

# Centering linguistic diversity and justice in course design

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# Language-based biases

# Language-based biases

As linguists, we are very aware that many languages and language varieties are marginalized, disadvantaged, stigmatized, and oppressed and many ways:

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

This is a problem in society at large, but **linguists are part of society!**  
So our field also exhibits language-based biases, at a variety of levels.

# Language-based biases

One major source is **external institutional bias**.

For example, as instructors, we are typically expected to promote and evaluate student fluency in a standardized variety of the dominant local spoken language (e.g. formal academic English).

Students who use language varieties farther from this idealized target tend to come from populations that are already disadvantaged for other reasons (racism, ableism, classism, etc.), so **this adds yet another barrier to their academic success** (Fletcher 1983, Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2011, Lippi-Green 2012, Flores and Rosa 2015, Blundon 2016).

# Language-based biases

As individuals who are shaped by a biased society, we are also subject to our own **unconscious biases**.

For example, we may commit common linguistic microaggressions, such as mispronouncing a minoritized student's name or misgendering or deadnaming a trans/non-binary student.

These kinds of 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.

Research in many subfields of linguistics has often been (and continues to be) **lopsided in favour of a small number of major spoken languages, especially English** (Linell 1982, Bender 2011, Woll 2013, Levisen 2019).

This research bias had created a lens through which other languages and their structures are treated as exceptional and potentially ignorable (as is often the case with sign languages).

# Language-based biases

Not only does linguistic work show a bias towards socially powerful languages, but we often present example data that reflects and reinforces other 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).



# Language-based biases

As experts on language, we are particularly equipped to know better, so **we should do better** (Rickford and King 2016, Leonard 2018, Conrod 2019, Charity Hudley 2020, Sanders et al. 2020).

This is especially important to remember in the classroom, where we are modelling behaviour and viewpoints that will be passed on to the next generation of linguists. If we don't correct for these biases, they will persist.

# Language-based biases

In the rest of this presentation, I'll offer some concrete ways that these biases can be addressed, based on an ongoing initiative in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Toronto.

# Overview of our EDI initiative

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Working with Professors Keren Rice and Naomi Nagy, I was awarded a three-year grant from the Learning & Education Advancement Fund through the Faculty of Arts & Science at the University of Toronto, titled “Innovations in Linguistic Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the Linguistics Curriculum and Beyond”.

I want to highlight this step, because **funding is key!** Projects like this can be a lot of work, and if you are getting graduate students to do it, their labour needs to be compensated. Be creative in seeking out funding sources. Many research faculty may not be aware that their institutions have dedicated funds for teaching and learning projects.

# Overview of our EDI initiative

Beginning with the most recent academic year (2019–2020), the grant funds two full-time graduate student positions for two semesters per year, for three years. The first two such Lead Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Teaching Assistants for the project are **Lex Konnelly** and **Pocholo Umbal**, who have been phenomenal and will be continuing with the project into its second year.



# Overview of our EDI initiative

The main goals of this project are to:

- raise explicit awareness of language-related bias in **course content**
- **diversify data** away from the usual suspects
- 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 the project's goals, though we also worked on projects behind the scenes separate from specific courses.

# Components

# Components: #1 Course content

One of the courses we worked with was my own introductory phonetics course in Fall 2019. In this course, we expanded three weeks of the course material to bring an explicit focus to **language-based bias as content** that the students were expected to learn and would be assessed on.



# 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.

Phonetics students are often taught to calculate resonant frequency of the vocal tract using 17.5 cm for the vocal tract length. This nicely divides into the speed of sound (35,000 cm/sec), but it is also often presented as a “typical” (Gobl and Ní Chasaide 2010:380) or “average” (Behrman 2018:216) or “neutral”(?! ) (Howard and Angus 2017:225) vocal tract length for adult males.

# Components: #1 Course content (a)

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

We wrote up new lecture notes for the course that discussed the problems with using this 17.5 cm default, especially with respect to transgender speakers and hormone replacement therapy, with suggested readings (Davies et al. 2015, Murray 2016, Zimman 2018, Cler et al. 2019). We also designed homework and exam questions that assessed student understanding of this material.

# 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.

# Components: #1 Course content (b)

Again, we wrote new lecture notes and designed assessments around this content, with a focus on a study (Babel and Russell 2015) showing that 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.

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 I 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 Syntax”, etc.), while courses focused only on spoken language are unmarked (“Syntax”).

# Components: #1 Course content (c)

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.

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).

# Components: #1 Course content (c)

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 Fall 2019.

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 of these Fall 2019 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 and exam questions 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

For example, we are building a **database of names** from a variety of languages and cultures, categorized by gender (feminine, masculine, non-binary), and confirmed with native speakers:

<i>feminine</i>	<i>masculine</i>	<i>non-binary</i>	<i>language</i>
Anuheā	Akoni	Akela	Hawaiʻian
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 this coming year, we will invite **guest speakers** to address various aspects of social justice and its relationship to linguistics. Our first speaker for October 2020 is Professor Anne Charity Hudley from the University of California, Santa Barbara, whose work was a huge inspiration for this project.

**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 **plan out the entire year** as early as possible, 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 first year.

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



# 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. What we did collect is sitting around waiting to find an appropriate use.

# Concluding thoughts

**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).

We are continuing to have discussions and do research into how best to de-Englishify semantics.

# Concluding thoughts

## Expertise matters.

Phonetics and phonology also happened to be easier because the three of us have more collective expertise in those fields than in syntax or semantics. This made it easier for us to judge how best to adapt our initiative to the relevant courses.

# Concluding thoughts

## **Buy-in matters.**

Obviously, a project like this won't work without instructor buy-in. As PI of this initiative, I am already fully committed, and Professors Jurgec, Béjar, and Thomas eagerly volunteered to participate. Without their buy-in, this would have been a lot more difficult. We are also fortunate that our department as a whole has been enthusiastic and supportive, which has helped create a positive atmosphere in which we feel that our work is valued.

# Concluding thoughts

**Wrap-up:** I've tried to present a basic model for how linguists can combat language-based biases in their teaching. We hope that some components of our project can help inspire you to make changes in your classes or even in your departments.

**Final 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]