

Teaching semantics from a JEDI perspective: Some considerations

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Roadmap

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JEDI and linguistics

JEDI and linguistics

Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) are important considerations in linguistics that we cannot morally ignore.

Language-based biases pervade society in many harmful ways, especially in education (Fletcher 1983, Charity Hudley and Mallinson 2011, Kohli and Solórzano 2012, Lippi-Green 2012, Flores and Rosa 2015, Blundon 2016, Bucholtz 2016, Russell et al. 2018, Cochran 2019, McMaster 2020, etc.).

As members of society who are also experts on language, linguists are thus uniquely positioned to help address these biases (especially in the classroom), and **it is our responsibility to do so** (as explicitly noted in various calls to action targeting linguists, such as Rickford and King 2016, Leonard 2018, Conrod 2019, Charity Hudley 2020 and Sanders et al. 2020).

Decentralizing English

Decentralizing English: Problems

Many subfields of linguistics have historically focused on a small handful of major spoken languages, especially English (Linell 1982, Bender 2011, Woll 2013, Levisen 2019).

This can be particularly true in the semantics classroom, where the linguistic variety of instruction (e.g. standardized English) also often serves as the object language and metalanguage, as well as directly inspiring the notation used in the formal language.

Decentralizing English: Problems

This already sets students up for **possible confusion**, because it often relies on subtle typographic distinctions for important concepts (and sometimes, there is no obvious distinction between object language and metalanguage, except when embedded):

Alice, Bob, run, see object lg and metalanguage

Alice, Bob, run, see OL when mentioned in ML

ALICE, BOB, {ALICE}, {⟨BOB, ALICE⟩} formal language

or: Alice', Bob', run', see'

or: a, b, R, S

Decentralizing English: Problems

But aside from this potential for confusion of the subject matter, this practice is also **exclusionary** to students who have less direct knowledge of the linguistic variety of instruction, putting them at a disadvantage

They may be users of a non-standardized dialect, they may be L2 learners, they may be users of an oppressed minoritized language (which can be especially problematic/traumatic in a classroom where the language of their oppressors is given more value and power), they may be Deaf/HOH (signed languages are historically minimized in linguistics courses), etc.

Decentralizing English: Problems

Focusing on a single language can also create **false implicatures about universals or defaults**.

It is easy for students to believe that the choice to use the language of instruction means that it is representative of what languages generally do, so that other patterns are implicitly treated as abnormal or outright impossible. It gets positioned as the default by which all other languages are compared (and thus, are implicitly Othered).

Decentralizing English: Problems

Worse, it implicitly **reinforces the social power of the language of instruction**, so that, for example, students come away with the impression that in order to understand semantics, they are expected to understand standardized English.

Decentralizing English: Solutions

We need to **diversify object languages and phenomena upfront**, from the very beginning, and throughout the course, from the first day to the last day.

Decentralizing English: Solutions

In particular, we should focus on and fully integrate underrepresented and historically oppressed languages, such as non-standardized varieties, signed languages, Indigenous languages, minoritized languages, etc.

Important: We should not only highlight underrepresented languages, but also their speakers, signers, and scholars.

Caveat: Discussing dialect variation of the language of instruction can be confusing and exclusionary for L2 users, so tread with caution!

Decentralizing English: Solutions

Shifting away from a focus on the language of instruction allows us to **highlight phenomena that are widespread but not easily observable in the language of instruction.**

This might be as straightforward as greater crosslinguistic attention to phenomena like evidentiality, aspect, politeness and honourifics, lexical semantics (e.g. different verbs for *eat* or *stand/lie*), and noun classes that go beyond social gender.

But we should also consider phenomena not often included in a typical introductory semantics course, like iconicity in signed languages or phenomena outside neurotypical and adult language, such as how children have a different understanding of *promise* (Astington 1988a,b).

Decentralizing English: Solutions

One tried and true strategy is to **find out what languages our students use**. Then we can bring those into the classroom.

This requires extra work on the instructor's part, especially for languages we aren't familiar with, but over time, an instructor will be more prepared with an increasingly diverse range of examples!

Caveat: Be sure to check in with your students about their comfort level with you using their language! Take care not to exploit them, exoticize them, and force them to be on display.

Decentralizing English: Solutions

Another solution is to **abstract away from specific languages** by using scenarios set up with storyboards, dolls/toys, etc.

Constructed languages (conlangs) can be used for this purpose as well. Many linguists have had great success using conlangs for teaching a variety topics in linguistics (Punske et al. 2020), though rarely for semantics.

I have used conlangs for semantic drift (Sanders 2016). but I have not yet experimented with it for formal semantics, so suggestions are welcome!

The Diverse Names Database

The Diverse Names Database

It's well-established that linguistic examples often reflect and reinforce unjust hierarchies and stereotypes, such as those concerning gender and culture, especially when it comes to the choice of names (Macaulay and Brice 1997, Pabst et al. 2018, Richy and Burnett 2019, Kotek et al. 2020, 2021).

The Diverse Names Database

As part of a larger project on JEDI pedagogy in linguistics, Lex Konnelly has been the driving force in constructing the **Diverse Names Database**, which is designed to help linguists replace their usual limited selection of names (*John, Mary*, etc.) with names that are more linguistically diverse and more gender inclusive.

We first previewed an early version of the database last year at the annual meeting of the Canadian Linguistic Association (Sanders et al. 2020), and we will be presenting a nearly finalized version next month again at the CLA (Konnelly et al. 2021).

But today, you get a sneak peak!

The Diverse Names Database

78 names across three gender classifications, representing 30+ language families and 110+ countries:

all-gender

feminine

masculine

Amal	Arabic	Anahera	Māori	Aimo	Finnish
Bounmy	Lao	Boróka	Hungarian	Baber	Urdu
Cahyo	Javanese	Chana	Hebrew	Carlu	Corsican
Deniz	Turkish	Danai	Shona	Digai	Slavey
Eryl	Welsh	Eteri	Georgian	Edmao	Limburgan
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
Xquenda	Zapotec	Xulia	Galician	Xuan	Asturian
Yunuen	Purépecha	Yolotl	Nahuatl	Yama	Pashto
Zhyrgal	Kirghiz	Zuriñe	Basque	Zaharia	Romanian

The Diverse Names Database

The full database will be available soon on the **Linguistics Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Repository (LEDIR)**, where we are also hosting all of the other materials we have developed in our larger project.

<http://ledir.ling.utoronto.ca>

LEDIR itself is currently live, though still in early development. Please check it out and give us suggestions!

Social meaning in formal semantics

Social meaning in formal semantics

From sociolinguistics, we know that **linguistic variants index all sorts of social meaning**: age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, geography, place identity, stance, persona, community of practice, etc.

Students love this stuff!

See also slurs, taboo vocabulary, and expressive content, but tread carefully, because some of this meaning bypasses the use-mention distinction (which is itself an interesting phenomenon to discuss).

Social meaning in formal semantics

I'm a bit out of my depth here, and maybe this is already happening more than I'm aware of, but we should think about how to better **incorporate social meaning into our semantics courses** and **make more direct connections with results from sociolinguistics**.

Rather than setting social meaning aside as a complication, we should engage with it directly and explicitly. Show the students how formal semantics can account for it and/or work through how it problematizes formal semantics.

Social meaning in formal semantics

In particular, it can be really instructive to show how social meaning can differ between instructor and student (e.g. the evolving distribution of singular *they*).

This can be a great opportunity to let the students teach you. Some of my most fun and engaging experiences in the classroom are having students explain (what they think is) new slang: meanings, distribution, felicity conditions, etc.

Empower the students as language experts! Show them that their linguistic varieties are valid, informative, and just as meaningful and structured as standardized language varieties.

Social meaning in formal semantics

This is not just important for teaching them semantics, but also for helping them become **good citizens of the world**.

There are huge important debates going on outside the classroom, and many of them involve language in some way (e.g. pronouns and gender inclusivity, cultural appropriation of slang, prescriptivism as a proxy for racism, etc.).

Social meaning in formal semantics

We need to educate our students to be equipped to contribute to those debates, as well as to recognize misleading linguistic practices to keep themselves properly informed (e.g. framing and role assignment in media reporting, such as “woman assaulted” and “man killed in police-involved shooting”).

We should help our students reach a point where they cannot unsee linguistic injustice.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Just because formal semantics is mathy doesn't mean we get a free pass to ignore the social component of language.

Languages are not separate from the people who use them.

Utterances are never made without context.

There is no default language user.

We need to erase these concepts from our teaching.

Conclusion

Some people do not have the privilege of being able to have their identities ignored, because “default” and “contextless” are really usually code for white, affluent, educated, male, cisgender, etc.

So when we set up “idealized” scenarios that ignore/minimize identity, **we are excluding some of our students from the conversation.**

And those students we exclude are already excluded by society at large, so when we attempt to idealize language by separating it from humans, **we are reinforcing unjust social structures.**

Conclusion

Language is often used as a tool of discrimination, so the study of language is necessarily linked to discrimination, whether we like it or not, and we need to deal with that.

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Language is often used as a tool of discrimination, so the study of language is necessarily linked to discrimination, whether we like it or not, and we need to deal with that.

If we do not actively work to combat linguistic discrimination, we are helping to perpetuate it.

Thank you!

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