

LSA Civility Panel: Power Dynamics in Linguistics

We can't eat prestige and won't eat crumbs.

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Power in linguistics, as in higher education in general but particularly at the schools where linguistics is most frequently taught, reflects a historical privileging of White male ideas and then the narration that we should all accept those values and norms to also be accepted. If not, the rhetoric goes, there will be direct consequences. There are a host of topics, in particular, that aren't seen as linguistics – the power dynamic reaches all the way to the scope of discipline, with the common exclusionary phrase “that's not linguistics” and naming in an exclusionary fashion what we value is a popular rhetorical device among linguists to the tune of mocking those who assume linguists “speak many languages” (To which I tell all of my students: You ought to!)

White male supremacy, in all contexts is predicated on fear and exclusion. And so accordingly there is a fear quality in linguistics that belies empowerment—fear of doing the work you actually care about, fear of saying the wrong thing, fear about what job you take or who you reach out to that prevents some of the squelching of the power dynamic because people fall back on pragmatic notions of “I have to because there just aren't that many jobs.” I picked this topic of the power dynamic on purpose from the choices that Penny Eckert offered to invited panelists because the pragmatic argument in higher education has never served African-American women, so I was happy to take it head on. Our topics are always marginal, our bodies are always controversial, and so the entire notion of this pragmatic model as a successful one falls on its head. Learn with us. We have to speak more openly about these issues for the system to actually work. We can replace fear with inclusion and love.

To do so, we need to have more transparent discussions about how jobs in higher education are financed, generated and brought to market. We also need to talk more about structural bias throughout the process down to the last negotiation. I intentionally teach at public institutions because of the greater range of diversity among the student bodies and because I believe, even in this era, in democratic education. Yet in larger questions and in smaller ones, I'm often taken aside and questioned about this decision. People often do so “in my best interest” but without critical information about the support as an African-American woman that public institutions offer because of their missions that private institutions often don't. Beware of who is narrating your “fear of exclusion” models.

We also need to build an explicit vocal empowerment model that doesn't rest on the notion of people speaking out and putting their individual livelihoods at risk but of one that addresses these structural power dynamic issues. In this way, we don't blame those impacted and they have a structural way to share ideas and bring about change.

I do research in K-12 and education and higher education and within educational research professional organizations and societies there are stronger societies in place to support students and faculty are more comprehensively in place. If we don't have the time or infrastructure to re-create discipline specific models, then we should be students of theirs.

We can't eat prestige—and won't eat crumbs. The privileging of certain sources of grant funding, ranking of institutions and privileging of sub disciplines are all power dynamics evolve way too much around the elite nature and structure of linguistics. Yet women, particularly women of color, do work that doesn't often meet these arbitrary criteria, such that the work and our discipline is gendered and racialized in nature.

There is still a lot of discourse about whether the LSA is for everyone—whether it is relevant. Whether *Language* would publish certain work. I wondered all of these things myself.

Here at this very LSA annual meeting, I'm working with three teams of people to take these issue head on. One group is working on a proposed LSA statement on race, one is working on collaboration in linguistics, and one is working on discrimination in linguistics. I share in the hopes that you will join us and support such work.

All three groups are important because to disrupt this power dynamic, we need to shift and share decision making about who is privileged and how in linguistics in formative ways that will take research and effort.

Regarding the race panel: Intentionally Brings More People into the Conversation

A persistent and contributing factor to the lack of formal discussion about race within linguistics, specifically in the U.S., may be the serious underrepresentation in linguistics of African-American and Latinx students and faculty, as well as those from other traditionally underrepresented groups. In 2015, according to the Linguistic Society of America's annual report, "The population of ethnic minorities with advanced degrees in linguistics is so low in the U.S. that none of the federal agencies report data for these groups" (LSA 2015:16; see also Rickford 2014).

Moreover, the leadership within the Linguistic Society of America has also seen serious underrepresentation by linguists of color. Among the small group of linguists of color who are current or past members of the Executive Committee, areas of interest are disproportionately in the realm of syntax and theoretical linguistics, representing a small slice of linguistic scholarship.

Regarding the Collaboration Panel: Shifts the Power and Authority Dynamic

As my colleague Jeff Good (University of Buffalo) writes: "In principle, the kinds of knowledge held by linguists should allow the field to be at the center of interdisciplinary collaborations and to have a significant impact on issues of relevance to the general public. However, such possibilities are often under realized, largely because scholars from other disciplines and members of the public are not sufficiently aware of linguistics to know when the expertise of linguists is important for addressing a research or social concern.

On the whole, it seems clear that, in order to increase the impact of the work going on within the field, linguists need to more seriously consider how to engage individuals and groups working within the language sciences and related areas, as well as representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations whose work intersects with linguistic issues.”

In this way, power is shifted and our collaborators and communities become authorities. My collaborations with Christine Mallinson (UMBC) are education and applied facing—two areas that are frequently marginalized within linguistics. Our work dismantles barriers and seeks to re-intellectualize applied and community issues within a larger social justice framework. On the flipside, when we exclude those in education and applied arenas from our academic conversations, why would they—even those who are academics themselves, then want to partner with us? The larger exclusionary nature of linguistics has often made our restorative work more challenging. We need you to work with us to do the work our people, those who are Black and Southern in particular, need.

Regarding climate within in linguistics:

I’m working with a fantastic group of junior scholars on the climate within linguistics. They are: Dr. Corrine Occhino, Research Asst. Professor in the Center on Cognition and Language at Rochester Institute of Technology, in Rochester, NY, Dr. Savithry Nambodiripad, Assistant Prof at the University of Michigan, and Dr. Lynn Hou, a University of California President’s Post-Doctoral Fellow at The University of California, San Diego.

The work is intended to further examine the problem of discrimination in linguistics and bring light onto the issues that are being discussed on this panel (e.g., the degree to which certain sub-disciplines are straight male-dominated or lab-centric have been hypothesized as contributing to negative climate). The best-case outcome is that this helps move "the conversation" about harassment towards action: identification of problem areas, informed structural changes, and public reckoning with the pervasiveness of these issues. We encourage you all to share your experiences here: https://umich.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9oaKQ2xrX9ngmOx

I conclude by saying that strong researchers know that we are all students and that it takes all of us at all levels to make a university run. For 13 years I worked at the College of William and Mary where the longest standing employee was a chef in the kitchen who was a cousin of mine. Abuse of students and disrespect of staff should be called out for what they are: ignorance. Yet many of us are unintentionally ignorant, so we have to consciously work to mitigate that ignorance. Study policies of student and worker’s rights—they pertain to you and your work and to the LSA. These matters are not tangential to us as a discipline or a society; they are the very foundation on which the study of language, communication, and humanity are laid.

Reference: Charity Hudley, Anne H. and Mallinson, Christine. 2017. We Must Go Home Again: Interdisciplinary Models of Progressive Partnerships to Promote Linguistic Justice in the New South. In *Language Variation in the South IV*. University of North Carolina Press.