Methods for increasing equity, diversity, and inclusion in linguistics pedagogy

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Language-based biases

Language-based biases

Linguists have come to a general consensus that **all languages and all language varieties are valid**, not just as objects of study within linguistics, but **as ways of using language**.

However, as we are painfully aware, society doesn't pay very much attention to what linguists have to say, so many languages are marginalized, disadvantaged, stigmatized, and oppressed:

- non-standard dialects
- sign languages
- minoritized languages
- Indigenous languages

Language-based biases

And don't get comfortable or smug! Despite our general consensus, we linguists still need to clean up our own house, too.

Language-based biases

We are often subject to **external institutional biases**, such as being expected to promote and evaluate student fluency in standardized English, which disproportionately disadvantages minoritized students, immigrants, students with learning differences, poorer students, etc.

Our own individual **unconscious biases** can lead to common linguistic microaggressions, such as mispronouncing a minoritized student's name or misgendering or deadnaming a trans/non-binary student. These microaggressions can have severe detrimental effects on a student's mental health and academic success (Kohli and Solórzano 2012, Bucholtz 2016, Russell et al. 2018, Cochran 2019, McMaster 2020).

Language-based biases

Language-based biases also permeate linguistics as field.

Our linguistic examples often reinforce **unjust hierarchies and stereotypes**, such as those concerning gender and culture (Macaulay and Brice 1997, Pabst et al. 2018, Richy and Burnett 2019, Kotek et al. 2020).

We also often present **spoken language as the default**, leaving students with minimal understanding of sign languages, sign language linguistics, or Deaf communities.

Language-based biases

As linguists, we should know better and do better.

Following in the spirit of Saussure's "tâche du linguiste" (1916) and many recent calls to action for increased attention to issues of social justice in linguistics (Rickford and King 2016, Leonard 2018, Conrod 2019, Charity Hudley 2020, etc.), **we call upon linguists to combat language-based biases in their teaching**.

We single out teaching here specifically because that is where we begin training **the next generation of linguists**. No matter how aware we might be of our language-based biases, if we do nothing about them, we will pass them on to our students.

Language-based biases

In the remainder of this talk, we describe an ongoing initiative in which we try to heed our own call to action on this issue.

Overview of our EDI initiative

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In the fall of 2018 at the University of Toronto, there was serendipitous synergy between ongoing conversations in the sociolinguistics research group and a recent faculty hire, **Professor Nathan Sanders**, who had a specific interest in social justice and pedagogy and was just beginning to teach a new first-year seminar he had designed on language and social justice.

Nathan worked with **Professor Keren Rice** and **Professor Naomi Nagy**, in consultation with members of the sociolinguistics group and the department at large, to write a grant for the Learning & Education Advancement Fund through the Faculty of Arts & Science at UofT, titled **"Innovations in Linguistic Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the Linguistics Curriculum and Beyond"**.

Overview of our EDI initiative

The grant was approved, and for three years beginning with the most recent academic year (2019–2020), we have funding to pay for two full-time graduate student positions (Lead Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Teaching Assistants). The first two Lead EDI TAs to be hired were **Pocholo Umbal** and **Lex Konnelly**.

Overview of our EDI initiative

The main goals of our EDI initiative are to:

- raise explicit awareness of language-related bias in **course content**
- **diversify data** away from major spoken European languages
- create more **inclusive and welcoming learning spaces**
- build a **repository** of resources and tools for instructors
- bring in **guest speakers**

For this first year, our primary strategy was to collaborate with instructors for two courses per semester to devise individualized approaches that suited their needs, while also satisfying our goals, though we also worked on projects behind the scenes separate from specific courses.

Components

Components: #1 Course content

Working with Nathan's introductory phonetics course in the fall, we expanded three weeks of the course material to bring an explicit focus to **language-based bias as content** the students were expected to learn.

Components: #1 Course content (a)

First, in the unit on modelling vowel acoustics, we added content concerning **gender diversity** to problematize the notion of "typical male/female" vocal tracts.

We are often taught to calculate resonant frequency of the vocal tract using a default of 17.5 cm vocal tract length. We are also told that this length is "typical" (Gobl and Chasaide 2010:380) or "average" (Behrman 2018:216) or "neutral"(?!) (Howard and Angus 2017:225) for adult males.

This perpetuates male as a default (already a problem in the sciences) and masks body diversity within and across genders.

Components: #1 Course content (b)

Then, in the unit on auditory perception, we added content concerning the **effect of social biases on speech perception**.

Speech perception is often taught very mechanically, with primary or sole focus on the physical functions of the auditory canal, the inner ear, the cochlea, etc. However, there is much research showing that social information also plays an important role in perception, so we cannot rely on auditory perception alone.

For example, native speakers of Canadian English are perceived as less intelligible if they are Chinese and their faces are visible; the effect goes away for white speakers, or when Chinese faces are hidden (Babel and Russell 2015). This has many social impacts that students need to be aware of, for example, in how they may subconsciously rate racialized instructors worse than white instructors.

Components: #1 Course content (c)

Finally, in the unit on sign language phonetics (itself an addition Nathan had made before this initiative), we added content concerning how **sign languages are often minimized or excluded in linguistics**.

Spoken languages are the assumed default in linguistics. Linguistics courses are regularly taught with no significant discussion of sign languages, but analogous courses with no significant discussion of spoken languages are rare, and where they do exist, they are usually overtly marked with "sign language" in the course title ("sign language phonetics", etc.).

In addition, it is quite common for an undergraduate linguistics major to never even work with any sign language data at all, but the reverse, for an undergraduate major to never work with any spoken language data, would be viewed by most linguists as highly improper.

Components: #1 Course content (c)

This attitude implicitly treats sign languages and Deafness as atypical phenomena that can be minimized or even outright ignored. By extension, it implies that Deaf people can be ignored, mirroring society at large (for example, ASL and LSQ are not recognized as official languages of Canada).

Further, by focusing primarily or exclusively on spoken languages, our field misses out on a huge amount of relevant knowledge from other modalities.

Worse still, linguists often behave as if this knowledge isn't important, frequently making broad proclamations about how "language" works, without having ever checked to see what sign languages do.

Components: #2 Diverse data

We also worked with **Professor Peter Jurgec** for his introductory phonology course in the fall.

In this course, our focus was on replacing or supplementing data away from major standardized European languages.

In addition to creating new ordinary phonology datasets from languages such as Cantonese, Sundanese, and Tagalog, we also created datasets demonstrating sociolinguistic variation and change in lesser-studied language varieties such as Faroese, Ganluo Ersu, and Toronto Heritage Russian.

Components: #3 Inclusive classroom practices

We also organized **workshops** with instructors and teaching assistants in both fall semester courses to discuss best practices for teaching a diverse student body.

Our focus was two-fold. First, **general social respect** for students: their gender, name, etc.

But given that we are linguists, we also wanted to highlight how to respect a student's linguistic background, especially with an eye towards **empowering students as language experts**.

Components: #4 Repository

We are also planning to store our materials into an **online repository**, so that other instructors across the world can use them.

In addition to the lecture notes, datasets, and homework problems we have been working on with instructors this past year, we are also working to build databases to help linguists construct more diverse and inclusive example sentences.

Components: #4 Repository

We are in the midst of building a **database of names** for each letter of the English alphabet. These names come from a variety of languages and cultures, categorized by gender (feminine, masculine, non-binary), and are being confirmed with native speakers:

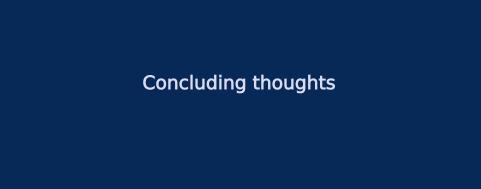| feminine	masculine	non-binary	language
Anuhea	Akoni	Akela	Hawai'ian
Bayarmaa	Batzorig	Batu	Mongolian
Chana	Chayim	Chesed	Hebrew
Damla	Demir	Deniz	Turkish
Eirian	Elwyn	Eryl	Welsh
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
Zuriñe	Zuzen	Zorion	Basque

Components: #4 Repository

We also plan to build a **database of predicates and sentence frames**, categorized by argument structure and other relevant syntactic and semantic properties.

Our goal is to select predicates and sentence frames that avoid the more problematic and offensive types that linguists often gravitate to: violence, gender stereotypes, etc.

Components: #5 Expert guest speakers

Beginning next year, we will invite **guest speakers** to address various aspects of social justice and its relationship to linguistics. Our first speaker is Professor Anne Charity Hudley from the University of California, Santa Barbara, who is scheduled to speak in the coming fall.

Concluding thoughts

Concluding thoughts

Time management and advanced preparation are key.

First semester went fairly smoothly, because we had time before the semester began to brainstorm ideas and make an action plan.

Second semester was rougher. The time between semesters is both very short and suboptimal for work (holidays, travel, family, etc.).

Thus, it's crucial to **start planning out the entire year during the summer**, rather than trying to plan one semester at a time.

Concluding thoughts

The nature of the course matters.

Sociolinguistics and field methods are already naturally predisposed to discussing issues of language-based biases, so we didn't even bother targeting them in this first year.

Phonology was fairly easy to work on, because datasets are generally easier to find and work with by non-experts.

Concluding thoughts

But syntax is hard! We worked with **Professor Susana Béjar** for her introductory syntax course in the second semester, and it was difficult to find datasets that could be easily slotted into her materials.

And semantics is harder! We worked with **Professor Guillaume Thomas** for his introductory semantics course in the second semester. The goal here was to think more broadly about how semantics is taught. The language of instruction is also often used as the object language for analysis, which can be difficult for L2 learners (especially if they are expected to make subtle semantic and pragmatic distinctions that even native speakers struggle with).

Concluding thoughts

Expertise and buy-in matter.

Phonetics and phonology also happened to be easier because the three of us have more collective expertise in those fields than in syntax and semantics. This made it easier for us to judge how best to adapt our initiative to the relevant courses. Next year, the plan is to bring in someone with syntax/semantics expertise.

And obviously, this won't work without instructor buy-in. As PI of this initiative, I am fully committed, and we are grateful that Professors Jurgec, Béjar, and Thomas happily volunteered to participate. Without their buy-in, this would have been a lot more difficult. We are fortunate that our department as a whole has been enthusiastic and supportive.

Concluding thoughts

Funding helps.

The most important reason this initiative has succeeded is because of Pocholo and Lex's many hours of hard work, work they could not have done (and I would not have asked them to do) without proper financial compensation.

While availability for funding may vary, we encourage you to look for what may be available at your institution. The grant we received was a teaching grant, which many research faculty aren't aware of. Be creative!

Concluding thoughts

Wrap-up: In this talk, we have provided a model that we hope will inspire other linguists to answer our **call to action** to combat language-based biases in their teaching. As we have shown, there are many ways to address these issues: content, data, methods, tools, experts. Pick and choose what works for you!

Caveat: We don't have all the answers. There are pieces of the puzzle we're missing, and there are surely some we're getting wrong. There are countless manifestations of bias and countless valid solutions. No one group or individual can do this perfectly. This is a communal effort, and we must all contribute and support each other.

Thank you!

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Appendix: Evaluation of effectiveness

As part of our evaluation of the effectiveness of the program, we plan to conduct student surveys in future years:

1. Before taking this course, how would you rate your own knowledge of the social complexity of the world? [1–4]

2. How much did this course expand your knowledge or reaffirm your knowledge of the social complexity of the world? [1–4]

3. How relevant do you think this course's content is to the social complexity of the world? [1–4]

4. What social aspects of the world do you feel could have been relevant but weren't addressed (or were not addressed well) in this course? Do you feel that your social identities were fairly and accurately represented in this course? [free response]