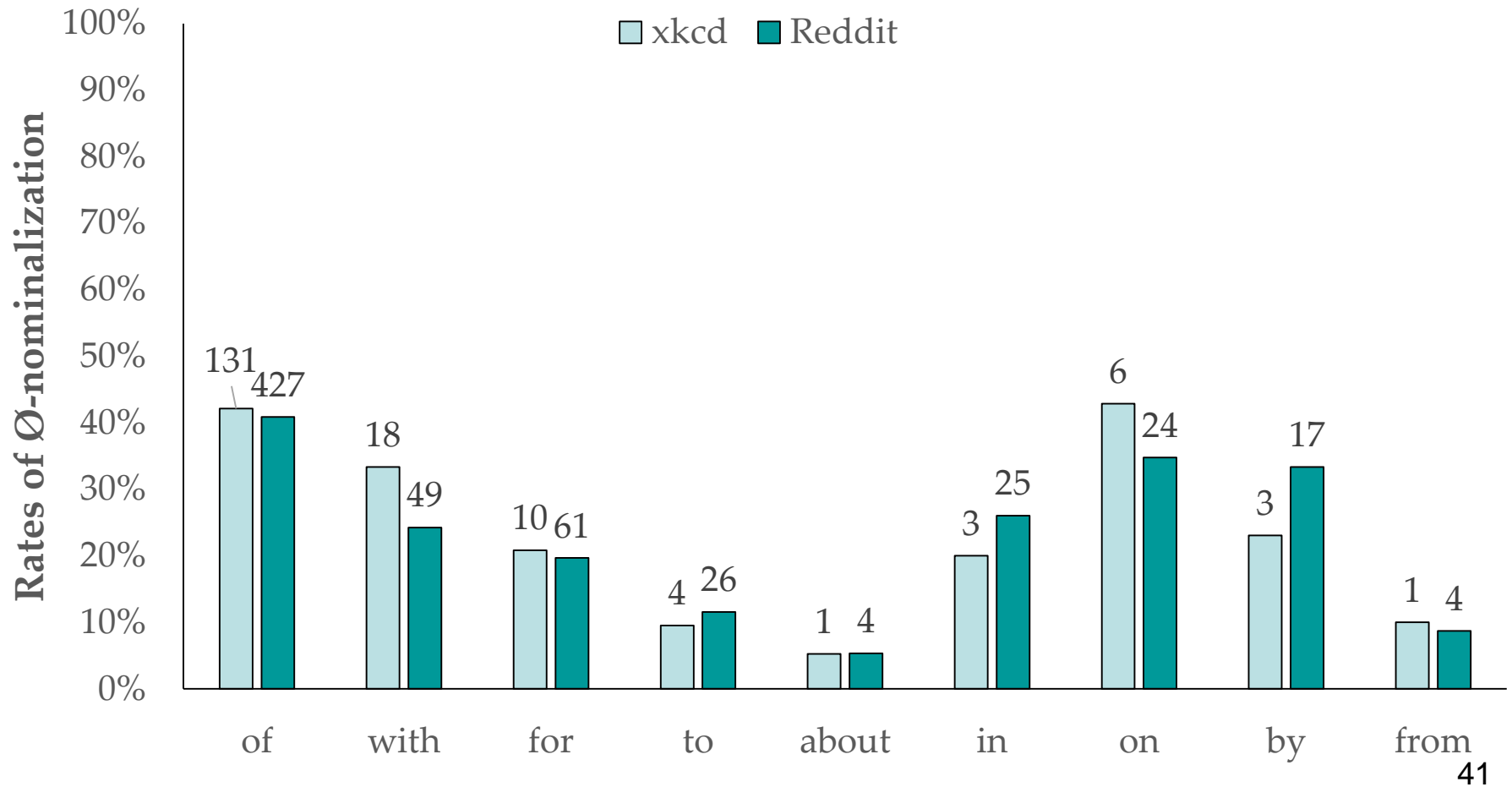
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When people break the rules, they still have to adhere to *other* rules (cf. McCulloch 2014, Blamire 2017).

We find strong support for this idea from variationist methodology. While rooted in deliberate nonstandardness, (*ness* ~ \emptyset) variation **is orderly and rule-governed**.

Driven by a need to demonstrate that zero-derived nominals are not actually adjectives, even though they look like them.

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Lots of potential here at the crossroads of language play and **communities**, too.

If **memes** tend to start out as inside jokes between friends, studying humor within CoPs or social networks online could be highly informative!

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With that in mind, let's look at Garley and Slade (2016) on cyberpunk discussions and morphology.

They tackle “the question of which methods of word-formation are most characteristic and productive within cyberpunk discussions online from the late 1980s to the present day” (Garley and Slade 2016:124).

“[T]he large-scale use of such lexical innovations in the context of such a subculture is not well-researched” (Garley and Slade 2016:124).

Maybe you could do a study of an online subculture/language/register that could supplement this one? 😊

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Data from a sequence of cyberpunk forums: almost 5 million words in total. Plus a sample of cyberpunk literature as a comparison/model.

These span a temporal range (26 years). Note the diachronic element (Garley and Slade 2016:124) and the link to **historical sociolinguistics**.

Not necessarily all having the same users or exact community sensibilities; looking for signs of broader cyberpunk culture and their linguistic manifestations.

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Survey of word-formation methods: clipping, blends, compounding, etc.

Some overlap with leetspeak, e.g. *pwn*, *w00t*

(Garley and Slade 2016:134)

Tendency to create new bound morphemes e.g.

'cyber-', '-ware' (Hock and Joseph 1996, Bauer 2004, Zwicky 2010).

Combination of clipping and compounding, e.g. *trodenet*, particularly distinctive in cyberpunk – model of pre-existing cases with futuristic/technological/totalitarian connotations? (Garley and Slade 2016:142-143).

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What are some other subcultures (either online ones, or subcultures with a considerable online presence) that might be particularly eager to coin lots of words and/or play with morphology?

(Legit answer: “linguists.”)

Next class: Monday, July 15

Preview the Lecture 7 readings and read **one or more** of them.
Post two **discussion questions** on Orbund.

Homework 3 is due on Monday.

The **proposal and quick presentation** are due on Thursday.

