

Teaching linguistics with equity, diversity, and inclusion

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reporting on work done with
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Background on the LEDIR project

Motivation: Language-related biases

Many languages and language varieties are marginalized, disadvantaged, stigmatized, and oppressed in many ways, both in society at large and within linguistics as a field:

- non-standardized dialects
- signed languages
- minoritized languages
- Indigenous languages

Motivation: Language-related biases

One major source of these biases for linguists 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).

Motivation: Language-related biases

As individuals, 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 using the wrong pronouns or names for a trans or 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).

Motivation: Language-related biases

There are also many **systemic biases** in the field of linguistics.

For example, research in many subfields has often been (and continues to be) overly focused on a **small number of major spoken languages, especially English** (Linell 1982, Bender 2011, Woll 2013, Levisen 2019).

This research bias has created a lens through which other languages and their structures (not to mention their users) are treated as exceptional or even potentially ignorable (as is often the case with signed languages).

Motivation: Language-related 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 1994, 1997, Bergvall 1996, Pabst et al. 2018, Richy and Burnett 2019, Kotek et al. 2020, 2021, Cépeda et al. 2021).

Motivation: Language-related 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. 2020a, Mallinson forthcoming).

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** as well as to students who will go on to be non-linguist members of society, who will still have impact beyond linguists and even academia (Hercula 2020).

Motivation: Language-related biases

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

Languages do not exist separately 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.

Motivation: Language-related biases

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

So when we set up idealized scenarios that ignore or minimize social identity, **we are excluding some of our students from the conversation**, reinforcing the barriers and biases these students often already face.

Motivation: Language-related biases

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 linguists need to deal with that.

If we do not actively work to combat language-related biases, we are helping to perpetuate them.

In the rest of this presentation, I'll discuss an ongoing initiative in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Toronto intended to help linguists address language-related biases.

The cornerstone of our initiative is the **Linguistics Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Repository (LEDIR)** ['ledə] (citable as Sanders et al. 2021–2022), where we host the materials that we have developed for this project over the past three years.

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

LEDIR is currently live and in active development. Please check it out and give us suggestions!

Project funding

This project was supported by a three-year grant from the **Learning & Education Advancement Fund (LEAF)** 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.

Project members

The main purpose of the grant is to fund two full-time graduate student positions for two semesters per year, for three years. For all three years, I have been working with **Lex Konnelly** and **Pocholo Umbal**, who have been phenomenal and shaped the project in ways I could never have predicted.



Lex Konnelly



Pocholo Umbal

Project collaborators

We have also had a number of collaborators in different fields (linguistics, mathematics, and English) and at other institutions (McMaster and UCLA): Keren Rice, Naomi Nagy, Peter Jurgec, Susana Béjar, Guillaume Thomas, Marisa Brook, Lisa Sullivan, Erin Vearncombe, Virgilio Partida-Peñalva, Jason Siefken, Carol Percy, Catherine Anderson, Colin McCarter, and Maura O'Leary.

Project collaborators

I am currently working with Avery Ozburn at UTM on another three-year LEAF grant to add another major resource to the project: **language profiles**. These will be short encyclopedia-like resources that instructors could use to contextualize the languages they use in their courses, to help get students more engaged and to see languages as being connected to human beings.

Project goals

Four main goals of this project:

- 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 online public **repository** of our resources

We collaborated with individual instructors for some courses and also worked on larger projects separate from specific courses.

Next up: five major kinds of resources we currently host on LEDIR.

Resource #1: The Handbook for Inclusive Linguistics Teaching

The Handbook for Inclusive Linguistics Teaching

The Handbook for Inclusive Linguistics Teaching (primarily written by Pocholo Umbal) is a webpage containing guidelines and resources for fostering equity, diversity, and inclusion in linguistics classrooms.

It introduces ways in which instructors and teaching assistants can help eliminate language-related biases in their curriculum and teaching practices.

The full Handbook is available here:

https://ledir.ling.utoronto.ca/?page_id=33

The Handbook for Inclusive Linguistics Teaching

The following is a brief outline of some of the topics addressed in the Handbook:

- reinforcing the idea that all language varieties are valid
- helping empower students as language experts
- using inclusive language in the classroom
- accessibility
- equitable marking of participation
- the importance of instructor positionality
- assessment design
- diversifying data and readings

Resource #2: 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).

To help address these problems, we developed the **Diverse Names Database** (DND), primarily constructed by Lex Konnelly.

The DND 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.

The Diverse Names Database

We have presented on the DND a few times (Sanders et al. 2020b, Konnelly et al. 2021, Sanders 2021), and we are in the midst of writing up a full report and guide for it for an upcoming special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Linguistics*.

The DND is available here:

https://ledir.ling.utoronto.ca/?page_id=53

The Diverse Names Database

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

all-gender

feminine-leaning

masculine-leaning

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

Resource #3: Data sets

Data sets

We currently have 11 data sets with exercises, using 40 signed and spoken languages.

3 exercises on articulatory phonetics for 21 signed languages: American, Argentinian, Austrian, British, Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, French, German, Greek, Icelandic, Japanese, Latvian, Lithuanian, Mexican, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish

8 exercises on phonology for 19 spoken languages: Abelam, Ainu, Alagwa, Cantonese, Dari, Finnish, Japanese, Jaqaru, Mixtec, Nimborean, Oneida, Potawatomi, Shuswap, Stoney (Nakoda), Tumari Kanuri, Turkana, Uzbek, Wari', and Woleian

Some exercises are comparative, others focus on data from a single language. The following are two samples.

For each of the following pairs of signs, list which of the manual parameters they differ for: handshape, orientation, location, and/or movement. You can ignore nonmanual articulation. For example, if you were given the ASL signs for MY and SORRY to compare, you would list that they have different handshapes and movements. You don't need to specify the details of the differences, just list the parameters that differ. If handshape, orientation, or location change during a sign due to movement, consider only the starting handshape, orientation, or location for purposes of comparison between signs.

a. Croatian Sign Language (Hrvatski znakovni jezik, HZJ)

BROWN <https://media.spreadthesign.com/video/mp4/42/405821.mp4>
BLUE <https://media.spreadthesign.com/video/mp4/42/405025.mp4>

b. German Sign Language (Deutsche Gebärdensprache, DGS)

BROWN <https://media.spreadthesign.com/video/mp4/9/7657.mp4>
BLUE <https://media.spreadthesign.com/video/mp4/9/6091.mp4>

c. Japanese Sign Language (日本手話, Nihon Shuwa, NS):

BROWN <https://media.spreadthesign.com/video/mp4/7/349356.mp4>
BLUE <https://media.spreadthesign.com/video/mp4/7/342135.mp4>

d. French Sign Language (Langue des signes française, LSF)

BROWN <https://media.spreadthesign.com/video/mp4/10/7656.mp4>
BLUE <https://media.spreadthesign.com/video/mp4/10/6092.mp4>

Describe how tone sandhi works in the Molinos dialect of Mixtec (a Mixtecan language of the Oto-Manguean family, spoken in Mexico) using the data provided below. Assume the words by themselves show the inherent tone. What happens to the inherent tone in two-word expressions?

[ʒāʔā] ‘chiles’

[sókó] ‘spring’

[ʒùkù] ‘herbs’

[ʒìtʃí] ‘dry’

[ʒāʔā ʒìtʃí] ‘dry chiles’

[sókó ʒìtʃí] ‘dry spring’

[ʒùkù ʒìtʃí] ‘dry herbs’

[kùkù] ‘four’

[kùkù ʒáʔá] ‘four chiles’

[kùkù sókó] ‘four springs’

[kùkù ʒùkù] ‘four herbs’

We have an abundance of phonetics and phonology data sets, so we are looking to expand our offerings to other subfields.

Resource #4: Lecture notes

We currently have 3 sets of short lecture notes for phonetics, but only 1 posted on LEDIR:

- gender diversity and vocal tract length (posted)
- social biases and speech perception (in prep)
- the status of signed languages in linguistics (in prep)

Gender diversity and vocal tract length

For the phonetics unit on tube models of vowel acoustics, we created lecture notes (primarily written by Lex Konnelly) 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 men.

Gender diversity and vocal tract length

This perpetuates men 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.

Social biases and speech perception

For the phonetics unit on auditory perception, we create lecture notes (primarily written by Pocholo Umbal) 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.

Social biases and speech perception

The new lecture notes and associated assessments had 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.

Signed languages in linguistics

Finally, in the phonetics unit on signed languages (itself an addition I had made to this course before this project), we created lecture notes (primarily written by me) concerning how **signed 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 signed languages, but analogous courses with no significant discussion of spoken languages are rare, and where they do exist, they are usually overtly marked with “signed language” in the course title (“Signed Language Syntax”, etc.), while courses focused only on spoken language are unmarked (“Syntax”).

Signed languages in linguistics

In addition, it is quite common for an undergraduate linguistics major to never even work with any signed 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 signed languages, deafness, and deaf communities as atypical phenomena that can be minimized or even outright ignored.

Signed languages in linguistics

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 signed languages do.

Resource #5: Notes on affirming writing

Notes on affirming writing

In collaboration with Lisa Sullivan and Erin Vearncombe at the Writing-Integrated Teaching Program at the Faculty of Arts & Science, we organized and delivered a workshop called “Affirming Writing: Teaching Writing About Communities in Affirming Ways.”

This workshop focused on problematic ways that communities may be talked about in linguistics.

The basic structure of the workshop was to highlight some obviously problematic wording, as well as more subtly problematic wording, and address them, with suggested revision.

Throughout, there was an overarching discussion of the underlying ideologies that made these particular phrasings problematic.

Notes on affirming writing

On LEDIR, we have posted short notes written up by the participants in the workshop, summarizing their workshop presentations concerning four communities:

- transgender communities
- Indigenous communities
- deaf communities
- immigrant communities

The following are two short samples from these notes.

Notes on affirming writing

Even the Linguistic Society of America ignores signed languages in general discussions, as in the following blurb from their “What is Linguistics?” page:

In a nutshell: Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Linguists apply the scientific method to conduct formal studies of **speech sounds**, grammatical structures, and meaning across the world’s 6,000+ **languages**.

<https://www.linguisticsociety.org/what-linguistics>

This blurb could be improved by giving explicit mention of signed languages, and expanding the notion of phonology beyond just speech sounds:

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Linguists apply the scientific method to conduct formal studies of speech sounds, **signs**, grammatical structures, and meaning across the world’s 6,000+ languages, **both spoken and signed**

or: Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Linguists apply the scientific method to conduct formal studies of **the physical properties**, grammatical structures, and meaning across the world’s 6,000+ languages, **both spoken and signed**

Notes on affirming writing

Though, in European language families, sound change is for the most part governed by rules that can be precisely formulated, several exotic groups (as, for instance, the Arantic family of Australia and the Papuan Kate group examined here) appear to behave differently. At least, this conclusion must be drawn from the sound shapes of semantically comparable items in each of the groups. The languages of each group differ etymologically to a greater extent than do interrelated European languages, whereas the etymologically related items (the cognates) display very few regular sound correspondences. [...] (Boretzky 1984).

Problems with Sample 2:

- The title and the text exoticize languages not spoken in Europe, communities considered isolated from the European point of view, and languages that have features that are not common in languages spoken in Europe or languages that have been documented/studied more. **Alternative:** Take out “exotic groups/languages”. Refer to the specific languages in question: “languages from the Arantic family of Australia” and “the Papuan Kate group”.
- It assumes languages spoken in Europe have properties that can be described and accounted for easily, as opposed to non-European languages. **Alternative:** *Sound change of X has been well described/accounted for in a series of languages spoken in Europe through rule A and B. The same phenomenon does not seem to occur in the same way in languages from the Arantic family the Papuan Kate group or cannot be accounted for by the same rules.*

Future plans

Future plans

We would also like to develop a parallel **database of predicates and sentence frames** that avoid some of the problematic and offensive scenarios linguists often use (violence, gender stereotypes, etc.).

We want to collect **more data sets** and write up **more lecture notes**, especially for other subfields.

Thank you!

Much of this presentation will appear in the forthcoming OUP
Inclusion in Linguistics collected volume, edited by
Charity Hudley, Mallinson, and Bucholtz.

Be on the look-out for Sanders, Konnelley, and Umbal (forthcoming)!

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